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I clasped the straying hand and drew her to me
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[Frontispiece: I clasped the straying hand and drew her to me.]

Gordon Craig

SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

By RANDALL PARRISH

Author of "My Lady of the North," "My Lady of the South," "Keith of the Border," "When Wilderness Was King."

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOR

BY ALONZO KIMBALL

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ILLUSTRATIONS

GORDON CRAIG

SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST STEP

I had placed the lumber inside the yard as directed, and was already rehitching the traces, when the man crossed the street slowly, switching his light cane carelessly in the air. I had noticed him before standing there in the doorway of the drug store, my attention attracted by the fashionable cut of his clothes, and the manner in which he watched me work. Now, as he rounded the heads of the mules, I straightened up, observing him more closely. He was forty or forty-five, heavily built, with a rather pasty-white face, a large nose, eyes unusually deep set, and a closely clipped mustache beginning to gray. His dress was correct to a button, and there was a pleasant look to the mouth which served to mitigate the otherwise hard expression of countenance. As I faced him in some surprise he looked me fairly in the eyes.

"Been at this job long?" he asked easily.

"Three days," I replied unhesitatingly, drawing the reins through my hands.

"Like it?"

"Well, I 've had worse and better," with a laugh. "I prefer this to my last one."

"What was that?"

"Ridin' blind baggage."

It was his turn to laugh, and he did so.

"I thought I was not mistaken," he said at last, sobering. "You are the same lad the train hands put off the Atlantic Express at Vernon a week ago."

I nodded, beginning to suspect him of being a fly-cop who had spotted me for a pull.

"I never noticed the name of the burg," I returned. "Why? were you there?"

"Yes, I came in on the same train. Just caught a glimpse of your face in the light of the brakeman's lantern. How did you get here?"

"Freight, two hours later."

"You 're not a bum, or you would n't be working."

I put one foot on the wheel, but he touched me on the sleeve with his cane.

"Wait a minute," and there was more animation in the tone. "I may have something better for you than this lumber wagon. I 'm right, ain't I, in guessing you 're no regular bum?"

"I 've bummed it most of the way from Frisco; I had to. I was homesick for the East, and lost my transportation."

"Your what?"

"Transportation; I was discharged at the Presidio."

"Oh, I see," smiling again, and tapping the wheel with his stick; "the army—foreign service?"

"The Philippines three years; invalided home."

"By God, you don't look it," his eyes on me. "Never saw a more perfect animal. Fever?"

"No, bolo wound; got caught in the brush, and then lay out in a swamp all night, till our fellows got up."

He looked at his watch, and I climbed into my seat. "See here, I have n't time to talk now, but I believe you are the very fellow I am looking for. If you want an easier job than this," waving a gloved hand toward the pile of lumber, "come and see me and we 'll talk it over." He took a card out of a morocco case, and wrote a line on it. "Come to that address at nine o'clock tonight."

I took the bit of pasteboard as he handed it up.

"All right, sir, I 'll be there on time."

"Come to the side door," he added swiftly, lowering his voice, "the one on the south. Give three raps. By the way, what is your name?"

"Gordon Craig," I answered without pausing to think. His eyes twinkled shrewdly.

"Ever been known by any other?"

"I enlisted under another; I ran away from home, and was not of age."

"Oh, I see; well, that makes no difference to me. Don't forget, Craig, the side door at nine."

I glanced back as we turned the corner; he was still standing at the edge of the walk, tapping the concrete with his cane. Out of sight I looked curiously at the card. It was the advertisement of a clothing house, and on the back was written "P. B. Neale, 108 Chestnut Street."

The mules walked the half dozen blocks back to the lumber yard, while my mind reviewed this conversation. There was a bit of mystery to it which had fascination, because of a vague promise of adventure. Evidently this man Neale had need of a stranger to help him out in some scheme, and had picked me by chance as being the right party. Well, if the pay was good, and the purpose not criminal, I had no objections to the spice of danger. Indeed, that was what I loved in life, my heart throbbing eagerly in anticipation. I was young, full-blooded, strong, willing enough to take desperate chances for sufficient reward. There was a suspicion in my mind that all was not straight—Neale's questions, and the private signals to be given at a side door left that impression—yet I could only wait and learn, and besides, my conscience was not overly delicate. I had lived among a rough, reckless set, had experienced enough of the seamy side of life to be somewhat careless. I would take the chance, at least, in hope of escape from this routine.

All the rest of the day, for this meeting had occurred early in the afternoon, I labored quietly, loading and unloading lumber, my muscles aching from a species of toil to which I had not yet become accustomed, my mind active in imagination over the possibilities of this new employment. I was not obliged to live this sort of life, but the uneasy spirit of adventure held me. My father, from whom I had not heard a word in two years, was a prominent manufacturer in a New England village. The early death of my mother had left me to his care when I was but ten years old, and we failed to understand each other, drifting apart, until a final quarrel had sent me adrift. No doubt this was more my fault than his, although he was so deeply immersed in business that he failed utterly to understand the restless soul of a boy. I was in my junior year at Princeton, when the final break came, over an innocent youthful escapade, and, in my pride, I never even returned home to explain, but disappeared, drifting inevitably into the underworld, because of lack of training for anything better. This all occurred four years previous, three of which had been passed in the ranks, yet even now I was stubbornly resolved not to return unsuccessful. Perhaps in this new adventure I should discover the key with which to unlock the door of fortune.

I possessed a fairly decent suit of clothes, now pressed and cleaned after the rough trip from the coast, and dressed as carefully as possible in the dingy room of my boarding house. A glance into the cracked mirror convinced me, that, however I might have otherwise suffered from the years of hardship, I had not deteriorated physically. My face was bronzed by the sun, my muscles like iron, my eyes clear, every movement of my body evidencing strength, my features lean and clean cut under a head of closely trimmed hair. Satisfied with the inspection, confident of myself, I slipped the card in my pocket, and went out. It was still daylight, but there was a long walk before me. Chestnut Street was across the river, in the more aristocratic section. I had hauled lumber there the first day of my work, and recalled its characteristics—long rows of stone-front houses, with an occasional residence standing alone, set well back from the street. It was dark enough when I got there, and began seeking the number. I followed the block twice in uncertainty, so many of the houses were dark, but finally located the one I believed must be 108. It was slightly back from the street, a large stone mansion, surrounded by a low coping of brick and with no light showing anywhere. I was obliged to mount the front steps before I could assure myself this was the place. The street was deserted, except for two men talking under the electric light at the corner, and the only sound arose from the passing of a surface car a block away. The silence and loneliness got upon my nerves, but, without yielding, I followed the narrow cement walk around the corner of the house. Here it was dark in the shadow of the wall, yet one window on the first floor exhibited a faint glow at the edge of a closely drawn curtain. Encouraged slightly by this proof that the house was indeed occupied, I felt my way forward until I came to some stone steps, and a door. I rapped on the wood three times, my nerves tingling from excitement. There was a moment's delay, so that I lifted my hand again, and then the door opened silently. Within was like the black mouth of a cave, and I involuntarily took a step backward.

"This you, Craig?"

"Yes," I answered, half recognizing the cautious voice.

"All right then—come in. There is nothing to fear, the floor is level."

I stepped within, seeing nothing of the man, and the door was closed behind me. The sharp click of the latch convinced me it was secured by a spring lock.

"Turn on the light," said the voice at my side sharply. Instantly an electric bulb glowed dazzling overhead, and I blinked, about half blinded by the sudden change.

CHAPTER II

THE CASE OF PHILIP HENLEY

It was a rather narrow hallway and, with the exception of a thick carpet underfoot, unfurnished. Neale, appearing somewhat more slender in evening clothes, smiled at me genially, showing a gold-crowned tooth.

"Did not chance to hear your motor," he said easily, taking a cigarette case from his vest pocket. "You are a little late; what was it, tire trouble?"

"I came afoot," I answered, not overly-cordial. "It was farther across town than I supposed."

"Well, you 're here, and that is the main point. Have a cigarette. No?" as I shook my head. "All right, there are cigars in the room yonder—the second door to your left."

I entered where he indicated. It was a spacious apartment, evidently a library from the book-shelves along the walls, and the great writing table in the center. The high ceiling, and restful wall decorations were emphasized by all the furnishings, the soft rug, into which the feet sank noiselessly, the numerous leather-upholstered chairs, the luxurious couch, and the divan filling the bay-window. The only light was under a shaded globe on the central table, leaving the main apartment in shadows, but the windows had their heavy curtains closely drawn. The sole occupant was a man in evening dress, seated in a high-backed leather chair, facing the entrance, a small stand beside him, containing a half-filled glass, and an open box of cigars. Smoke circled above his head, his eyes upon me as I entered. With an indolent wave of one hand he seemingly invited me to take a vacant chair to the right, while Neale remained standing near the door.

This new position gave me a better view of his face, but I could not guess his age. His was one of those old-young faces, deeply lined, smooth-shaven, the hair clipped short, the flesh ashen-gray, the lips a mere straight slit, yielding a merciless expression; but the eyes, surveying me coldly, were the noticeable feature. They looked to be black, not large, but deep set, and with a most peculiar gleam, almost that of insanity, in their intense stare. Even as he lounged back amid the chair cushions I could see that he was tall, and a bit angular, his hand, holding a cigar, evidencing unusual strength. He must have stared at me a full minute, much as a jockey would examine a horse, before he resumed smoking.

"He will do very well, Neale," he decided, with a glance across at the other. "Possibly a trifle young."

"He has roughed it," returned the other reassuringly, "and that means more than years."

The first man laughed rather unpleasantly, and emptied his glass.

"So I have discovered. Have a cigar, or a drink, Craig?"

"I will smoke."

He passed me the box, watching me while I lighted the perfecto, Neale crossing to the divan.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

"I thought about that. What part of the country do you hail from?" and I noticed now a faint Southern accent in the drawl of his voice.

"New England."

"Ever been south?"

"Only as far as St. Louis. I was at Jefferson Barracks."

"Neale said you were in the army—full enlistment?"

"Yes; discharged as corporal."

"Ah; what regiment?"

"Third Cavalry."

His black eyes swept across toward Neale, his fingers drumming nervously on the leather arm of the chair.

"Exactly; then your service was in Oregon and the Philippines. Tramped some since, I understand—broke?"

"No," shortly, not greatly enjoying his style of questioning. "I 've got three dollars."

"A magnificent sum," chuckling. "However, the point is, you would be glad of a job that paid well, and would n't mind if there was a bit of excitement connected with it—hey?"

"What is your idea of paying well?"

"Expenses liberally figured," he replied slowly, "and ten thousand dollars for a year's work, if done right."

I half rose to my feet in surprise, believing he was making sport, but the fellow never moved or smiled.

"Sit down, man. This is no pipe dream, and I mean it. In fact, I am willing to hand you half of the money down. That 's all right, Neale," he added as the other made a gesture of dissent. "I know my business, and enough about men to judge Craig here for that amount. That we are in earnest we have got to assure him someway, and money talks best. See here, Craig," and he leaned forward, peering into my face, "you look to me like the right man for what we want done; you are young, strong, sufficiently intelligent, and a natural fighter. All right, I 'm sporting man enough to bet five thousand on your making good. If you fail it will be worse for you, that's all. I 'm not a good man to double-cross, see! All you have got to do to earn your money is obey orders strictly, and keep your tongue still. Do you get that?"

I nodded, waiting to learn more.

"It may require a year, but more likely much less time. That makes no difference—it will be ten thousand for you just the same," his voice had grown crisp and sharp. "What do you say?"

"That the proposition looks good, only I should like to know a little more clearly what I am expected to do."

"A bit squeamish, hey! got a troublesome conscience?"

"Not particularly—but there is a limit."

He slowly lit a fresh cigar, studying the expression of my face in the light, as though deciding upon a course of action. Neale moved uneasily, but made no attempt to break the silence. Finally, with a more noticeable drawl in his voice, the man in the armchair began his explanation.

"Very good; we 'll come down to facts. It will not take long. In the first place my name is Vail —Justus C. Vail. That may tell you who I am?"

I shook my head negatively.

"No; well, I am a lawyer of some reputation in this State, and my entire interest in this affair is that of legal adviser to Mr. Neale. With this in mind I will state briefly the peculiar circumstances wherein you are involved." He checked the points off carefully with one hand, occasionally glancing at a slip of paper lying on the table as though to refresh his memory. I listened intently, watching his face, and dimly conscious of Neale's restlessness. "Here is the case as submitted to me: Judge Philo Henley, formerly of the United States Circuit Court, retired at sixty-four and settled upon a large plantation near Carrollton, Alabama. His wife died soon after, and, a week or so ago, the Judge also departed this life, leaving an estate valued in excess of five hundred thousand dollars. Philo Henley and wife had but one child, now a young man of twenty-five years, named Philip. As a boy he was wild and unmanageable, and, finally, when about twenty years old, some prank occurred of so serious a nature that the lad ran away. He came North, and was unheard-of for some time, living under an assumed name. Later some slight correspondence ensued between father and son, and the boy was granted a regular allowance. The father was a very eccentric man, harsh and unforgiving, and, while giving the boy money, never extended an invitation to return home. Consequently Philip remained in the North, and led his own life. He became dissipated, and a rounder, and drifted into evil associations. Finally, about six months ago, he married a girl in this city, not of wealthy family, but of respectable antecedents. Her home, we understand, was in Spokane, and she had an engagement on the stage when she first met Henley. He married her under his assumed name and they began housekeeping in a flat on the north side."

He paused in his recital, took a drink, his eyes turning toward Neale; then resumed in the same level voice:

"The Judge learned of this marriage in some way, and began to insist that the son return home with his wife. Circumstances prevented, however, and the visit was deferred. Meanwhile, becoming more eccentric as he grew older, the father discharged all his old servants, and lived the life of a recluse. When he died suddenly, and almost alone, he left a will, probably drawn up soon after he learned of his son's wedding, leaving his property to Philip, providing the young man returned, with his wife, to live upon the estate within six months; otherwise the entire estate should be divided among certain named charities. Three administrators were named, of whom Neale here was one."

I glanced back at the man referred to; he was leaning forward, his elbow on his knees, and, catching my eyes, drew a legal-looking paper from his pocket.

"Here is a copy of the will," he said, "if Craig cares to examine it."

"Not now," I replied. "Let me hear the entire story first."

Vail leaned back in his chair, a cigar between his lips.

"The administrators," he went on, as though uninterrupted, and repeating a set speech, "endeavored to locate young Henley, but failed. Then Mr. Neale was sent here to make a personal search. He came to me for aid, and legal advice. Finally we found the flat where the young couple had lived. It was deserted, and we learned from neighbors that they had quarreled, and the wife left him. We have been unable to discover her whereabouts. She did not return to, or communicate with, her own people in the West, or with any former friends in this city. She simply disappeared, and we have some reason to believe committed suicide. The body of a young woman, fitting her general description, was taken from the river, and buried without identification."

"And young Henley?" I asked, as he paused.

"Henley," he continued gravely, "was at last located, under an assumed name, as a prisoner in the Indiana penitentiary at Michigan City, serving a sentence of fourteen years for forgery. He positively refuses to identify himself as Philip Henley, and all our efforts to gain him a pardon have failed."

"But what have I to do with all this?" I questioned, beginning to have a faint glimmer of the truth.

"Wait, and I will explain fully. Don't interrupt until I am done. Here was a peculiar situation. The administrators are all old personal friends of the testator, anxious to have the estate retained in the family. How could this be accomplished? Neale laid the case before me. I can see but one feasible method—illegal, to be sure, and yet justifiable under the circumstances. Someone must impersonate Philip Henley long enough to permit the settlement of the estate."

I rose to my feet indignantly.

"And you thought I would consent? would be a party to this fraud?"

"Now, wait, Craig," as calmly as ever. "This is nothing to be ashamed of, nor, so far as I can see, as a lawyer, does it involve danger. It will make a man of Henley, reunite him with his wife if she still lives, and give him standing in the world. Scattered about among charities the Lord knows who it would benefit—a lot of beggars likely. We are merely helping the boy to retain what is rightfully his. Don't throw this chance away, hastily—ten thousand dollars is pretty good pay for a couple of months' work."

I sank back into my chair undecided, yet caught by the glitter of the promise. Why not? Surely, it would do no harm, and, if the administrators were satisfied, what cause had I to object. They were responsible, and, if they thought this the best course, I might just as well take my profit. If not they would find someone else who would.

"But—but can that be done?" I asked hesitatingly.

Vail smiled, confident of my yielding.

"Easily," he assured. "Young Henley has been away five years; even before that he was absent at school so much as to be practically unknown except to the older servants. These have all been discharged, and scattered. The wife is entirely unknown there. Anyone, bearing ever so slight a resemblance, would pass muster. All you need do is read the father's letters over, post yourself on a few details and take possession. We will attend to all legal matters."

"Then you consider that I resemble Henley?"

"No," coolly, "not in any remarkable manner, but sufficient for our purpose—age, size, general appearance answers very well; nose, eyes and hair are alike, and general contour of the face is similar. There is not likely to be any close scrutiny. Here is young Henley's photograph."

He picked it up from among the papers, and handed it over to me. There was a resemblance, recognizable now that my attention had been called to it, certain features being remarkably similar, although the face in the picture wore a hard, dissipated look utterly at variance with my own. I glanced at the endorsement on the back.

"He was going to send this photograph to his father."

"Yes, but never did. Apparently there is no flaw in our plan."

CHAPTER III

I ACCEPT THE OFFER

I do not know how others might have looked upon such a proposition as this, but it never occurred to me at the time to doubt the honesty of Vail's statement, nor could I perceive any great wrong in the action so calmly proposed. This was Philip Henley's property; his father undoubtedly intended he should inherit it, and the poor devil was utterly unable to comply with the terms of the will. The very fact that he possessed sufficient pride to part with the inheritance rather than openly reveal his disgrace, appealed strongly. That sort of fellow must have a strain of manhood in him. If I could serve him, save the property for him, at almost no danger to myself, and make a tidy sum of money doing it, why shouldn't I consent? I saw no reason for refusal. To be sure the method was not lawful, yet was advised by a lawyer, and agreed to by the administrators. Besides, the keeping of a few promiscuous charities out of such a gift did not seem especially wrong—I knew nothing, cared nothing for their loss. They were but names of no significance. Vail, watching the expression of my face in the light, seemed to divine my thoughts.

"Evidently you are recovering your good sense," he remarked easily. "There is no use acting like a fool in a matter of this kind. You are lucky to fall into such a chance. You 'll act, I take it?"

"Yes," the word was out almost before I was aware of speaking.

"Sensible decision, my man," his face lighting up. "Now there is no need of our meeting again, or being seen together. The more quiet we can keep our plans, the better it will be for all concerned. Neale, hand Craig your copy of the articles of administration, and of the will."

I took these and read them over carefully, yet without fully comprehending the legal phraseology. They were apparently genuine, and I gathered from them that the facts were exactly as stated. Peter B. Neale, of Birmingham, was named one of the administrators. The two men watched me read, and when I laid the papers down Vail was ready with others.

"Here is a small packet of letters from Judge Henley to his son," he said, in a business-like way, "which you had better read, and so familiarize yourself with local names, and conditions. I have also drawn up, and had typed, a brief sketch of young Henley's life, which will aid you in playing the part. You will need a new outfit of clothes, I presume?"

"This is my best suit."

"I thought it probable. Now, if you will sign this paper, I will hand you a liberal advance."

I read it over slowly, but it appeared innocent enough. Of course they would require some guarantee that my work would be performed. Yet certain questions arose to my mind.

I read it over slowly, but it appeared innocent enough

[Illustration: I read it over slowly, but it appeared innocent enough.]

"As soon as the property is legally in my possession I am to deed it over to you?"

"Certainly; I represent the administrators, and the rightful heir."

"That will involve forgery on my part."

He waved his hand, as though brushing away an insect.

"Technically, yes; but under legal advice, my dear boy, and agreement of the officials interested in proper settlement of the estate. There is no danger whatever."

I was not assured as to this, and yet the man's easy manner, and smooth speech, served to ease my conscience.

"And the ten thousand dollars?" I asked.

"A thousand will be handed you tonight; the remainder may be retained at the final settlement, together with the compensation of the woman. You make your own terms with her; so you see you cannot lose. Sign here."

"I had forgotten the woman. Is she necessary?"

"It will be better to have one, as they know down there young Henley was lately married. Any good-looker, with an easy conscience, will do. You could coach her on the train."

"But I don't know a young woman in town," I admitted soberly, "except my landlady's daughter, and she 's the limit."

Vail and Neale both laughed.

"You 're slow, Craig," the former said good-humoredly. "I thought better of you than that. However, you will have all day tomorrow. Get on your new clothes, and look around. There 's plenty would jump at the chance."

I shook my head.

"That's altogether out of my line," I averred. "I 'd rather go alone."

"Well, we 'll not war over that. You can leave your wife North if you wish. I tell you what you do. Think it over, and call me up by 'phone about three o'clock tomorrow—here's the number. If you decide on taking a woman along I know one who will answer, and will have her at the train."

"I am to leave then tomorrow night?"

"Yes, over the Eastern Illinois, at 8:10."

There was a moment's silence; then he rustled the paper on the table, and held out a fountain pen.

"Sign here."

I was not hypnotized, or unduly controlled; my mind seemed clear, but I yielded without a word and wrote my name at the bottom of the sheet. Vail blotted it carefully, folded the paper, and placed it in a drawer of the table. Then he handed me two bills.

"There is a thousand dollars there, Craig, and I will send you a typewritten memoranda of instructions, covering all points in the game. Where can I be sure of finding you at three o'clock tomorrow?"

"At 407 Green Street."

"All right; as soon as you read those instructions call me up by 'phone, and let me know what you have done regarding a woman, and ask any questions you may desire. That will be all now. Neale, you might show Craig the way out."

He put out his arm, and we shook hands, although he did not arise from the chair. It had all been accomplished so suddenly that I felt confused, uncertain as to what I had best do. Only the feel of those bills in my pocket seemed real, and made me fully aware that I was pledged to the service. Neale stepped into the hall, and I followed him. The entry way was in darkness, and the man went to the side door without switching on the light.

"Is this Mr. Vail's house?" I questioned, and he drew the latch.

"Yes, and, by the way, it will be as well for you to go out cautiously, and not be seen. We want to play safe, you know."

The door opened and closed, leaving me outside in the house shadow.

CHAPTER IV

AN ESCAPE FROM ARREST

It was then that the power of thought returned to me. However glibly those two conspirators might gild over the affair it nevertheless was a criminal matter to which I had blindly committed myself. Neale's parting words of warning alone made that clearly evident. They understood the risk of discovery, and now I also comprehended it with equal clearness. Fraud and forgery were contemplated, had been coolly planned, and it occurred to me that I was the one selected for sacrifice in case of discovery. Vail and Neale were probably safe enough, as it would be easy for them to deny any participation, but they had me bound fast. However, I had no thought of withdrawal from the contract, for, while I saw the danger involved, and realized the illegality, yet I failed utterly to perceive any real evil. I did not doubt the truth of all that had been told me, and was willing to assume the risk. I fingered the crisp bills in my pocket, and the words "ten thousand dollars" kept repeating themselves over and over. Of course I would do it; I should be a fool not to. It would be "easy money," and my earning it could harm no one.

Not a glimmer of light appeared from within the house I had just left, and I drew my cap down over my eyes, and stared about, listening. The hour could not be far from midnight, the night dark, the air heavy with mist. Glancing out between the houses I caught a glimpse of asphalt pavement glistening with moisture, and the distant electric light above the street intersection appeared blurred and yellow. Here, in the heart of the residential district, the last belated cab had already drifted by, leaving the silence profound, the loneliness complete. Two blocks away a trolley-car swept past, an odd, violet light playing along the wire, grotesque shadows showing briefly amid the enveloping folds of vapor. The discordant clang of the gong died away into the far distance. Crouching there in the shade of the wall I felt like a criminal. Then, angry at myself, I advanced slowly forward, yet keeping well under cover.

The light fell slanting across the stone steps in front, and revealed a narrow opening through the brick coping beyond. I must pass that way in reaching the street, but hesitated to go forward boldly. I could see only a few feet in any direction, as the fog was thickening, driving along the soaked pavement in dense gray clouds, already beginning to blot from view the houses opposite. Another trolley-car, dismally clanging its gong, paused a moment at some near-by corner, and then passed noisily on. The way seemed clear, the street utterly deserted, and, nerving myself to the effort, I crept cautiously forward, until I crouched behind the brick coping. There was not a disturbing sound, and I straightened up, essaying the first quick step forth into the full gleam of the light. Like some confronting ghost, scarcely more real than a phantom of imagination, I came face to face with a woman.

She had turned swiftly into the narrow gateway leading through the brick coping, hurrying silently as if pursued, her foot barely planted upon the step when we met. I stopped, speechless, rigid, my outstretched hand gripping the rail, but the woman drew hastily back, her lips parted in a sudden sob of surprise, one hand flung out as if in self-protection. It was instantaneous, yet before either could move otherwise, or utter a word of explanation, a heavy footfall crunched along the walk, and a burly police officer, his star gleaming ominously in the dull light, rounded the corner a dozen feet away. Neither of us stirred, staring into each other's bewildered faces, and before either fully realized the situation, the strong, suspicious hand of the law had gripped my shoulder.

"Here, now, an' what the hell are ye oop too, me fine buck?" he questioned roughly, swinging me about into the light. "Give an account o' yer-self moighty quick, 'er I 'll run ye in."

Startled, recalling the money hidden in my pocket, the last injunction of Neale, I could think of no excuse, no explanation. The girl, still staring blankly at me, must have perceived how I instinctively shrank back, my lips moving in an impotent effort at speech. Some sudden impulse changed her fright into sympathy. However it was the officer who impatiently broke the silence, swinging his night stick menacingly:

"Come on now, me lad, hav' ye lost yer voice entoirely? Spake oop loively—whut ther hell are the two ov' yer oop to, onyhow?"

She started forward, just a step.

"Nothing in the least wrong, officer," her voice trembling slightly, yet sounding clearly distinct. "He—he was merely accompanying me home from a dance."

"Whut dance?"

"Over—over there on 43rd Street."

"An' do yer live here?" the gruff tone still vibrant with suspicion. "Fer if ye do, yer 're sure a new gurl," and he peered at her shadowed face in the dim light. She drew in her breath sharply.

"No," her voice steadying, now she realized she must carry out the deception. "My place is three blocks yet, around the next corner."

"Thet 's a prutty thin story, Miss. Then whut wus the two ov' yer doin' in here?"

She clutched the brick coping with one hand, never glancing toward me, her eyes fixed imploringly on the glistening face of the questioning policeman. Yet she responded instantly with the quick wit of a clever woman.

"I had my foot on the step, tying my shoe," she explained simply. "You don't arrest people for that, do you?"

It was plain enough the officer was puzzled, yet he reluctantly released his grip on my arm, boring the end of his club into the brick wall.

"It's half Oi' belave yer stringin' me roight now," he announced doubtfully, "but Oi 'll give yer ther benefit ov' the doubt; only the two ov' yer better kape on a-goin' till yer git under cover. Don't let me run across yer along this beat agin ternight. Be gory av yer do, Oi 'll let yer explain to ther sargint over at ther station. Go on now!"

I felt her hand touch my sleeve timidly, and caught a swift glimpse of her eyes. We must carry out the deception now, and go away together. There was no other choice. The policeman stared after us through the mist, rolling his night stick in his hand. I heard him mutter to himself:

"It 's a rum go o' sum koind. Thet guy ain't dressed fer no dance. But, dom me, if she 's the koind o' female ter run in aither. Lord, but she 's got a foine pair o' eyes in the face ov' her."

Close together, without venturing to speak or glance around, we walked forward into the enveloping mist. Her fingers, for appearances' sake, barely touched the rough cloth of my sleeve. All this had occurred so swiftly, so suddenly, that I was yet bewildered, unable to decide on a course of action. The girl, I noticed, was breathing heavily from excitement, her eyes cast down upon the wet pavement. Once, beneath the glow of the lamp at the first corner, I ventured to glance slyly aside at her, in curiosity, mentally photographing the clear outline of her features, the strands of light brown hair straggling rebelliously from beneath the wide brim of the hat. I was of rather reckless nature, careless, and indifferent in my relationship with women. A bit of audacious speech trembled on my lips, but remained unuttered. My earlier conception that she was a woman of the street died within me. There was more than a mere hint of character about that resolute mouth, the white contour of cheek. She glanced furtively back across her shoulder—evidently the policeman had disappeared, for she released her slight grasp of my arm, although continuing to walk quietly enough by my side, her face partially averted. The night was deathly still, the sodden walk underfoot scarcely echoing our footfalls, the weird mist closing denser about us, as we advanced.

At the second street intersection she turned east, advancing toward where passing trolley-cars promised some life and activity even at that late hour. Helpless to do otherwise I moved along with her in the same direction, our grotesque shadows dimly discernible beneath the yellow mist of light. Impulsively she stopped, and faced me, her hands clasped.

"I—I—please—I will say good night, now," she said, endeavoring to speak firmly, yet with no uplifting of the eyes.

Hesitatingly I stood still, feeling strangely embarrassed by this sudden curt dismissal.

"Do—do you mean you wish me to leave you alone on the street at this hour?" I questioned uneasily. "At least permit me to see you home safely. I will not hurt you, or speak a word."

There was a tone of earnestness in my plea but she only shook her head decisively, lips pressed close together. The faint glow of the overhead light rested on the slightly uplifted face, and the sight of her features yielded me fresh confidence.

"You have no cause to feel afraid of me," I went on soberly, in the silence. "Can't you tell that by my face?" and I removed my cap, standing before her uncovered. She lifted her lashes, startled and curious, gazing at me for the first time. I met her glance fairly, and the slight resentment in her eyes faded, her clasped hands moving uneasily.

"I—I am not afraid of—of you," she returned at last doubtfully. "It is not that, but—but really I cannot permit you to accompany me farther."

"Only to the place where you said you lived," I urged eagerly. "I promise not even to take note of the number, and will never bother you any more."

Her fine eyes hardened; then sank slowly before mine.

"That—that was a lie also," she acknowledged, half defiantly. "I—I do not live about here."

I stared at her in sudden doubt, yet remained loyal to my first impression.

"All the greater reason then for not leaving you here alone."

She laughed, a faint tinge of bitterness in the sound.

"Surely you cannot imagine I would feel any safer in company with a burglar?" she asked sharply. My face flushed.

"Why accuse me of that?" I asked quickly. "Merely because I was in that yard?"

She drew back a step, one hand grasping her skirt.

"Not altogether. You were hiding there, and—and you were afraid of the policeman."

I could not explain; it would require too long, and she would in all probability refuse to believe the story. Besides, what difference could it make? She had as much to explain as I; no more reason to suspect me than I had her. Let us meet then on common ground.

"If I grant your hasty guess to be partially correct," I returned finally, my voice deepening with earnestness, "and confess I was avoiding observation—what then? Can you not also believe me a man capable of treating you honorably? Is it totally impossible for you to conceive of circumstances so compelling, as to cause one to avoid the police, and yet involve no real loss of manhood?"

She bowed her head slightly, lowering her eyes before mine. My earnestness, my apparent education, were clearly a surprise.

"Yes," she confessed reluctantly enough. "I—I believe I can. There was a time when I could not, but I can now."

"Then yield me the benefit of such charity of judgment," I went on. "At least do not altogether condemn me on mere circumstantial evidence, and before you learn what has led up to the events of the night. At least give me opportunity to exhibit my gratitude."

She remained silent, motionless.

"Why not? Is it because you have no confidence in me?" I insisted.

She put out one hand, grasping the iron rail of a fence, and I thought I could see her form tremble.

"Oh, no! it—it is not that exactly," she explained brokenly. "I believe I—-I might trust you, but—but of course I do not know. I think you—you mean well; your words sound honest, and your—your face inspires confidence. Only I have found so much deceit, so much cruelty and heartlessness in the world I have become afraid of everyone. But I—I simply cannot let you go with me—oh! please don't urge it!"

I leaned forward, my face full of sympathy, my voice low and earnest.

"And do you suppose I will consent to desert you after that confession?" I questioned, almost indignant. "I would be a brute to do so. You saved me from arrest just now; for me to have been taken to the station house and searched would have put me in a bad hole. It was your wit that saved me, and now I am going to stay and help you. I 'll not leave you alone here in the street at this hour of the night."

She looked at me, her eyes wide open, shining like stars, her face picturing perplexity, not unmixed with fear, one hand yet gripping the supporting rail, the other pressed against her forehead.

"Oh, but you must! indeed, you must!" the words scarcely more than sobs. "I—I have no place to go!"

CHAPTER V

BEGINNING ACQUAINTANCE

I drew in my breath sharply, my lips set in a straight line. Already had I half-suspicioned this truth, and yet there was that about the girl—her manner, her words, even her dress—which would not permit me to class her among the homeless, the city outcasts.

"You mean that you are actually upon the streets, with—with no place to *go*?"

She did not answer, her head bowed, her face suddenly showing white and haggard. I stared at her with swift realization.

"My God, girl! and—and I actually believe you are hungry!"

Her eyes uplifted to my face dumb with agony, her hand grasp upon the rail tightening. Then she pitifully endeavored to smile.

"I—I am afraid I am, just a little." She acknowledged slowly, as though the words were wrung out of her.

I straightened up, with shoulders flung back. All that was strong, determined in my nature, came leaping to the surface. It was my time to act.

"Then that settles it. You are coming with me. No! don't shake your head; I shall have my way this time. There is a respectable all-night place over there on Desmet Street. I ate there once a week ago. We 'll go together."

She drew back, still clinging helplessly to the rail, her eyes on my face.

"Oh! you must not—I—"

My hand touched her arm.

"Yes, but I shall," I insisted, almost sternly. "Good Heavens, do you suppose I will leave you here on the street hungry? I 'd never rest easy another night as long as I lived. You are going with me."

Feeling my determination she made no further resistance, and I half supported her as we moved slowly forward through the mist, her face turned away, her arm trembling beneath the firm clasp of my fingers. As we advanced I became conscious that my own position was an awkward one. I had no money of my own with me—not a cent other than those two five-hundred dollar bills handed me by Vail. The uselessness of attempting to pass one of these was apparent; it would be better to plead lack of cash, and put up some security if the man in charge refused credit. At whatever cost the girl must have food.

It was much brighter on Desmet Street, numerous electric signs, advertising various places of business, even at this late hour, continuing to exhibit their rotating colors, while not a few of the shop windows remained brilliantly illuminated. Occasionally a belated pedestrian passed, while trolley-cars clanged their way through the fog, approaching and vanishing in a purple haze. Three doors around the corner was the all-night restaurant, through the glass front revealing a lunch counter, and a number of cloth-draped tables awaiting occupants. A few of these were in use, a single waiter catering to the guests; a woman was scrubbing the floor under the cigar stand, while a round-faced, rather genial-looking young fellow, stood, leaning negligently against the cashier's desk. Rather doubtfully I glanced uneasily up and down the deserted street, and then aside into the still averted face of my chance companion. I had no desire she should comprehend my dilemma.

"Would you mind waiting out here on the step a moment?" I questioned awkwardly, attempting to explain. "Only until I make sure who are inside. There are some fellows I am not friendly with, and I am not hunting a rough house with a girl to look after. You won't care for just a minute, will you?"

"No," wearily, "I won't mind."

"You 'll promise not to go away?"

She shook her head, her eyes staring dully into the mist.

"No; I won't go away. Where could I go?"

Scarcely satisfied, yet feeling obliged to take the chance, I stepped within, and advanced across the room toward the man at the cashier's desk. He glanced up curiously as I approached, and spoke low, so as not to attract the attention of others.

"Pardner, is my credit good for two meals?" I asked genially. "I guess you 've seen me in here before—I drive for the Wooster Lumber Company." A night cashier in that neighborhood becomes early habituated to tales of hard luck. It requires but a few lessons to render suspicion paramount. The round-faced man, all geniality vanished, stared directly into my face.

"Oh, yes, I 've seen you before, I reckon," he acknowledged noncommitally. "But that does n't necessarily mean we are ready to do a credit business. Been fired?"

"No; just happen to be short of cash, and need to eat. I 'll hand it to you tomorrow."

"I 've heard that song before. I reckon you 'll have to try your luck somewhere else, unless you 've got the price."

"That's the last word, is it?"

"Sure thing," indifferently. "Nothing doing."

Realizing the utter uselessness of argument, or of exhibiting my large bills, I reached inside my coat, unpinned, and held before him on the desk a bronze medal, fastened to a colored ribbon.

"Well, is this good for the price?" I questioned. "There 's two of us."

The round-faced cashier bent forward to look, his eyes widening with aroused interest. Then he glanced up inquiringly into my face.

"Yours?" he asked in open suspicion.

"Ought to be; cost me a Mauser bullet, a dozen bolo cuts, and eight weeks' hospital."

The cashier was visibly impressed, turning the medal over in his hands.

"So! Where was all this?"

"Down in a rice paddy; place called Baliancan."

"What regiment?"

"Third Cavalry."

The cashier's black eyes flashed, and he extended a cordial hand.

"Put her there, Amigo," he broke forth warmly. "Lord! but maybe I don't remember! Say, but you fellows were a husky lot o' bucks. Knew ye? I rather guess I did. I was bunkin' then with the First Nebraska. Sure, I 'll stand ye for the meal. Put back yer plaything, and bring in yer pardner —this spread is on the house. The Third Cavalry has divided chuck with me mor'n once, an' I ain't goin' back on one of the boys for the price of a meal."

Our hands met, clasped closely lying across the desk, our eyes glowing with suddenly aroused memories of comradeship in a foreign land. Then I repinned the medal to the front of my rough shirt, gulping a bit as I strove to speak calmly.

"It's a woman," I explained, nodding toward the door. "I found her out there hungry. Could we have that table yonder behind the screen?"

"Sure; and don't be afraid to order the best in the house. Damn me, but that was some fight we had at Baliancan, even if the history folks don't say much about it. I can see you Third Cavalry fellows goin' in now, up to yer waists in water, an' we wa'nt mor'n a hundred feet behind. Did you see them Filipino trenches after we took 'em?"

I shook my head.

"No; I was down and out long before then."

"Hell of a sight, believe me—jammed full o' little brown men, deader than door nails. They died a fighting, all right, an' they sure gave us a belly full that day. Lost sixteen out o' my company."

Our eyes lingered an instant on each other's faces; then I turned away, and walked to the door. She was waiting motionless, her back to the window, and, when I spoke, followed me in without a word. I led the way to the secluded table behind the screen, seated her, and took the chair opposite. Without questioning her wishes I ordered for both, the girl sitting in silence, her face bent low over the menu card, a red flush on either cheek. Still obsessed with vague suspicion of her character I could not forbear a suggestion.

"What will you have to drink?" I asked, as the waiter turned aside. "I 'd rather like a cocktail to drive the wet out of my system. Shall I make it two?"

She glanced up quickly from under shading lashes, her eyes, big and brown, meeting my own.

"I prefer coffee; that will be quite sufficient."

I ran my hand through my hair.

"Don't you ever drink anything stronger?" I asked, almost tempted to apologize. "You know lots of women do."

"I have never formed the habit."

"Cocktail for you, sir?" said the waiter briskly, flipping his towel on the table. "Martini, or Manhattan?"

I dropped my gaze from the girl's face to the menu card. It seemed to me her eyes had

pleaded with me.

"No; make mine coffee too," I replied gravely, "and hurry the cook up, will you."

We sat there waiting without further speech, she nervously fingering the card, her eyes veiled by lowered lashes. I glanced cautiously across at her, conscious of my cheap clothing, and vaguely wondering why my usual off-hand address had so suddenly failed. I felt embarrassed, unable to break the silence by any sensible utterance. My eyes rested upon her hands, white, slender, ringless. They were hands of refinement, and my gaze, fascinated by the swiftly recurring memory of other days, arose slowly to a contemplation of her face. I had seen it heretofore merely in shadow, scarcely with intelligent observation, but now, beneath the full glare of electric light, its revealment awoke me to eager interest. It was a womanly face, strong, true, filled with character, not so apt, perhaps, to be considered pretty, as lovable—a face to awaken confidence, and trust; a low, broad forehead, shadowed still by the wide-brimmed hat, and the flossy brown hair; the skin clear, the cheeks rounded, and slightly flushed by excitement; the lips full and finely arched; the chin firm and smooth. Her greatest claim to beauty was the eyes, now securely veiled behind long, downcast lashes. Yet I recalled their depth and expression with a sudden surging of red, riotous blood through my veins. As I sat there, uncertain how I might break the embarrassing silence, she suddenly glanced up questioningly.

"You—you do not at all understand my position, do you?" she asked timidly. "I mean why I should be homeless, on the street, alone at—at such an hour?"

"No," I responded, surprised into frankness, "you do not seem like that kind."

A wave of color flooded her clear cheeks, the brown eyes darkening.

"And I am not that kind," she exclaimed proudly, her head flung back, revealing the round, white throat. "You must comprehend that fact at once."

CHAPTER VI

WE OPEN CONFIDENCES

I bent my head, impressed by her earnestness, every instinct of a gentleman born, returning instantly.

"I do comprehend," I admitted seriously. "Believe me I have felt the truth of this ever since I first saw your face. You have ample reason for misjudging me, for believing me a criminal, but I possess no excuse for even questioning you. Shall we not permit the whole matter to rest there, and pretend at being friends for the moment? You have already acknowledged being both homeless and hungry. What more do I need know to be of assistance? The cause of such a condition is no business of mine, unless you choose to tell me voluntarily. You may not consider me a gentleman," and I glanced down at my cheap suit. "Yet surely you cannot regard me as a mere brute."

She continued to gaze at me, her eyes misty, yet full of wonderment. My language was not that of the slums, nor were my manners. To her I must have seemed as strange a character, as she appeared to me. We were both advancing blindly through the dark.

"You are also," she affirmed finally, as if half regretting the words. "You are just as penniless as I."

"Why should you say that?"

"Because I know," and by now her eyes were blinded by the tears clinging to her lashes. "You—you humiliated yourself to serve me; you—you were obliged to pawn something in security for this food. I—I saw you—your excuse for leaving me outside was just a sham. You had no money. I watched through the window, and—and I almost ran away, only my promise held me."

I laughed uneasily, yet sobered almost at once, leaning across the table, all earlier embarrassment vanished.

"Well, even at that, it would not be my first experience," I said swiftly. "Poverty is extremely unpleasant, but not a crime. Do not let that unfortunate condition of my exchequer spoil your appetite, my girl. I can assure you that is among the least of my troubles. In fact I have of late become hardened to that state of affairs. My life has been up and down; I 've ridden the top wave of prosperity, and have knocked against the rocks at the bottom. Lately I 've been on the rocks. But good luck, or bad, I am not the sort to desert a woman in distress."

"You are a man of some education?"

"Two years at the University."

"And now?"

I smiled grimly, determined to admit the worst.

"Little better than a tramp, I suppose, although I have held a job lately—driving for a lumber yard across the river."

A moment she sat in silence, her eyes lowered to the table.

"What—what was that you offered the man for security?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, nothing much. It had no intrinsic value, and the fellow would not even accept it. He was willing to trust me."

"Yes, but tell me what it was? Something you valued highly?"

I felt my cheeks reddening, yet there was no reason why I should not answer.

"It was a medal, an army medal."

"You were in the army then?"

"Yes, I served an enlistment in the Philippines, and was invalided home; discharged at the Presidio. Someway I have been up against tough luck ever since I got back. I think the climate over there must have locoed me; anyhow the liquor did. Tonight the pendulum is swinging the other way."

"Why do you think that?"

"I have met you, have I not?"

There was no brightening of her eyes, no acknowledgment of the words.

"To have the misery of another added to your own requires no congratulations," she said gravely. "But I am glad you told me. I know there are many who return home like that. I can understand why much better now than I could once. I have had experience also. It is so easy to drift wrong, when there is no one to help you go right. I used to believe this world was just a beautiful playground. I never dreamed what it really means to be hungry and homeless, to be alone among strangers. I had read of such things, but they never seemed real, or possible. But I know it all now; all the utter loneliness of a great city. Why it is easier to fall than to stand, and, oh! I was so desperate tonight. I—I actually believe I had come to the very end of the struggle. Whatever happens—whatever possibly can happen to me hereafter—I shall never again be the same thoughtless creature, never again become uncharitable to others in misery." Her eyes dropped before mine, yet only to uplift themselves again, shining with brave resolution. "Would you care to tell me what it is with you? What it is you fight?"

"I am afraid I do not fight, except physically," I confessed soberly. "Probably that is the whole trouble. If I have ever had a grip I 've lost it. However I 'm willing to tell my story, although it's a poor one, just the uninteresting recital of a fool. My home was in New England, my father a fairly successful manufacturer. My mother died while I was a child, and I grew up without restraining influence. I led an ordinary boy's life, but was always headstrong, and willful, excelling physically. My delight was hunting, and the out-of-doors. However I kept along with my studies after a fashion, and entered the University. Here I devoted most of my time to students' pranks, and athletics, but got through two years before being expelled. Interesting, is n't it?"

"Yes," she said. "It is what I wish to know."

"This expulsion resulted In a row at home," I went on, disgusted at myself. "And I took French leave. For six months I knocked about, doing a little of everything, having rather a tough time, but too obstinate to confess my mistake and return. Of course I naturally fell in with a hard set, and finally enlisted. My regiment was sent to the Philippines, where we had some fighting. I liked that, and was a good enough soldier to be promoted to a sergeantcy. I reckon I had better have remained in the service, for when I was sent back to Frisco, because of wounds, and then discharged, I went to hell."

"And your father does n't know?"

"Not from me. I had money at first, and transportation to Chicago where I enlisted. I blew in the cash, and lost the other. Then I started in to beat my passage east, working only when I had to. I was thrown off a train about twenty miles west of here, and came into this burg on foot. It was tough luck for a day or two until I caught on to a lumber yard job. I 've been working now for a couple of weeks. Nice record, is n't it?"

Her parted lips trembled, but those questioning brown eyes never deserted my face.

"It is not as bad as I feared, if—if you have told me all."

"I have confessed the worst anyhow. I 'm a rough, I suppose, and a bum, but I 'm not a criminal."

"Why were you at that house? and so afraid of the police?"

"Well, that is a long story," I replied hesitatingly. "I had been talking with some men inside, who had offered me work, and good pay. There was a reason why I did not wish to be seen coming out at that hour."

"Not—not anything criminal?"

"No; I 've confessed to being a good-for-nothing, but I 'm clear of crime."

She drew a long breath of relief.

"I do not quite believe," she said firmly. "You—you do not look like that."

I laughed in spite of my efforts.

"I am delighted to have you say so. No more do I feel like that now. Yet so the record reads, and you must accept me just as I am, or not at all. I have nothing else to offer."

She lowered her eyes, her fingers still nervously fumbling the menu card.

"Perhaps I have no more."

"I have asked no explanation of you."

"True; yet you cannot be devoid of curiosity. You meet me after midnight, wandering alone in the streets; you see me boldly, shamelessly, interfering to prevent the arrest of a strange man; you hear me deliberately falsify, again and again. What could you think of such a woman? Then I accept your invitation, and accompany you here, believing you a criminal. What possible respect could you, or any other man, entertain for a girl guilty of such indiscretion?"

"You ask my individual judgment, or that of the world?"

"Yours, of course; I know the other already."

I extended my hand across the table, and placed it over her own. A swift flush sprang to her cheeks, but she made no effort to draw away. The action was so natural, so unaffectedly sincere, as to awaken no resentment.

"I am a young man," I said earnestly, "but I have seen all kinds of life, both right and wrong, upper and lower. I can realize how easy it is to sit in a club window, and criticize the people passing along the street. That is an amusement of fools. The inclination to become one of that class left me long ago. Now I do not understand why you were upon the street tonight unattended; why you came to my assistance, or why you are here with me now. I have no desire to pry into your secret. I am content to remain grateful, to count this a red-letter day, because somehow, out of the mystery of the dark, we have thus been brought together. An old professor used to say all life hinges on little things, and I believe our chance meeting is going to change both our lives, and for the better. Without asking a question, or harboring a suspicion, I have faith in you—is that enough?"

"You mean, you accept me upon trust?"

"Certainly; even as you must accept me. I have no letters of recommendation."

She was again looking directly toward me, her brown eyes earnest and fearless.

"I—I confess I like your face," she admitted, "and I believe you have tried to tell me the truth about yourself, but our situation is so peculiar, so different from what I have been taught was proper." She smiled sadly, her eyes misting. "I am afraid you will not understand. You can scarcely appreciate how strictly I have been brought up, or what such an unconventional meeting as this means to me. I ought to be ashamed of myself."

"But are you?"

"Really I—I do not seem to be. It almost frightens me to realize I am not, I do not understand myself at all. Why should I talk thus frankly with you? Why feel confidence in you? It is not in accordance with the rules of my old life, nor of my nature. Such actions would shock those who know me; they ought to shock me. Am I in a dream, from which I am going to awaken presently? Is that the explanation?"

I shook my head.

"No, not in that sense, at least. Rather the other way around. You have been in a dream all your life—a dream that some social code somewhere constituted the real world. Under these petty regulations of conduct you were not yourself at all, only a make-believe. Something serious

has occurred in your life, and changed all in an instant. You have been thrown against the real world. You find it not to be what you supposed. It is no cause for shame or regret; womanhood lies deeper than any pretense at gentility. Men seldom fail to recognize this fact—their lives of struggle compel them to, but a woman finds it hard to understand."

"To understand what?"

"How any man meeting her as I have you—in the street at night, under conditions society would frown at—can still feel for her a profound respect, and pay her the deference which a gentleman must always extend to one he deems worthy."

For a long moment she did not speak, but withdrew her hand from beneath mine, resting her chin in its palm.

"What is your name?" she asked finally.

"Gordon Craig."

The lashes drooped quickly, securely shadowing the brown depths, the flush deepening on her cheeks. In the momentary hush which followed the waiter came shuffling forward with our order.

CHAPTER VII

THE WOMAN'S STORY

I had never supposed I lacked audacity, yet I found it strangely difficult to again pick up our conversation. This woman puzzled me; was becoming an enigma. She encouraged me, and yet something about her precluded all familiarity. I was haunted by the vague suspicion that she might be "stringing" me; that she was not as innocent as she pretended. Her eyes again glanced up, and met mine.

"It is a terrible experience being penniless, and alone," she said with a shudder. "I can never condemn some forms of evil as I once did, for now I have felt temptation myself. I—I have even learned to doubt my own strength of character. I walked past a great hotel last evening, and looked in through the windows, at the dining-room. It was brilliant with electric lights, in rose globes over the spotless tables, and hundreds of people were gathered about eating and drinking. I had been there myself more than once, yet then I was alone outside, in the misty street, penniless. I had no strength left, no virtue—I was in heart a criminal. Have you ever felt that?"

"Yes," I acknowledged, hopeful she would explain further. "I comprehend fully what you mean. Nature is stronger than any of us when it comes to the supreme trial."

"I had never known before. It is strange to confess such a thing, but it is true. I—I do not believe I am weak as compared with others. Never before have I had any occasion to question the supremacy of my will, yet I learned a lesson last night—that I am not a saint. I actually faced crime, and it did not even look horrible to me! it appeared justified. Even now, sitting here with you, I cannot believe I was wicked. You will not misconstrue my words, but—but life is not always the same, is it? How inexpressibly cruel a great city may be with glaring wealth flaunting itself in the pinched face of poverty. How can I help being rebellious now that I have seen all this through hungry eyes?"

Her hands were clasped above her plate, the slender fingers intertwined. I was looking at her so intently forgot to answer.

"I—I am glad I met you," she said frankly. "I—I think you have saved me from myself."

"You asked me my name," I broke in eagerly. "Would you mind telling me who you are?"

"I?" the clear cheeks reddening. "Why, I am only a fool."

"Then there is, at least, one tie between us. But, if we are to remain friends I must know how to address you."

Her red lips parted doubtfully, her brow wrinkling.

"Yes, and we cannot afford to be conventional, can we? I am Viola Bernard."

"I knew a girl once by that name; ages ago it seems now. A little thing in short skirts, but I thought her rather nice. I believe we are inclined to like names associated with pleasant memories. So I am glad your name is Viola."

"It was my mother's name," she said quietly, her eyes downcast, "and I am not sorry you like it." She stirred the coffee in her cup, watching the bubbles rise to the surface. "I feel more confidence in you than I did, because you have been so honest about yourself."

"I have told you the truth. I think I comprehend one trait, at least, of your character—you would never again trust one who had deliberately deceived you."

She did not remove her eyes from the cup, nor appear to note my interruption, but continued gravely:

"I must tell my story to someone; I can fight fate alone no longer. Perhaps I may not confess everything, for I do not know you well enough for that, but enough, at least, so you will no longer suspect that I—I am a bad woman."

"I could never really believe that."

"Oh, yes, you could. I have read in your face that my character puzzles you. You invited me to drink a cocktail to try me. Don't protest, for really I do not wonder at it, or blame you in the least. How could you think otherwise? My position was a strange one, bound to awaken suspicion; my conduct immodest. Yet you must accept my explanation, for I shall tell the truth. I was never guilty of such an act before—never! Perhaps because I was never tempted. There is a home I could return to, and a mother, but they are more than a thousand miles from here. But I cannot go, even if I possessed the means, because of my pride—my false pride possibly. I have chosen my course, and must abide by it to the end."

She drew a long breath, speaking very slowly.

"It is a hard story to tell, for the wound is still fresh, and hurts. I was upon the stage—not long, but with sufficient success so that I had become leading woman with one of the best stock companies. It was against my mother's wish I entered the profession, and she has never become reconciled to it, although our relationship remained pleasant. A few months ago, while playing in Omaha, I met Fred Bernard. I knew little of him, but he appeared gentlemanly and well-to-do, and was presented to me by one in whom I had confidence. He was pleasant, and apparently in love with me; I liked him, was flattered by his attentions, and discouraged in my ambition. When he asked me to marry him conditions were such that I accepted, even consented, under his urging, to an immediate ceremony. We came to this city, were quietly married here, and occupied a flat on the north side. My husband did no work, but received remittances from home, and apparently had plenty of means. He told me little about himself, or his condition, but promised to take me to his people in a little while. He said his father was wealthy, but eccentric; that he had told him of our marriage, but there had been a quarrel between them, and he could not take me there without an invitation. I was never shown the letters, but they bore Southern postmarks."

She paused, hesitating, her eyes full of pain.

"I—I was afraid to question, for—for he proved so different after our marriage. He was a drunkard, abusive and quarrelsome. I had never before been in intimate contact with anyone like that, and I was afraid of him. Whatever of love I might have felt died within me under abuse. He struck me the second day, and from that moment I dreaded his home-coming. For weeks I scarcely saw him sober, and his treatment of me was brutal."

Tears were in her eyes, but she held them back, forcing herself to go on.

"Then he was gone two days and nights leaving me alone. He reappeared the third evening in the worst condition I had ever seen him. He acted like a veritable savage, cursing and striking at me, and finally drove me from the house, flourishing a revolver in my face, and locking the door behind me. I—I sat there on the steps an hour, and endeavored to go back, but there was no response. I walked the streets, and then—having a little money with me—found a place to lodge. The next day I went back, but the flat was locked still, and neighbors said my husband had left with a traveling bag. I—I was actually thrown out upon the streets to starve."

Her voice lowered, so that I was compelled to lean closer to catch the rapidly spoken words.

"At first I—I was not altogether sorry. I thought it would be easy to find work. I was not afraid of that—but—but it was not easy. Oh! how hard I tried. I faced open insult; cowardly insinuation; brutal coarseness. I never dreamed before how men could treat women seeking honorable employment. Scarcely a courteous word greeted me. Refusal was blunt, imperative, or else, in those cases where vague encouragement was given, it was so worded as to cause my withdrawal in shame. If I had been skilled in any business line my reception might have been different; if I possessed recommendations, or could have frankly confessed the truth, perhaps I might have been given a chance. But as it was everywhere, suspicion was aroused by my reticence, my inability to explain, and the interview ended in curt dismissal, or suggestive innuendo."

She paused again, her bosom rising and falling, her cheeks flushed.

"Go on," I said, encouragingly. "Do not fear I shall misunderstand. I have been through the same mill."

She gave me a quick glance of gratitude, pressing back a straggling strand of hair.

"But you were not a woman," she insisted, "and could defend yourself from insult. I endeavored so hard to discover some opening; I even sought domestic service, and was examined as though I was a horse on sale. I walked the streets; I refused to despair, or permit myself to believe failure possible. I went home at night, tired out, to a little rented room in Forty-Ninth Street, prayed as I used to when a child, cried myself to sleep, only to wake up the next morning determined to continue. I was not weak then; I was as strong as any girl could be; I—I fought it out to the very last," her head suddenly drooping, "but—but the end came just the same. Perhaps I should never have hung on so long; perhaps it would have been better to have sent word to my mother, and asked help to go home. But—but I kept hoping to succeed, until it was too late. I spent all the little money I had, and pawned my rings. I had married against my mother's wish. I could not turn to her for help. Oh, I was tempted; I think you must know what I mean! You realize what temptation is; how it weakens, and conquers the soul?"

I closed my hand firmly over hers.

"Yes, I know."

Her sensitive face brightened; her eyes clearing of mist.

"It is a comfort to speak with a gentleman again. I—I had almost begun to believe there were none left in the world. You give me courage to go on, to acknowledge everything. Mr. Craig, I was a soul tottering on the brink when I met you out yonder; a desperate, disheartened girl, tempted to the point of surrender. I had lost hope, pride, all redeeming strength of womanhood. I scarcely cared whether death, or dishonor, claimed me. I do not know what fateful impulse moves me now, but I can look into your eyes without sense of shame, and confess this. I was, in all essential truth, a woman of the street—not yet lowered utterly to that level, not yet sacrificed, but with no moral strength left for resistance. No fear, no horror. Oh, God! it seems like some awful dream—yet it was true, true! I had ceased to struggle, to care; I had begun to drift; I had lost everything a woman prizes, even my faith in God. I know you cannot comprehend what this means—no man could. But I want you to try. Think what it would mean to your sister, to some pure friend in whom you have implicit trust. Oh, I know what the world would say—the well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed, sneering world—but it is to you I appeal for some slight mercy. You have also suffered, and grown weak, and, because you told me your story first, I dare now to tell mine. I was a soul on the brink, and—God forgive me!—not afraid of the rocks below. Like one stupefied I looked down, hated myself and laughed."

CHAPTER VIII

FACING THE PROBLEM

My fingers closed yet more tightly over the small hand, but her face remained rigid, the lines deep about the mouth.

"The landlady had turned me out," speaking now bitterly and swiftly, "retaining my few belongings, and calling me a foul name which made me cower away like a whipped child. I had nothing left—nothing. For a week I had listened to no kind word, met with no kind act. I was upon the street, alone, at night, purposeless, homeless, wandering aimlessly from place to place, weakened by hunger, stupefied by despair. Men spoke to me, and I fled their presence as though they were pestilence; women, painted, shameless creatures, greeted me in passing as one of their own class, and I sought to avoid them. Once I mustered sufficient courage to ask help, but—but the man only laughed, and called me a foul name. I do not know where I went, what the streets were called. I remember the brilliantly lighted hotel: the theater crowds jostling me on the sidewalks; the saloons where I saw women slipping in through side entrances, the strains of piano music jingling forth on the night air. I—I knew what it meant, and lingered, faint and trembling, before one illuminated front, like a fascinated bird, until a drunken man, reeling forth, laid hand on my shoulder with proposal of insult. I broke away from him, and ran into the dark, every nerve tingling."

She shuddered, catching her breath sharply.

"Then—then I found myself out among the residences, where everything was still and lonely, walking, walking, walking, every shadow appearing like a ghost. I sat down to rest on the curbing, but a policeman drove me away; once I crept into a darkened vestibule in a big apartment building, but another discovered me there, and threatened to take me to the station. I did n't care much by that time, yet finally he let me go, and I crept miserably on. I became afraid of the police; I felt as I suppose criminals must feel; I slunk along in the dark shadows like a hunted thing. The night grew misty and damp, but I found no shelter. I had no will power left, no womanhood, no remorse; I had become a thing to play with, a body without a soul. I had ceased

to care, to think, to even remember; I only wanted to drop the struggle, and have it over with. Perhaps I should have taken my own life, had I only known how to accomplish it—it seemed infinitely worse to live than to die. It was thus I came there, to that corner. I heard the policeman approaching along the side street, and, terrified, sprang into the yard to escape—then—then, I met you."

Someone laughed at one of the other tables, and I wheeled about in my chair. For an instant I believed her voice had been overheard, but instantly realized the mistake and turned back, noticing how she was trembling.

"Tell me," I questioned earnestly, "what caused you to interfere between me and the officer?"

"What! Oh, I hardly know," a touch of hysteria in the nervous exclamation. "It was just a natural ending to all the rest, I suppose. I was a criminal in heart, a fugitive; I hated the law, and was afraid of the police. I merely did what occurred to me first, without thought, volition, purpose. I was compelled to choose instantly between his mercy and yours; the—the difference seemed small enough then, but—but I realized you were frightened also, and—and so I preferred to trust you. That was all; it was my fate, and—and, well I did n't care much how it ended."

"But you endeavored to escape from me; you sought to compel my leaving you?"

She lifted her face again, flushing, saddened, slightly indignant, the brown eyes widening.

"Perhaps the soul was not all dead," she returned gravely. "Perhaps womanhood was not all gone. I did not know you; I was in terror."

"And now?"

Our eyes met, her own cleared of tears, gazing frankly at me.

"I am not afraid; I believe I have found a man, and a friend."

I was conscious of a sudden wild throb of the heart, a swift rush of blood through my veins.

"I might have doubted that myself a while ago," I acknowledged almost bitterly, "but now I am going to make good. Lord! how a fellow can run to seed when he lets himself go. Don't you know you are helping me, as much as I am you? You didn't find much out there—only a drunken discharged soldier, an ex-hobo, with a laborer's job. I 've wasted my chance in life, and been an infernal fool. I can see that plain enough, and despise myself for it. I knew it before you came—the difference was then I did n't care, while now I do. You have made me care. Yes, you have, girl," as she glanced up again, plainly startled by this unexpected avowal. "You care, and because I know you do, things are different. I mean it; this is no word play. I tell you when a man has been steadily dropping, in his own estimation, as well as the social scale; when he has just about lost his pride, his self-respect, his realization of right and wrong; when he sees nothing ahead worth fighting for; when he seeks happiness in drink, and makes companions out of crooks and hobos, that is when it amounts to something to have a real woman like you come into his life, and hear her speak of trust and friendship. Lord! it 's like a breath of pure air amid the foulness of the pit. I believe in *you*, and I have n't believed in anybody for a long while. Perhaps you didn't wholly mean all you said to me; perhaps you 'll forget about it when your luck changes, but it 's a thing that is going to stay with me; you can bet on that! I guess it was what I 've been hungry for; the loss of it had taken the very heart out of me," I paused, fearful I might be going too far, yet given fresh courage by the expression of her face. "You see you belong to my class, little girl, and—and you are the first of them to speak a kind word to me in five years. It's—it's a bit tough to be cut dead by your own class."

It was her hand, white and slender, which reached shyly across the table, and touched mine, but her eyes alone made answer.

"That is all right," I continued, my voice shaking. "I understand how you feel. Anyhow you 've made a new man out of me; maybe the stuff is n't much, but there is a soul in it somewhere, and you 've given that soul something to get a grip on. That was all I needed, just to get my teeth set. But what about you? This is no fit place for your kind—you better go home to your mother."

She shook her head with decision.

"Why not? is she hard?"

"Yes, she would be very hard with me."

"Do you mean you would rather risk it here with—with me, than go back, and face her?"

"Yes, even that," she replied soberly. "I have courage to fight it out here, but not there. I know what it will mean if I go back—reproaches, gossip, ostracism—all the petty meannesses of a small town. I loathe the very thought. I am strong again, and I will not go. It is between God and me, this decision; between God and me." She drooped her head, hiding her face upon her arms, her shoulders trembling. "You—you may despise me; you may think me the lowest of the low, but I—I am going to stay here."

I sat in silence, amazed, puzzled, gazing across at her, my face sober, my hands clinched.

"You actually mean you dare risk yourself here—with me?"

"With your help; with you as a friend to talk to—yes."

I drew in my breath sharply, my forehead beaded with perspiration.

"But stop and think what I am," I urged recklessly. "A mere hobo."

She raised her face, the flushed cheeks wet, the brown eyes glowing indignantly.

"No," she said earnestly. "You are not that; you are a man."

For a long minute I did not answer, unable to determine what to do, how to act. We had both finished our meal, and there was no excuse for lingering longer at the table.

"You will go with me, then?"

"Yes."

I pushed back my chair, and she arose also, following me without question as I passed across to the door. The cashier nodded to my good night, and I opened the door for her passage to the street. The mist of the cloudy night had been blown away by an increasing breeze. The air was warm, and the sky brightening in the east. I glanced aside into her face, and led the way into a near-by park, the two of us trudging along a well-kept gravel path, until I discovered a bench hidden from observation amid surrounding shrubbery.

"I 've simply got to think this whole matter out," I explained simply. "It's happened so unexpectedly. I 'm stumped as to what had better be done."

She remained standing, resting one hand on the back of the settee, a slender figure, neatly enough dressed, yet exhibiting evidence of her long night's wandering.

"You mean I am a problem? You—you do not know what to do with me?"

I glanced at her, surprised by the change in her voice.

"Naturally; a young woman is usually a problem, isn't she? This particular one has come with a suddenness sufficient to jar anybody's nerves. Three hours ago I was without responsibility, a mere log adrift on the current. I 've hardly wakened up yet to the change in conditions. Here I am a fellow so utterly worthless that I have n't even been able to take decent care of myself alone, yet all at once the duty fronts me to double my responsibilities."

Her cheeks reddened.

"No, you are not! Is that then your conception of me? Let me tell you differently. Just so soon as this city wakes up, I am going to start forth again and seek work."

The smile I was attempting faded.

"Seek work! I understood you confided yourself to my care."

"Not—not in that way—never!" indignantly. "You had no right to so construe my words. You—you know I am not like that. I trusted you as a man; I—I gave you my—my confidence as a friend," her speech growing swift, and impetuous. "Do not make me sorry. I will not accept your money; I will never remain dependent upon you, or a burden. I have regained my courage, and am no longer afraid. All I needed was to know that I was not all alone—I can fight for the rest."

"Mrs. Bernard," I began quietly, realizing her spirit. "You have given a wrong meaning to my words; I respect you, believe in you, and merely desire to help you to the best of my ability. Sit down here, and let us face this thing squarely together. We must n't act like children, or close our eyes to facts. For instance—we have both been up all night. That is n't specially new for me, but it is to you, and the exposure and strain shows. You are not fit to go out hunting employment."

"Poverty has no choice," bitterly. "The fact that I am tired does not matter."

"Oh, but it does. Now I am not quite so badly off as you suppose. All I ask is a chance to think, to arrange some plan. Won't you sit quietly there until I puzzle it out?"

She sank down wearily upon one end of the settee, and I took the other, leaning forward, my face in my hands.

CHAPTER IX

WE COMPLETE ARRANGEMENTS

For a few moments as I sat thus in silence the obvious way out never once occurred to me. Somehow the memory of my own position had become blotted out in contemplation of the serious predicament of my companion. How could I assist her in spite of her pride, and her determination to continue the struggle alone. I could not take her to my boarding house, which was exclusively for men, nor did I have any acquaintance able to furnish her employment. I shoved my hands deep into my pockets, and my fingers touched the two bills handed me by Vail. For an instant I failed to realize their significance, and then the recollection of my own engagement came swiftly back. At first the memory was a disgust; the very presence of the girl, and her tale of struggle, made me realize the sordidness of this plot in which I was involved. Somehow it struck me then as a dirty, underhanded scheme. Yet, as I reviewed the details, this conception largely vanished. We were defrauding no one, merely protecting a man helpless to protect himself, backed by legal advice, as well as by the desire of the administrators of the will. The comparatively large sum of money offered me for the service was not excessive considering the amount involved, or the way in which I physically resembled the party represented. The feeling of resentment died away, but I doubted if she could be made to look at it in the same light. I glanced across to where she sat, the gray dawn giving me clear view. Her head rested back upon one arm, and she was asleep. Uncomfortable as she looked, she was still resting, the tired lines of her face less noticeable. I had no heart to awaken her, and remained motionless, thinking it all over carefully in detail.

We remained undisturbed, our settee removed from the main pathway, along which a few early workmen passed. She was the very one to act the part of Philip Henley's wife, if she would consent. Her refinement, the clear innocence of her face, would be convincing, and I began already to long for her company. Yet she would have to be told every detail, convinced the apparent fraud was justifiable. I rather dreaded the look in her eyes when she first heard the proposal, and her questioning me. While I still hesitated, fearful of refusal, the sun shining upon her face awoke her suddenly. She straightened up instantly, but her eyes smiled as they met mine.

"I was asleep," she said in surprise. "For how long?"

"Nearly two hours."

"And you have sat there quietly all that time?"

"That is nothing. I was tired, but not sleepy. Besides, I had so much to think about."

"You mean regarding what you shall do with me," and she arose to her feet. "It is time now I did something for myself."

"Wait, please," and I extended my hand, almost forcing her back upon the settee. "Let me say a word first before you decide to go. All I told you last night about myself is true, with one exception. I have money, and profitable work in view—see!" and I held before her the two bills.

She gazed at them with wide-open eyes, half convinced of some legerdemain.

"A thousand dollars," she exclaimed bewildered. "*You*! why, what does it all mean?"

"Yes, and nine thousand more promised, when I complete work that ought not to require to exceed two months. I was not without money in the restaurant, only I could not ask the cashier to change so large a bill. Sit down again, please, and let me tell you the story."

She did so, almost reluctantly, as though doubting my sanity, but I could note a change in the expression of her face as I proceeded. I told it slowly, carefully, pausing to explain each detail to her questioning, yet was not interrupted more than once or twice. Somehow, as I thus repeated the proposed scheme to another it did not appear quite as easy, or honorable, as when I faced it alone. However, I struggled through, painting the affair as well as I could, but without daring to propose her cooperation. Her wide-open eyes on my face gave me a thrill of apprehension I could not analyze.

"That 's the whole story," I ended, rather lamely.

"What do you think of it?"

"I—I hardly know," with slow hesitation. "It is very strange. Tell me the young man's name again."

"Henley—Philip Henley."

"And the town?"

"Carrollton, Alabama."

"And he is in prison for crime, you say—what crime?"

"Forgery, a fourteen-year sentence."

"Did they tell you when he was sent there?"

"No; I believe not."

"And his wife has disappeared? They can find no trace of her?"

"So both men assured me."

"And this one named Neale—are you certain he is an administrator?"

"Yes, I was shown a certified copy of the will; everything seemed to be exactly as represented."

She pressed one hand to her forehead, her eyes on the ground. I watched her, an unasked question trembling on my lips. Suddenly she looked up again, her cheeks flushed.

"You were going to suggest that I go with you, were you not?" she asked swiftly. "That I play the wife's part? Why did n't you ask it?"

"Because I lacked courage," I replied frankly, yet leaning eagerly toward her. "I was afraid you would take such a proposition wrongly."

"Then you retain some respect for me; some faith in my character?"

"I certainly do," earnestly.

"And you see nothing wrong in carrying out your part? You mean to go to Carrollton with someone—a woman?"

"I—I agreed to the terms—yes."

She drew a long breath, her eyes upon mine.

"Then I will go also," she said soberly, and held out her hand.

"You mean that?"

"Yes—why not? Surely it is as right for me as for you. You wished me to say yes, did you not?"

My face must have answered, as my lips failed, but she went on swiftly:

"Then I will go; only remember it is acting, a mere play in which I have a certain part to perform. We are to be friends throughout it all—actors on the stage. There must be no misunderstanding about this."

I had recovered my voice now, realizing all she meant, and anxious to reassure her.

"Certainly. There will be no mistake, Mrs. Bernard. That was why I hesitated to ask you, for fear you might misinterpret my purpose. You are the very woman to do this. I dreaded to have with me the kind Vail would have sent. I am delighted—truly I am, and nothing shall occur to cause you any regret."

"We go tonight?—I shall need clothing."

"Of course; that was what this money was advanced for, to outfit us. How much will you need?"

She thought a moment, a little line of perplexity between her eyes, finally naming a sum which surprised me.

"Not more than that?" I exclaimed. "Surely that is not enough."

"Oh, yes, it is," laughing. "There will be no dressing. All I need do is appear neat."

We sat there and talked it over, deciding exactly our course of action. At nine o'clock I left her, hunted up the nearest bank and got change for my bill. Then I gave her the amount asked, and we separated, to meet again late that afternoon at the depot. I felt no doubt as to her being there on time. My day was a busy one, as I had to visit my boarding house, buy needful clothing, and arrange for transportation. At the moment specified I called up Vail on the phone, and he responded instantly, the very tone of his voice evidencing the relief he felt at hearing from me.

"Began to think I had skipped with the thousand?" I asked. "Well, I have n't, for the other nine looks too good."

"You are going, then?"

"Sure; all packed, and transportation bought. Best of it is I 've found the right woman to go

along with me.

"Good; I didn't know what to do about that—the one I had in mind is out of town. Who is she?"

"Oh, never mind her name; she is all right, a friend of mine."

"Not likely anyone I know. Where are you?"

I told him, and he agreed to send over certain papers to me by messenger. These arrived promptly, and I studied them carefully until nearly train time, getting all the facts firmly implanted in my mind. Then, my heart beating somewhat faster than usual, I took cab to the depot, more deeply interested I fear in again meeting Mrs. Bernard, than in the adventure itself. We met beneath the grim shadow of the train shed.

CHAPTER X

AT THE PLANTATION

The events of the day had changed her greatly. At first, as she came toward me through the crowd near the gate, holding out a neatly gloved hand, I could scarcely realise that this well-dressed, soft-voiced lady was the homeless creature I had consorted with the night before. Her eyes laughingly challenged mine, while the hours since had given her back perfect control.

"So you did not even know me," she said pleasantly. "Oh, but you did not—you were passing by when I spoke. Don't apologize, for really I take it as the highest compliment. You are wonderfully improved yourself. If I had ever doubted your claim to having been well born I would realize the truth now. That is something not easily counterfeited."

"And something evidently you need never try to counterfeit," I added, forgetful of our peculiar relations, as I gazed at the arch face under the broad hat brim. "Pray how did you work such a marvelous transformation on so small a sum? I had a theory marriage was expensive."

Her cheeks flamed.

"That depends," she replied; "I had excellent training. The marvel is even greater than you suppose, for behold this case also filled with necessities. Is this our train?"

"Yes," and I took up the grip she designated as hers. "Let us get settled and into the diner, for I am hungry as a wolf."

I had procured opposite sections, and, before retiring, we studied the papers, together with Vail's letter of instruction, and thus came to a complete understanding. She was quick-witted, and spoke frankly, and yet, when I finally lay down in my berth I felt less well acquainted with her than before. Somehow, in a manner inexplainable, a vague barrier had arisen between us. I could not trace it to any word or action on her part, and yet I felt held away as by an invisible hand. Her very cordiality exhibited a reserve which made me clearly comprehend that the slightest familiarity would be checked. Evidently she had determined coolly to carry out the deceit, to act her part to perfection, because of the reward, and she meant I should comprehend her exact position. I fell asleep dissatisfied, half believing she was also playing a part with me, although it was impossible to conceive her purpose. The conception even came that she was herself an adventuress, yet I throttled the thought instantly, unwilling to harbor it.

It was at the close of the following afternoon when our train reached Carrollton. The depot must have been a mile from the town, and very few people were upon the platform, two drummers and ourselves the only ones to disembark. The traveling men hastened to the nearest hack, while I glanced about in search of a conveyance. The only other vehicle present was a two-seated surrey, driven by a rather disreputable negro. I approached in some doubt.

"No, sah," he said, grinning. "Dis yere am my own curridge, sah; tain't nuthin' ter do wid de Henley plantation. I reckon dey done did n't git no telegram. Dey sure did n't less dey wus oxpectin' one, an' cum inter town after it. Yes, sah, I know whar de place am all right. I done worked dar onct. I reckon you 'se Massa Philip Henley, sah; though you 've sure growd some since I saw you de las' time. I 'se ol' Pete, sah; I reckon you remembers ol' Pete."

"Of course I do," I returned heartily, encouraged by his words to believe I would pass muster. "Can you drive us out?"

The negro scratched his head.

"I reckon as how I can, sah, leastwise so far as ther gate. It's going to be plum dark when we gits dar, an' dis nigger don't fool round dar none in de dark."

"Why, what's the trouble, Pete?"

"Cause ol' Massa Henley's ghost was hangin' round, sah. I ain't nebber seen it myself, an' I don't want to, for he was sure bad 'nough alive, but dar 's niggers what has."

"Oh, pshaw," I laughed, turning toward the silent girl. "We will risk the ghost if you 'll drive us out. Put in the grips."

"Yes, sah. I reckon this yere am de new missus."

"Yes," and I assisted her into the rear seat. "That's all; now jog along."

He climbed into his place, but with no special alacrity; but whipped his team into a swift trot, evidently anxious to complete the trip as early as possible. I glanced aside at my companion, observing the paleness of her face.

"Surely you are not afraid of the negro's ghost?" I questioned.

"Oh, no, but the strangeness of it all has got on my nerves. I did not suppose it would be so hard, and—and I am not so sure now that we ought to do this."

"But that is foolish," I insisted, a bit angrily. "We talked it all over, you know, and no harm can be done, except through our discovery. Don't fail me now."

"Oh, I am not going to fail," indignantly. "The ride will steady my nerves," she leaned forward whispering, her head inclined toward the front seat. "Perhaps he can tell us who we shall meet there?"

"Pete," I asked, "who is out there now?"

The negro turned, so I could see the whites of his eyes.

"At de Henley plantation, sah? Why, I reckon de oberseer an' de housekeeper—both white folks. I done don't know just who dey am fer shure, cause dey don't stay long no more. I reckon dey can't abide dat ghost, sah, an' de field han's dey won't stay on de place at all affer dark."

"The overseer and housekeeper then are newly employed?"

"Dem am de fac's, sah. Deh ain't been dar no time at all, an' I reckon as how dey won't stay long, though de niggers say de oberseer am a hell ob a man."

Here was a pleasant situation surely. While the conditions were favorable enough so far as our purpose was concerned, yet I fervently wished we had postponed our arrival until daylight. While the negro's ghost had no terrors for me—indeed, merely afforded amusement—I realized my companion was not so indifferent. She pressed closer to me in the narrow seat, her eyes on the dusky shadows. I endeavored to laugh away her fears, but got little response. The road was a lonely one, although apparently well traveled, bordered by rail fences and, deserted-looking fields. Once we passed through a swamp, and skirted the edge of timber. Then we turned to the right into a branch track, where low bushes brushed our wheels. By this time it was quite dark, and Pete was obliged to hold in his horses. There was a quarter moon in the sky, just enough to give everything a spectral look, with no human habitation visible, and owls hooting dismally in the distance. It was uncanny in the extreme, and even I felt the desolation, and became silent. Pete whistled stoutly, but without enthusiasm, occasionally turning his head to make sure we were still there. I could hear her quick breathing, and feel an occasional clutch of her fingers on my sleeve at some unusual sound. Suddenly the negro pulled up before a high hedge, and I perceived the white glimmer of a gate opposite us, the black shadow of trees beyond.

"Here we am, sah," he whispered, glancing about fearful, "an' de good Lord knows I 'se glad tain't no furder. You just han' me a dollar, sah, an' den I 'se goin' fur to git out o' dis."

"Is that the house in there?"

"Suah, you ought for to know dat. Tain't changed none, 'cept run down a bit, far as I know. Here am your grips, sah."

We had no sooner alighted than he wheeled his team, and departed, whipping the horses into a run. I felt her hand grip my sleeve, and glanced aside into her face.

"Frightened?" I asked, endeavoring to speak easily. "Don't let that fellow bother you; surely you do not believe in spooks?"

"No," her voice trembling, "but it is all so desolate. I—I wish we had waited until daylight."

"Well, frankly, so do I," I responded, "but the thought comes too late. There is nothing left us but to try the house; we cannot pass the night out here."

"No, oh, no!"

"Then come on," and I picked up the suit cases. "We will probably be laughing at ourselves in five minutes. You will have to unlatch the gate."

It was held in place by a sagging rope, but opened noiselessly, and we advanced onto a brick walk, so little used as to be half hidden by weeds growing in the crevices. The moon dimly revealed rank vegetation on either side, while ahead, beneath the tree shadows, the darkness was profound. There was no sound, no faintest gleam of light to indicate the house, and I was compelled to advance cautiously to keep to the path, which apparently wound about in the form of a letter "S." We were at the foot of the front steps, the building itself looming black before us, almost before we realized its nearness. I could perceive the outlines indistinctly, and the deserted desolation affected me strangely. Perhaps some of the negro's superstition had got into my blood, for I felt my heart leap when the girl suddenly sobbed, clutching me in an agony of fear. Yet the very knowledge of her fright stiffened my resolution, and I dropped the grips to clasp both her hands.

"Don't!" I insisted. "I know the place looks leery enough, but Pete said the overseer and housekeeper were here. Doubtless they are in the back rooms. Wait here until I go up and rouse them."

"Oh, no; I could not stand it to be left alone."

"All right; here, take my hand, and we 'll go up together."

They were broad wooden steps, leading to a wide porch, the roof supported by heavy columns. Beyond was the dark bulk of the house, shapeless in the gloom. We were within a single step of the top when a man—seemingly a huge figure—suddenly emerged from the shadow of a column, and confronted us.

"What ther hell," he ejaculated sullenly, "are you doin' here?"

I paused with foot uplifted, too astounded at the apparition to respond, conscious my companion had shrunk behind.

"Well, speak up!" growled the voice. "What 's wanted?"

It was not in my nature to fear men, and this was evidently a man. I could feel the warm blood surge back to my heart.

"You surely startled me, friend," I explained. "Are you the overseer?"

"I reckon I am, but what I want to know is, who you are?"

"I?" striving to regain my wits. "Why, I am—am Philip Henley; we—we have just got in from the North."

"How did you git out yere?"

"A negro drove us from the station—old Pete who worked here once; maybe you know him?"

The man grunted.

"What become of the nigger?"

"He simply dumped us out at the gate, and drove back as though the devil was after him. He said the place was haunted."

"And he hit it about right at that, as ye'r' likely to find out afore mornin'. Is that a woman with you?"

"Yes—may we come in?"

"Oh, I reckon I ain't got no license to turn yer away, if yer mind ter risk it. Lord knows I 'm willin' 'nough to hav' company. Git yer duds, an' I 'll light up, so yer kin see a bit."

He disappeared, and I lugged the grips to the top of the steps, where we waited. Then a faint light streamed out through the open door, a moment later outlining his figure.

"Come on in," he said, still gruffly. "Yer don't need be afeerd o' me, mam, and the housekeeper be yere directly."

I confess I entered the dim hall reluctantly, obsessed by some strange premonition of danger, but Mrs. Bernard clung to me, and the sight of her white face gave me new courage.

CHAPTER XI

A PLEASANT WELCOME

It was an old-fashioned living room into which we entered, the floor unswept, the chairs faded and patched. Curtains were drawn closely at the windows, while the single oil lamp stood on a center table littered with old newspapers. I dropped the grips on the carpet, not so much interested in my surroundings as in the appearance of the man in charge. The shading of the light gave me only a partial view of the fellow, but he was big, loose-jointed, having enormous shoulders, his face so hidden by a heavy mustache, and low drawn hat brim, I could scarcely perceive its outline. He appeared a typical rough, wearing high boots, with an ugly-looking Colt in a belt holster.

"Where are you from?" I asked, surprised at this display of firearms.

"Texas," with a grin, not altogether pleasant. "That's an ol' friend."

"No doubt, but I see no sense in wearing it here. What are you afraid of?"

He stroked his mustache, eyeing me.

"Wal, personally, stranger, I ain't greatly feerd o' nuthin', but I wus hired fer to keep people outer this shebang. There ain't no work goin' on, so I don't hav' no niggers to keep folks out."

"Who employed you?"

"That don't make no difference. Those wus my orders—not to talk, nor let enybody hang 'round except you folks."

"Then we were expected?" in surprise.

"Sure; I reckon yer 'd a been hoofin' it up the road long afore this otherwise. Still, I dunno," with a suggestive wink, "I 've got a likin' fer pretty girls."

I glanced at her, where she had sank down on a dilapidated sofa, but no expression of her face told me she had overheard. It was the man's wink, more than his language, which angered me.

"Cut out your references to the lady," I said in a low tone, "unless you are starting in for trouble."

"Oh, skittish, hey! Wal, stranger, I never run away frum no troble yet, an' I reckon I don't begin now. Besides, yer need n't ride no high hoss with me. I 'm on ter your game."

His words sufficed to silence my batteries. I felt no fear of the man, big as he was and armed, but the thought that he might have been sent there by either Neale or Vail, and informed of the conspiracy, made me cautious about angering him. I must discover first the exact situation before locking horns with this Texas steer.

"Oh, do you!" I returned carelessly. "All right, then, we 'll let it go at that; only please remember the lady is under my protection. What is your name?"

"Coombs," in better humor, feeling he had bluffed me. "Bill Coombs."

"Can we have a bit of lunch?"

"I reckon yer can. Ol' Sally is a rustlin' some grub now. I stirred her up when I furst cum in."

He sat down cross-legged on a chair the other side the littered table, and stared at us, his hat still drawn down over his eyes. Whether the fellow knew no better or was deliberately insolent, I could not clearly determine. However, it was easy to perceive the girl was alarmed, and my thought was with her. This unmannerly brute could wait until we were alone for his lesson. I had handled worse men than him in my time, and I proposed finding out before we retired who was master. So when he even rolled and lit a cigarette, eyeing me closely during the operation, I pretended to take no notice, but spoke to her quietly, in a voice which would not carry across the room.

"Don't mind him," I whispered. "He's only a rough-neck trying to bully a bit. I'll teach him his place before tomorrow."

"It is not the man so much," she replied, giving me a glimpse of her eyes. "But it is all so desolate and gloomy. I have never been superstitious, but that negro's fear actually gave me the creeps. I have been seeing shadows ever since."

I laughed lightly, touching her hand.

"Still we 've found nothing else than live ones. Shadows won't hurt us, and this place will look better by daylight."

"You have n't any nerves."

"Oh, yes, I have; only they are trained. I didn't anticipate an easy job when I came down here. It's assumed a different form, that's all."

"You do not like it?"

"Not altogether," I admitted. "I am beginning to wonder if those fellows were square, if they gave me the straight story. Coombs' words would seem to indicate that he knows I 'm a fraud. Perhaps he did n't mean that, but it sounded so. Why should they tell that rough-neck their plans, and send him down here? I 'll find out what he knows, and how he knows it, before another ten hours. If he 's here to spy on us I 'll make him earn his money."

She did not look around.

"Are—are you just beginning to doubt what those men told you?"

"Doubt!" in surprise. "No; I don't know that I do. But I don't like to be mistrusted and watched. Why? Do you think they are double-crossing us?"

"I 've—I 've taken your word," she said quickly. "But it has never seemed quite right to me. I —I hardly know why I consented to come, only I was so miserable, anything seemed better than the life I was leading."

"You saw all the papers," I interposed, "and they bear out every statement."

"Yes, but could they not be forged? Why should any honest lawyer advise a client to undertake such a fraud?"

"Why, really I do not know," I returned, looking at her in astonishment. "Of course it does seem queer, but the case is a peculiar one, and, perhaps, can be solved in no strictly legal way. If you felt so about it, why did you not say so before?"

"Don't get angry—please. I hardly think I was myself then. It was just an impulse I could not resist to get away from the past. I was desperate enough then for anything. I don't think I cared whether it was right or wrong. But on the train I lay awake and thought it all over, and—and I would have gone back then if I could. I am sorry, so sorry, but I am thoroughly ashamed of myself —here, as I am."

"You mean, pretending to be my wife?"

"Yes; that—that is bad enough, surely. I must have been crazy to ever consent. Even if the truth is never known I can no longer respect myself. But—but that is not all—we are actually criminals, engaged in a criminal plot. Because the plan was concocted by a lawyer makes no difference. We could be arrested, imprisoned."

"I supposed you understood."

"No doubt I did, but my brain was numbed; I could not comprehend. It was not your fault, but mine; I do not blame you. Only, must we go on?"

"We shall have to play out the game tonight, at least," I said, startled by her earnestness. "I will talk with Coombs, and will tell you the result tomorrow. Your nerves are all unstrung, and the affair may appear different by daylight."

She put her hand in mine, her eyes on my face.

"No; it is not my nerves. See, my hand does not tremble; I am not afraid physically. I 've simply come to myself; I 'm convinced we 're doing wrong."

"But you will wait until morning? until I have talked with Coombs?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes," after an instant's hesitation. "There is nothing else I can do."

The Texan got noisily to his feet, and swaggered across the floor.

"If you all hav' got through yer whisperin'," he said roughly, "I reckon Sally 's got ther grub laid out."

I bit my lips to keep back a hot reply, feeling the restraint of her eyes, and we followed him into the next room. The table was set for two, and I could distinguish the shadow of a woman standing motionless in the farther corner. The dim light barely revealed her outlines.

"Yer kin talk it out yere," announced Coombs, waving one hand, "cause I won't be present, havin' et already. I reckon Sally won't interfere none."

He slammed the door viciously going out, causing the lamp to sputter. Then the woman came silently forward, a coffeepot in her hand. She was a mulatto perhaps sixty years of age, her face scarred by smallpox, and with strangely furtive eyes. Somehow she fitted into the scene, and I

saw my companion gazing at her almost with horror, as she flitted about us silently as a specter. I endeavored to talk, while eating heartily, for I was hungry, but found it difficult to arouse Mrs. Bernard to any response, and she merely toyed with her food. In despair I turned to the other, hopeful that a question or two might dissolve the spell.

"You are the housekeeper, I believe?"

She favored me with a single glance of surprise.

"Yes."

"Have you been here some time?"

"No."

"You probably knew the old Judge?"

"No."

Her monosyllabic answers were perfectly colorless, and, with this last, she picked up an empty dish, and vanished. I endeavored to laugh, but there was no response in the eyes of the woman opposite. She dropped her fork, and pushed back her chair.

"Oh, I simply cannot stand this place!" she exclaimed. "There is something perfectly horrid about it, and—and the people. How shall I ever get through the night?"

"That is nothing," I soothed, although hardly at ease myself. "She is evidently of the taciturn sort. We don't need to keep these servants, you know. I 'll hunt up some more cheerful in town tomorrow. Why, by Jove, it's ten o'clock already. Have you finished?"

"I could n't choke down another mouthful."

"Well, don't be afraid. They mean well enough, no doubt. Sallie!"

She came gliding in, her back to the door.

"Are you the one who is to show us to our rooms?"

"Yes."

She picked up the lamp and went out, and Mrs. Bernard followed instantly, evidently afraid to be left in the dark. I followed with the grips, trailing up the stairs, having seen nothing of Coombs in the front room. In the upper hall our guide threw open two doors, going into the rooms and lighting lamps, thus giving glimpses of the interiors. The one in the corner was the larger, and better furnished.

"This will be yours," I said, placing her valise on the floor. "You can feel safe enough there with the door locked—yes, there is a key—and I will be right opposite if you need anything."

She gave me her hand, but I felt it tremble.

"You are still afraid?"

"Yes, I am—but—but I am not going to be such a fool."

As her door closed I turned to the mulatto, who still stood there, lamp in hand. I was not sleepy, and I wanted most of all to have an understanding with Coombs. I could not talk with the fellow in the presence of Mrs. Bernard, for he was the kind to be handled roughly for results, but now I was ready to probe him to the bottom. "Is the overseer downstairs?"

"No."

"See here, Sallie," I insisted warmly, "I 'm master of this house and I want some kind of answer besides yes, and no. Where is he?"

"Ah reckon he's out in one o' ther cabins, sah—he done don't sleep in the house nohow."

"He does n't sleep here! Why?"

"Ah spect it 's cause he 's afeerd too, 'sah," she replied, her snaky eyes showing. "Ah 's a voo-doo, an' ah don't care 'bout 'em tall, but good Lor', dar ain't no white man wants ter stay in des yere house mor'n one night."

She laughed, a weird, grating laugh, and started downstairs. I stood still, watching her light disappear. Then, swearing at myself for a coward, stepped back into my own room, and closed the door.

CHAPTER XII

THE DEAD MAN

This revealment of conditions left me thoroughly puzzled. I was not frightened at the situation, for I largely attributed the fear shown by both Pete and Sallie to negro superstition. I could have dismissed their faith in a haunted house with a smile, and gone to sleep myself with an easy conscience, confident that a noisy wind, or a hooting owl, was the sum and substance of all the trouble. But Bill Coombs was a very different proposition. He was of the hard-headed kind, not to be easily alarmed by visionary terrors, and yet he was manifestly afraid to sleep in the house. I was sufficiently acquainted with his type to comprehend there must be some real cause driving him to retreat to the negro cabins for rest. He was a rough of the Southwest, illiterate of course, but a practical fellow, and, without doubt, a gun-fighter. He had been employed because of these very characteristics, and it would require surely a very real ghost to drive him away.

I sat there for some time smoking, endeavoring to think it all over coolly, and listening intently. At first I could distinguish the rattle of dishes downstairs, as Sallie cleared the table, and, a little later, heard Mrs. Bernard moving about uneasily in her room across the hall. But at last these sounds ceased, and the house became still. I removed a portion of my clothing and lay down on the bed, a certain uneasiness preventing me from undressing entirely. I was tired, but with little inclination for sleep. The room was large, the furniture of old style and well worn, the light of the small hand lamp leaving much of the spacious apartment in shadow. It was not only imagination which kept me wakeful, but the dim suspicion engendered in my mind by what Mrs. Bernard had said below. Could there be any truth in her questioning of the motives actuating the man who had sent us here? Had we come—mere pawns in some game of crime—deceived, perhaps betrayed to arrest? Was Coombs here merely to watch us, and report to Neale and Vail how we carried out our part of the bargain? The affair certainly looked altogether different now I was upon the ground, although I could figure out no possible object those men could have. At least they could accomplish nothing without my cooperation, and, if I discovered any evil afoot, I could block them instantly. I was there to save this property for the rightful heir, and was determined now to see that Philip Henley received all that was due him. It was after one o'clock before I fell into a drowsy sleep.

Indeed, it hardly seemed to me that I had entirely lost consciousness, when I was jerked bolt upright by the sharp report of a firearm. For a single instant I imagined the shot fired within my room; then I sprang to the door, and flung it open, peering out into the hall. Everything was still, the rays from my lamp barely extending to the head of the stairs. I could neither see, nor hear anything, and yet I had a strange premonition that I was not alone. There was an automatic revolver in the pocket of my coat, and I stepped back after it, picking up the lamp on my return, determined on a thorough examination of the upper story. There was no doubt about the shot—the sound was no effect of a dream. I wondered if the girl had been awakened by the report, and paused to listen at her door, but no sound reached me from within. The thought that she might have discharged the weapon occurred to my mind, but was as instantly dismissed, as I was convinced she possessed nothing of the kind.

I moved down the hall cautiously, regretting the need of a lamp, but the place was strange, and I dare not venture about in the dark. Old as the house was, there was no creaking of boards underfoot, and, strain my ears as I would, not the slightest sound reached me.

The first doors I came to were ajar, but the moon was at the back of the house, and I was obliged to enter each apartment, and flash my light into the corners to make sure they were vacant. These were medium-sized bedrooms, comfortably furnished, although containing nothing new. Only one exhibited any evidence of late occupancy, being in considerable disorder, the bed unmade, some discarded garments strewn about the floor. I prowled about within this room for some time, even invading the closet, but discovered nothing more suspicious than a loaded revolver in a bureau drawer, together with some torn letters, and an old newspaper. This was a local sheet, containing a notice of the death of Judge Henley, which I took time to read. The letters were in such scraps I could not even decipher the address.

One fact, however, was revealed—some man had been sleeping up here lately, and it was not Coombs, but a much smaller Individual. This knowledge made me even more cautious, as I tiptoed down the hall, now narrowed by the back stairway. The first door opened into a bath-room, the tub half full of dirty water, a mussed towel on the floor. The last door, leading to a room apparently extending clear across the rear of the house, was tightly closed. I set my lamp down well out of sight, and gripped my revolver, before attempting to manipulate the knob. It opened noiselessly; moonlight streamed through one window, where the curtain was not closely drawn, but the gloom was too dense to reveal much of the shrouded interior. I could dimly perceive a table, and some chairs, one overturned. There was no movement, however; no sign of present occupancy. Convinced as to this, I slipped back for my lamp, shading the flame so the light was thrown forward into the room. A single glance revealed everything. The table, a common deal affair, contained two bottles, one half filled, and three dirty glasses, together with a

pack of disreputable-looking cards, some of these scattered about the floor. There was no other furniture, and the walls were bare, a dirty gray color. But what my eyes rested upon in sudden horror, was the body of a man, curled up in a ball on the floor as a dog lies, his face hidden in his arms. That he was dead I knew at a glance.

I had seen violent death often, but this was different, and I shrank back, staring at that motionless form as though stricken by paralysis. There was no movement in the room, no sound except the fluttering of a curtain. With effort I gained control over my nerves, and moved slowly forward, placing my lamp on the table, so as to have both hands free. This murder—or was it suicide?—had occurred within ten minutes. I turned the man over, revealing a bearded face, the features prominent but refined. He was no ordinary rough, and his clothing was of excellent material. He had been shot in the back of the head.

It was murder then—murder! In an instant I pictured the tragedy exactly as it must have occurred—the open window, the overturned chair, the scattered cards, telling the whole story. Just what was the fellow doing here alone at that hour? Why should he have been killed? Even as I struggled with the horror, a sudden gust of wind extinguished the lamp, and I gripped the table, staring about in the haunted darkness. A moment and my eyes adapted themselves to the new environment, the moonlight streaming through the open window, and across the man's body. With heart quaking like a frightened girl, I stole across the floor, and glanced out. A single story extension, probably the kitchen roof, was below. Kneeling upon this the assassin could easily fire into the room. Beyond, the pale moonshine revealed a patch of grass, a weed-entangled garden, and behind these a dense forest growth. To the right of the garden I could dimly distinguish a row of small cabins, the negro quarters. Coombs would be occupying one of these, and they were so close that, even if asleep at the time, he could scarcely fail to hear the report of the gun in the silent night. Yet there was no light along the row of huts, no sign of human presence.

All this was but a rapid survey, for I dare not remain there, my back to that black interior. The body of the dead man huddled on the floor, the unknown mystery of the dark house, filled me with an awful dread. Seized by sudden terror I caught up the extinguished lamp, scarcely breathing until again outside in the hallway, the door closed behind me. Trembling in every limb I felt my way along through the darkness, guiding myself by the wall. What could I do? What ought I to do? I knew nothing of the house, or where to find the woman; I was not even sure of her presence. Indeed, the very memory of her snaky eyes gave me new horror. And Coombs! Suspecting him, as I did, it would be the height of folly to seek him out yonder in the dark. There was nothing left but to await daylight; to remain on watch, endeavoring alone to formulate some plan of future action.

Accustomed as I was to danger, the situation set my pulses throbbing—the intense blackness, the silence, the memory of that dead face, utterly unnerving me. I imagined things—a presence in that deserted hall through which I groped. Some unknown horror close at hand, even a spectral passing down the stairs. I listened, clinging to the banister-rail, feeling again helplessly for matches. Perhaps the faint scuffling was some scurrying rat, or some puff of wind in a chimney hole, but God only knows how glad I was to discover the open door to my own room again. There were matches there on the table, but my hand trembled so I struck three before the wick of the lamp caught fire. When I ventured to look out again, holding the light so as to see, the hall was desolate. I tiptoed across, and listened at her door; there was no sound within.

CHAPTER XIII

I GET INTO THE GAME

I crept back, closed the door behind me, and sat down facing it. My hand shook as I lit a cigar. This was becoming serious, a ghastly tragedy, in the playing of which I scarcely knew my part. The whole affair had seemed so simple at first, almost humorous. The earliest impression being that it was no more than a good joke. I was willing enough to be an instrument for keeping certain unknown institutions out of a legacy bequeathed them by a crazy man, and saving the property to his rightful heirs. Why not? especially as the very administrators themselves considered it the proper thing to do. Of course a technical crime was involved—I must pretend to be another, even forge that other's name, but for no criminal purpose. I was merely paid for the risk assumed, and it was easy money. Perhaps the years of rough life I had led had blunted my sensibilities to large extent—had left me less capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, yet, not until Mrs. Bernard had so unexpectedly voiced her doubt did I so much as suspicion I was being made a catspaw of for a criminal end. I was not willing to confess as much even now, but I saw the affair from a new viewpoint. I was not so sure, so certain, that I understood the entire truth.

Coombs was no plantation overseer, but a mere Texas bully. The very appearance of the man told that, and those neglected, weed-grown fields were another proof. What was he here for,

then? And Sallie! Lord, I could despise that Texas rough, but the snaky eyes of the woman made me shiver, and look about apprehensively. Then there was the dead man—the *dead man*. There echoed into my brain the woman's whisper in the parlor below, "I 'm not afraid, but I am beginning to believe we 're doing wrong." There was wrong somewhere surely—cowardly crime, murder! But were we connected with it? Was it also part of the plot in which we were employed? I could not understand, yet resolved one thing clearly—I would find out tomorrow, early, before she had to be told the ghastly discovery of the night. With the first return of daylight I would seek out Coombs, tell him what I had seen, and compel him to confess the truth. Then I should know how to act, how to approach her, and explain. My nerves steadied as I sat there in the silence, and my mind drifted to the woman sleeping across the hall. Then, my cigar smoked out, I also fell asleep in the chair.

The gray of dawn was on the windows when I awoke, my body aching from its unnatural position. For the instant I imagined some unusual sound had aroused me, yet all was quiet, the only noise the twittering of birds from without. I closed my eyes again, but a ceaseless train of thought kept me wide awake, and, finally, I got upon my feet and looked out into the dawn, determining to explore our strange surroundings before any others were astir. With loaded revolver in my pocket, I slipped into the hall. The faint light revealed its shabbiness, the grimy rag carpet, and discolored walls. Some spirit of adventure led me the full length until my hand was upon the latch of that last door. I could not resist an impulse to look upon the dead man again by daylight, and thus assure myself of the reality of what seemed only a dream. I opened the door slowly, noiselessly, and peered cautiously within. The light was strong there, revealing clearly every nook and corner of the room. All was exactly as I recalled it to memory—the stained walls, the dirty floor, the table littered with cards, the overturned chair and the motionless body of the dead man. I ventured half way to the window, staring about at every sign revealed in the glare. From the wound in the head a dark flow of blood stained the floor, and, as I bent closer, noticed the eyelids were lowered over the dead eyes. Shot as he had been, killed instantly, the hand of the assassin must have performed this act. Then surely this killing had been no common quarrel, but a planned assassination, the culmination of some prearranged plot.

This knowledge, while it set my heart throbbing in realization of new danger, yet served also to stiffen my nerves. What had we blindly drifted into? What was behind this lawlessness which could make murder commonplace? What mystery lurked about this haunted, hideous house where death skulked in the dark? My thought was not so much concerned with myself, and my own danger, as with that of the young woman whom I was bound to protect. She had come innocently, driven by desperation, to play a part she already loathed in this tragedy, and now I alone stood between her and something too awful to contemplate. Now, before she awoke I must discover the truth, and thus be prepared to get her safely away.

I closed the door on the silence, and stole quietly downstairs. There was no movement, no sound in the great house. The front room, hideous in its grimy disorder, was vacant, and I opened the front door noiselessly, and stepped forth into the spectral gray light of the dawn. The first glimpse about was depressing enough. I had no conception of what I was confronting, or of what was to be revealed by my explorations, but the dismalness of the picture presented to that first glance gave me a shock impossible to explain. The house itself, big and glaring as it was, was nevertheless little better than a ruin, the porch beams rotten, the front blinds sagging frightfully, the paint blistered by the sun. Several of the windows were broken, and the steps sagged and trembled under my weight. The front yard, a full half acre in extent, was a tangled mass of bushes and weeds, a high, untrimmed hedge shutting off all view of the road. The narrow brick path winding through this mass of vegetation was scarcely discernible, apparently seldom, if ever, used. I was unable to determine the position of the gate so luxuriant was the weed growth, and thick the shrubbery. From the foot of the steps a narrow passage trampled into the dirt circled the corner of the house, disappearing within a few feet. This was the only sign visible of human occupancy.

Convinced that this must lead to the rear, and possibly the negro cabins where Coombs slept, I followed its tortuous windings, although half afraid to desert my guardianship of the house even for this purpose. Still there was little to be feared so long as Mrs. Bernard remained securely locked in her room. I was freer for exploration now than I would be later, and must know at once the conditions with which we had to contend. Beyond doubt the woman was still asleep, and, perhaps, by the time she aroused and appeared below stairs I could find a reasonable explanation of all this mystery—something to smile over, rather than fear. While this was but a vague hope, it still yielded me a measure of courage as I picked my way cautiously along the south side of the house, avoiding the windows as much as possible, until I emerged into a somewhat clearer space of ground at the rear. The kitchen was an ell, constructed of rough boards, but with shingle roof. The door stood ajar, and I glanced in, only to find the room empty, the pots and pans used the night before still unwashed.

There was nothing there to interest me, and I crossed a narrow space of grass to where a broken picket fence was visible amid a fringe of weeds. No description can fitly picture the gloomy desolation surrounding that ramshackle place. It got upon the nerves, the decay, the neglect apparent on every side. The very silence seemed depressing. Evidently this fence, now a mere ruin, had once served to protect a garden plot. But I saw merely a tangled mass of wild vegetation, so thick and high as to obstruct the view. Narrow footpaths branched in either direction, and I chose to follow the one to the right, thinking thus to skirt the fence, and learn

what was beyond, before approaching the negro cabins on the opposite side. To my surprise, I found myself suddenly standing on the bank of a narrow bayou, the water clear, yet apparently motionless, the opposite shore heavily timbered. Owing to a sharp curve I could see scarcely a hundred yards in either direction, yet close in beside the shore a light boat was skimming over the gray water. Even as I gazed, the fellow plying the paddle saw me, and waved his hand. In another moment the bow grounded on the bank and its occupant came stumbling up the slight declivity.

He was a medium-sized, wiry-looking fellow, with olive skin and small mustache, dressed in brown corduroy, a colored handkerchief wound about his head in lieu of a hat. As he came to the level where I stood, he stopped suddenly, staring into my face.

"Sacre! I thought eet vas Coombs. Who are you, M'sieur?"

"I came in last night," I replied evasively, "and was just looking about a bit."

"So! you know Coombs, hey?"

"I 've met him—yes."

The black eyes searched my face, and I noted his right hand touch the hilt of a knife in his belt.

"What water is this?" I asked, ignoring his action, "bayou?"

"Oui, M'sieur."

"Are we near the sea?"

"Twenty-seex mile. You not know where you are? 'Tis odd you not know, M'sieur."

I laughed, enjoying his bewilderment, yet not realizing how to turn it to better account.

"Oh, no. I came by train in the night, and am a little hazy as to location. You live about here?"

"Som'time; then off again—sailor."

I nodded to prove I understood, but the man stopped uneasily.

"Whare Coombs? You know, M'sieur?"

"*No*, I don't," I acknowledged. "Asleep in his cabin likely."

The Creole, for such he undoubtedly was, made a swift resolve.

"'Tis like, M'sieur. I find out, maybe you come too!"

The last was more of an order than a question, and the fellow stepped back slightly in a manner almost a threat. Understanding the significance of the gesture I gave it no apparent heed, but turned in the direction of the cabins. I had no reason to avoid Coombs; indeed, I desired to see him, and I had no intention of permitting this lad to suppose that I feared his veiled threats. Without so much as glancing back at him I advanced along the footpath, my hands in my pockets. Yet my mind leaped from point to point in eager speculation. The whole thing was puzzling. I had come expecting a mere bit of play-acting, with all details left in the control of others. I anticipated no more than a few weeks of idleness, with, perhaps, the overseeing of a plantation, to partially keep my time occupied. Instead I found myself instantly involved in a network of mystery where even murder was part of the play. Little as I liked Coombs, this Creole was even more dangerous. The one was a rough, the other a venomous snake. So far as the original purpose of my adventure was concerned it had already largely faded from recollection. The swift recurrence of more startling events dominated. The spirit of adventure, with which I was liberally endowed, was fast taking possession of all my faculties. Whatever mystery surrounded this house, whatever of crime lurked in the neighborhood, I became determined to solve. For the moment I forgot even Mrs. Bernard, and my own assumed character, in the excitement of this new chase.

"Ze right; turn to ze right, M'sieur," said a voice behind me, and then I saw Coombs standing before the door of the second cabin. Half dressed as he was, his ever-present "gun" hung low at his hip, and his face scowled in surprised recognition.

"What does this mean, Broussard?" he growled savagely. "Where did you pick up that fellow?"

CHAPTER XIV

THE CONFESSION

I caught the wicked, snaky gleam of the Creole's eyes. All his early suspicion of me had revived instantly.

"At the landing," he hastened to explain. "How could I tell? He said he knew you, M'sieur."

"Oh, he did, hey! Well, all I know about him is that he blew in here last night with a woman; claimed to be young Henley, and took possession of the place. I reckon it 's about time I saw some papers to prove what yer are, young feller, 'for yer go snoopin' round at daylight. What's yer game enyhow?"

The man's bluster gave me my clew. The thought suddenly occurred to me that, for some reason, he was more afraid of me than I of him. And if I met him on the same ground he was of the disposition to give way first.

"You can see my authority, Coombs, any time you are ready to exhibit your own," I returned coolly, leaning back against the side of the cabin, and staring him straight in the eyes. "I 've got more occasion to question you, you big brute, than you have me. Who is going to prevent my walking about these grounds? You? Just try the experiment, and see how it comes out. If you are the overseer here, then it is my money that is paying your wages, and from the look of things," and I swept my hand toward the surrounding weeds, "you 'll not hold the job long at that."

Coombs did not cringe, but my tone brought him uneasiness.

"The niggers won't work," he returned gruffly. "Thar ain't a nigger on the place."

"Apparently white men enough hanging around. What 's the matter with the negroes?"

"Ghosts," and the fellow laughed. "Maybe yer've seen sum?"

I straightened up, stung by the sneer in his voice.

"No; but I 've seen something more to the point—a murdered man."

"What?"

"Just what I said. There was a man killed last night in that back room upstairs. Shot in the head through the window. I heard the shot and investigated. His body lies there now."

I saw Broussard's snaky eyes flash across toward Coombs' face, but the latter remained motionless.

"It's a damn lie!" he ejaculated roughly. "There is no body there."

"Easily settled. Come with me, and I 'll show you."

Rather to my surprise neither objected to the test, and we tramped in single file toward the house. Some precaution kept me at the rear, and I followed silently when Coombs entered the open door of the kitchen. Unknown to me there was a narrow back stairway, and we mounted this without exchanging a word. In the upper hall Coombs threw open the rear door, and, stood aside, not even looking within.

I glanced past him. There was the furniture as I remembered it, the dirty walls, the opened window. But the overturned chair stood against the wall, the cards were stacked on the table, and there was no body lying on the floor. So startled was I by this discovery that I could scarcely credit my eyesight, but was brought to a realization of the truth by Coombs' harsh laugh.

"Well, where 's yer dead man? I reckon ye don't see none, hey!"

"No," I insisted, "but I did see one—twice. The body lay there where the stain shows on the floor. It has been carried away within half an hour."

"A likely story. Who could do the job? Nobody round this shebang but Sallie an' me. I sure ain't been in yere, an' I reckon it wan't Sallie. So cut it out, young feller. After breakfast you an' I 'll hav' a talk, an' find out a few things. Come on, Broussard, an' let 's talk over that matter o' ours."

The two went down the stairs together, and I closed the door of the rear room, and stepped out into the hall. Sallie was in the kitchen, for I heard her voice questioning the men as they passed through. Out of the window I caught a glimpse of them both disappearing through the weeds toward the bayou. As to myself I was more at sea than ever. The sudden disappearance of the body had left me bewildered, yet more strongly convinced than before that this was no ordinary affair. Evidences of a plan, of cooperation, rendered the situation serious. That dead body had not moved itself; human hands had accomplished the deed during the brief period of my absence outside. Whose hands could have done it? Not those of Coombs, surely, for he could not have passed me and attained the house while I was in the garden unseen. Nor Sally, for she possessed no strength to more than drag the dead man to some near-by covert. With the

possibility of this in mind I searched the vacant rooms of that floor, closets and all, thoroughly, but to no result. There was, therefore, but one conclusion possible—unknown parties were involved. We were not alone in the house in spite of its apparent desertion.

I paused in doubt before Mrs. Bernard's door, convinced this was the truth. Should I tell her frankly the story of the night, my vague discoveries, my suspicion? I surely had no right to deceive the woman, or keep her with me. I had determined myself to face it out, to risk life if need be, to learn the truth. But I had no right to further involve her. She had accompanied me thus far innocently enough, accepting my explanation, driven to acquiescing by the desperate situation in which she found herself. Already she regretted her hasty action. To involve her still deeper would be heartless. I could not do it, at least not without full confession.

I rapped at the door twice before there was any movement within. Then her voice asked who was there, and at my answer she came out fully dressed, fronting me with questioning eyes.

"The night has rested you," I said smilingly, my heart beating in swift appreciation of her beauty. "Are you ready for breakfast?"

"For anything to escape the loneliness of that room," she replied seriously. "If I really look rested, it is not from sleep for I have passed the night in terror." She held out her hands as though seeking to assure herself of my real presence. "Tell me what is wrong with this house? What occurred last night?"

"I am not altogether sure myself," I said, striving to speak quietly, and holding her hands tight, "But I will tell you all I know, after you have explained. Were you disturbed?"

"Yes, but I hardly comprehend what was reality, and what dream. I slept some, I am sure, lying pressed upon the bed. At first I thought that was impossible, I was so frightened, and I had so much to think about, but found myself too utterly exhausted to keep awake. Yet my slumber was fitful, and filled with dreams. But I am sure of some things—my door was tried twice, and I heard someone prowling about the hall—"

"That might have been me," I interrupted, "as I was out there during the night, but I certainly never tried your door."

"You had a light?"

"Yes."

"I saw that shining over the transom; it was much later when my door was tried; not long before daylight I think. Whoever it was, passed out the front hall window onto the porch roof. My light was burning, although turned low, and no doubt he saw me sitting up, wide awake on the edge of the bed, for he had disappeared by the time I gained sufficient courage to approach the window and look out."

"Climbed down the trellis, probably," I said, deeply interested. "It appears strong enough to support a man. I wish you had got sight of the fellow."

She lifted her hands to her head.

"But I was so frightened. My head throbs now with pain. I cannot explain, but—but I had begun to hate this mission of ours before we ever reached here, and then this awful house, and that man and woman. I almost begged you not to leave me alone, yet I conquered that weakness, and said good night, and locked my door. You never realized how I felt."

"No, not entirely, although I did comprehend you were sorry you had consented to come."

"Not that altogether," and her eyes uplifting met mine, "I was frightened last night in the darkness. I confess I completely lost my nerve, and would have run away if I could. Perhaps I even said things which made you believe I regretted my action in coming with you. But I am more myself now, and I mean to remain, and discover what it all means. Can you guess why?"

"No; I would naturally suppose the night would have added to your terror, your desire to get away."

"Then you do not suspect even now who I am?"

"Who you are? Only as you have told me."

"And I told you only a half truth. I am the wife of Philip Henley." Her cheeks flushed, a touch of passion in her voice as she faced me. "That is the truth. Do you suppose that I would ever have come here with you otherwise? No matter how desperate my condition was that would have been impossible. I should have despised myself. Even as it was I have been thoroughly shamed to have permitted you to think of me as you must. Now I tell you the truth—I consented to come because I am Philip Henley's wife."

My surprise at this swift avowal kept me silent, yet I could not conceal the admiration from revealment in my eyes. She must have read aright, for she drew back a step, grasping the knob of

the door.

"I—I wanted to tell you yesterday—all the way coming down here. I felt that I could live the deceit no longer. I do not blame you, Mr. Craig, for you are a man, and you had every reason to believe that you were doing nothing really wrong. I wanted to learn all I could before I confessed my identity, and—and I wanted to discover just what you were like."

"You mean whether I could be trusted?"

"Yes; I—I could not tell at first. We met so strangely, and merely because I liked you from the beginning was not enough. You understand?"

"Yes, and now?"

She looked at me frankly.

"Now I am simply going to trust you fully. I must; there is no other way. I thought it all over and over again last night, and determined to confess everything as soon as we met this morning. I am Viola Henley, Mr. Craig, and I need you."

CHAPTER XV

THE DECISION

I had had time to think, swiftly to be sure, yet clearly enough. Surprised as I was by her statement, yet the truth as thus revealed failed to startle me seriously. Vaguely I had suspicioned the possibility before, not really believing it could be so, and yet struck by the similarity in circumstances of the two women. Consequently the shock of final discovery was somewhat deadened, and I retained the pose of thought. Moreover, to know her identity was an actual relief. Before, I had half doubted the righteousness of my cause, at times almost felt myself a criminal. Now that I could openly associate myself with Philip Henley's wife, in a struggle to retain for her what was justly her own, all feeling of doubt vanished, and I became grimly confident of the final result. Perhaps the relief I felt found expression in my face, for the woman exclaimed:

"I believe you are actually glad; that it pleases you to know this."

"It certainly does," I replied swiftly, "for now I can work openly, knowing exactly what I ought to do. I have felt like a rat skulking in a hole. I believed what those men told me; they convinced me with proofs I could not ignore, but they must have lied. In some details, at least, they must have deceived. How would it be possible for Philip Henley to be in a penitentiary convicted of crime?"

"It would not be," she returned firmly. "There was no time after I left him for an arrest and conviction. That alone is sufficient to convince me of fraud and conspiracy. More than that, Philip Henley was not one to commit a crime of that nature, and there was no reason why he should. His remittances were amply sufficient. Under the influence of liquor he might commit assault, or even murder, but never forgery."

"Then what do you think has occurred?"

"Either one of two things," she said soberly. "He is dead, or helplessly in the power of those men who sent you here. There is no other conclusion possible. They had possession of his papers —even his private memoranda. They knew more of conditions here than I had ever been told. In my judgment, he is dead. Otherwise I cannot conceive it possible they would dare attempt to carry out such a conspiracy. The very boldness of their plan convinces me they believed no one lived to expose them. They knew he was dead, and believed, if I still lived, that I knew nothing of this inheritance. The telegram announcing the Judge's death I never saw. It must have arrived while Philip was too intoxicated to grasp its meaning."

"You know nothing then of the two men, Neale and Vail?"

"No; there is a Justus C. Vail, a lawyer in the city. I found the name in the directory, and called at his office. He was away making political speeches; had been gone two weeks."

"Then the fellow assumed that name, thinking I might be familiar with it, and thus be impressed with the legality of the transaction. As to Neale, I will go to the courthouse in this county, and find out about him. Only first of all we must understand and trust each other. We have got some shrewd villains to fight, men capable of resorting to desperate measures. You have told me the whole truth about yourself now?"

"Absolutely, yes. I told you the truth before, except only my real name. I was married to Philip Henley. Wait, here is my marriage certificate; I have always kept it with me, for I have been afraid of him almost from the first. I gave you the name Bernard unthinkingly, as that was the name he insisted upon living under. He explained his father required this, or else would stop his remittances. I had to humor him, although I thought it most strange. Is that all you wish to know?"

"All now, yes. I must have time to think, and plan what is best for us to do. I can already see my duty sufficiently clear, but not how to go at it. The fact is, Mrs. Henley—"

"Would it not be better for you to call me Viola?" she interrupted. "Someone might overhear, and we must continue to carry out the deception, I suppose."

"It will be safer, if you do not object."

"I? Oh, no; I shall not care in the least. You were saying?"

"This, Viola," and her eyes suddenly flashed into mine, "the conditions I have already discovered here—in this house—are no less strange, and dangerous than the mission which brought us here. Everything looks bad. You ought to know it, and you are strong enough to be told. I do not know who tried your door last night, and later escaped down the trellis. If I did I could determine what action to take. But one thing I do know—there was murder committed in this house."

"Murder!" her face went white, her fingers clasping my sleeve, "Who was killed? Coombs? That woman?"

"Neither. A man I never saw before. I heard the same shot which frightened you; took my lamp and investigated. I found him lying dead on the floor of the rear room. He had been shot in the back of the head through an open window."

"Merciful God! and the body still there."

"No, but its disappearance only adds to the mystery. I dared not create an alarm at once, as we were in a strange house, and I had no means of knowing where to find either Coombs or the housekeeper. Nor did I venture to leave you alone unguarded. As soon as daylight came I went in there again to convince myself the murder was not a dream. The man's body lay there undisturbed. I turned him over, and examined the wound. Then I went out and found Coombs, who sleeps in one of the negro cabins. He sneered at my discovery, but finally accompanied me back to the house. I could not have been absent to exceed thirty minutes, and yet, when we opened the door of that rear room, the body had disappeared—vanished completely. Not a thing remained to tell of any tragedy."

"It had been dragged into some other room; hidden away in some closet. The woman did it."

"That was my thought at first. As soon as I got free from Coombs I searched this floor, every inch of it, and found nothing, not even so much as a stain of blood. The dead man was heavily built, and Sallie could never have lifted him alone. There were others—men—concerned in the affair."

"And you saw none?"

"Only a Creole who came down the bayou by boat just as I reached the bank. He had some message for Coombs—a snaky-eyed little devil—but he had nothing to do with the removal of the body, for he was not out of my sight after he landed."

Bewildered consternation was clearly manifested in the girl's white face, and yet there was a firmness to the lips that promised anything but surrender. I was sufficiently a fighting man to comprehend the symptoms, and my own heart throbbed in quick response to her anticipated decision. For an instant she seemed to struggle to regain her breath.

"Oh, how terrible! I can scarcely realize that all you have told me can be fact. It sounds incredible, monstrous. Why, it is as if we lived in a wild land, and another century. No novelist could conceive of such a horrible condition. There were pirates along this coast once—I have read of them—but now, in our age of the world, to even dream of such a state of affairs would be madness. What can it mean? Have you any theory?"

"Absolutely none; I am groping in the dark, without a single clew. All I know is that Coombs is a big ruffian, but too cowardly to commit murder. The Creole might, and I would n't trust Sallie with a knife on a dark night, but, in my judgment, there are others involved about whom we know nothing."

"You mean there is a band? that we have stumbled into a rendezvous of outlaws?"

"I suspicion so. This plantation has been practically abandoned for years. Even when the Judge was alive he lived in town, and could get no negroes to work out here because they believed the place was haunted. A bayou comes within a hundred yards of the rear of the house,

so concealed by trees and weeds as to be almost invisible until you stand on the banks. We are only a little over twenty miles from the Gulf. Altogether this would make an ideal hiding place for Mobile or New Orleans thieves. I don't say this is the solution, but it may be. More likely they will prove to be a local gang, smugglers, or moonshiners with a touch of modern piracy on the side."

"What do you mean to do?"

The question was asked quietly, and I glanced at her, noting the color had returned to her cheeks.

"I? Why remain and ferret it out, I suppose," and I laughed. "I was never very good at running away, and really I must get at the bottom of this affair. Coombs is going to have a talk with me later—intends to make sure who I am, no doubt—and I may learn something from him during the interview. Anyhow, I am just obstinate enough to stay it out."

"What about me?"

"You better return to town; a traveling man on the train said there was a good hotel. Probably Coombs has some kind of a rig we can drive down in. I 'll ask him after breakfast."

"Is it because you do not wish me with you?"

I hesitated slightly, confused by such direct questioning.

"I shall feel more free alone," I replied at last, "for I shall have only myself to guard. I am used to taking care of myself. Besides, this is likely to prove a rather unpleasant situation for a lady. You must remember I propose to fight this thing out now in the open. I am going to be Gordon Craig, and not a make-believe Philip Henley. The scene has changed, and I 'm glad of it. I feel more like a man already."

"And you conclude I can be of no help, no assistance—"

The cracked voice of Sallie came to us up the stairs, the unexpected sound startling both.

"I reckon you all better com' down an' eat."

She stood in the light of the front door watching us, and we descended the flight of steps without exchanging a word. The woman turned and walked in advance into the dining-room.

"Where is Coombs?" I asked, looking about curiously.

"He done eat already, but I reckon he 'll be 'round 'gain after a while. You all just help yerselves."

We endeavored to talk as we sampled the meal, directing our conversation into safe channels, both obsessed with a feeling that whatever we said would be overheard. The woman vanished into the dark passage leading toward the kitchen, but no sound of labor reached us from that direction, which made me suspicious that she lingered not far from where we sat. I caught Mrs. Henley's eyes occasionally straying in that direction uneasily. Yet she managed to keep up a sprightly conversation, largely relating to the country we had traveled over. Neither of us ate heartily, merely toying with the rather unpalatable food, and, as soon as we dared, pushed back our chairs. It was a relief to get out of the room, but as we stood a moment in the front doorway, breathing in the fresh air, I noticed a giant form approaching the house through the weeds.

"Coombs is coming already for his interview," I said hastily. "As it may be stormy perhaps you had better retreat upstairs."

She glanced in the direction of his approach, and drew slightly back into the shadow of the hall. There was a flush on her cheeks, and her eyes met mine almost defiantly.

"I will go," she said quickly, "but I shall not leave this house while you remain."

CHAPTER XVI

COMPELLING SPEECH

She was gone before I could speak, before I could even grasp the full purport of her decision. I followed the flutter of her skirt up the stairs, half tempted to rush after, yet as instantly comprehended the uselessness of any attempt at influencing her. Even the short space of our acquaintance had served to convince me that she was a woman of resource, of character, and determination. If she felt it right to remain no argument would be effective, or have the slightest

weight. Perhaps another night would change her mood, but now, in the sunshine, her courage would hold steadfast. Even as these considerations flashed across my mind, I heard the thud of Coombs' feet upon the steps of the veranda. That he had been drinking I realized at a glance, and it was equally evident that he planned to overawe me by brutal domineering. In spite of every effort to control my expression I could not restrain a smile at the manifest bluster of his approach.

"So yer 've got through eatin', hey," he began coarsely. "Whar 's the female? Thought I saw her here."

"You did," I returned coldly, "but Mrs. Henley has returned to her room."

"Mrs. Henley, huh! Think yer kin pull thet bluff over me!"

"What bluff?"

"Aw, this Henley racket you sprung last night—'bout yer being young Phil Henley come back."

"Did I say that?"

"Yer shure did," eyeing me in some surprise. "I reckon my ears heard all right. Why, what are yer this morning?"

"If I ever made any such claim as that, Coombs, it was merely to assure our admittance. You were not overly-cordial, you know, and I did n't propose having the lady walk back to town. It's different this morning, and I am going to be just as frank with you as you are with me. Is that square?"

"I reckon," uneasily, not yet able to gauge my purpose, and feeling his bluff a failure. "I ain't got nothin' ter lie about so fur as I know. Let's go inside, whar we kin have it out quiet like."

I followed him into the front room, and he kicked out a chair so as to bring my face to the windows. As I sank into it I noticed a dusty mirror opposite which gave me a dim reflection of the entire room. Coombs shut the door leading to the back of the house, and sat down facing me, his big hands on his knees. His effort to look pleasant only made him appear uglier than usual.

"Wal, go on!" he said gruffly.

I crossed my legs comfortably, and leaned back in the chair, quite conscious of thus adding to his irritation. If I could only anger the fellow sufficiently he might blurt out something of value. Anyhow, my best card was cool indifference.

"There is not much to say," I replied deliberately. "I 'll answer your questions so far as I think best, and then I 'll ask a few of you. The lady upstairs is Viola Henley, the wife of Philip Henley. She has come down here to take legal possession of this property. That is the situation in a nutshell. I am merely accompanying her to make sure that she gets a square deal."

His jaw sagged, and his eyes wandered.

"Oh, hell," he managed to articulate. "What is your real game?"

"Exactly as I have stated it, Coombs. To the best of my knowledge Philip Henley is dead—at least he has disappeared—and his widow is the rightful heir to this estate."

"Wal, I reckon he ain't dead—not by a jugful."

I felt the hot blood pump in my veins. Did the man know this to be true, or was he merely making the claim for effect?

"That, of course, remains to be proven," I returned smilingly.

"Oh, does it, now! So does this yer wife business, to my thinkin'. Wal, it won't take long ter settle the matter, believe me. Who are you enyhow?"

"My name is Craig—Gordon Craig."

"A lawyer?"

"Not guilty."

"A damn detective?"

"Same plea."

I thought he gave a grunt of relief; anyhow there was more assurance in his manner, a fresh assumption of bullying in his voice.

"All right, then; I reckon I got yer number, Craig. Yer after a little easy money. Somehow yer

caught onto the mix-up down yere, an' framed up a scheme to cop the coin. Might hav' worked too if I had n't been on the job, an' posted. Damn nice-lookin' girl yer picked up—"

"Drop that, Coombs!" I interrupted sharply, leaning forward and staring him in the eyes. "Let loose all you care to about me, but cut out the woman!"

"Oh, too nice, hey!"

"Yes, too nice for you to befoul even with your tongue. If you mention her name again except in terms of respect there is going to be trouble."

He laughed, opening and closing his big hands.

"I mean it," I went on soberly. "Don't think I am afraid of you, you big slob. No, you keep your hands where they are. If it comes to a draw you 'll find me quick enough to block your game. Now listen."

Had I been less in earnest, or less puzzled as to the real situation, I would have laughed at the expression upon the man's face. With hat pulled over his eyes, he sat stiff, staring at me, his fingers twitching nervously, unable to determine just the species confronting him. I made no display of a weapon; he could not be sure that I was armed, yet my right hand was hidden in the side pocket of my coat. I could read the doubt, the indecision in his mind, as plainly as though expressed in words. The brute and the coward struggled for mastery.

"I 've told you the truth about who we are, and our purpose in coming here," I went on slowly and clearly, "because I have decided to fight in the open. Now I want to know who you are? What authority you have on the Henley plantation? Speak up!"

The reply came reluctantly, but there must have been a sternness in my face which compelled an answer.

"I told yer—I 'm the overseer."

"A fine specimen, from the looks of the place; what was you ordered to grow—weeds?"

"Thet 's none o' your business."

"It 's the business of the lady upstairs, Coombs, and I am representing her at present. It will be just as well for you to be civil. Who appointed you to this position—the administrators?"

"I reckon not."

"Ever hear of a man named Neale, P. B. Neale?"

"No."

"Or Justus C. Vail?"

He shook his head.

"No one sent you any word then that we were coming? or gave you any orders to look after us?"

The blank expression of his face was sufficient answer. I waited a moment, thinking, endeavoring to determine my next move. This knowledge made one thing clear—we were playing a lone hand. As well planned as was the scheme of those two conspirators they had reckoned without sufficient knowledge of the existing conditions here. But was this true? Would villains as shrewd as they be guilty of such neglect? Besides, they had assured me that the overseer would be notified of our coming. Suddenly there flashed back to my memory a picture of that murdered man in the rear room. Could he be the connecting link? the overseer sent by Neale? If this horrible suspicion was correct it only proved the desperate character of those against whom I contended. And if true only the harshest measure would compel Coombs to acknowledge the truth. I drew in my breath, every nerve braced for action. Then I jerked the revolver from my pocket, and held it, glimmering ominously in the light, across my knee.

"You probably have some reason for lying to me," I said coldly, "and now I am going to give you an equally good reason for telling the truth. What do you know about the administrators of this estate?"

He was breathing hard, his eyes on the shining barrel.

"There is one named Neale, is n't there?"

"I—I reckon so."

"How do you know?"

"Wal," feeling it useless to struggle against the argument presented by the blue steel barrel, "Hell, all I know is a fellow com' 'long yere a while back with a paper signed Neale, thinkin' ter

take my job."

"What happened to him?"

"Oh, he just nat'ally got kicked out inter the road, an' I reckon he 's a running yet. He was a miserable Yankee runt, an' I did n't hurt the cuss none to speak of. What yer askin' all this fer enyhow," he questioned anxiously, "an' a drawin' that gun on me?"

"It seemed to be the only available method for extracting information. Pardon my insistence, Coombs, but was n't that dead man up there the fellow Neale sent?"

"Not by a damn sight," and I could see the perspiration break out on his forehead. "Why, there wan't none enyhow. That guy skipped out North agin."

"All right; we'll let it go this time. Now one more question and I am done. Under whose orders are you in charge here?"

He was so long in answering, his eyes glaring ugly under heavy brows, that I elevated my weapon, half believing he meditated an attack.

"You 've got to answer, Coombs," I said sternly, "or take the consequences. I 'm in dead earnest."

Suddenly I became aware that his glance was not directly upon me, and I lifted my own eyes to the surface of the tarnished mirror behind where he sat. It reflected the large portrait of the late Judge Henley hanging on the opposite wall, and—by all the gods!—I thought I saw it move, settle back into position! I was upon my feet instantly, swinging aside into a better situation for defense. Perhaps that seeming movement, swift and elusive, might be a figment of imagination, a mere trembling of the glass. But I was taking no chances. The very conception of some hidden peril threatening me from behind awoke the savage in me instantly. Before Coombs could realize what had occurred I had the gun muzzle at the side of his head.

"Now answer," I commanded sharply. "Whose orders put you here?"

He choked, shrinking back helpless in the chair.

"By God! you won't always have the drop on me—"

"Well, I have now. Speak up; who is the man?"

His eyes ranged along the wall, an expression in them like that of a whipped cur.

"Philip Henley," he whispered, so low I scarcely caught the name.

"What!"

"Wal, I told yer," he growled resentfully. "Yer kin believe er not just as you please, but, so help me, that's the truth. I reckon I know."

As I stared at him, half believing, half incredulous, I became conscious that she stood in the hall doorway. Coombs lifted his head, glad of any respite, and I glanced aside also, dropping the revolver back into my coat pocket.

"You—you were quarreling?" she asked, coming into the room, "you were so long I became anxious, and came down."

"Nothing serious," I assured her, smilingly. "Coombs here was a little reluctant to impart information, and I was compelled to resort to primitive methods. The result has been quite satisfactory."

"Kin I go now?" he asked uneasily.

"Yes, by way of the front door."

I watched his great hulking figure until he disappeared along the path leading around the house. I had no fear that he would ever face me openly; all I needed to guard against was treachery. Then I turned and looked into the questioning eyes of the woman.

"What did you learn? What did he say?"

"Only one thing of real importance," I answered in subdued tone, "and I dragged that out of him by threat. He was not employed by Neale, and the fellow who was sent down here to assist us was disposed of in some way."

"Killed, you mean?"

"I suspect as much, but Coombs claims he was kicked off the place, and returned North."

For a moment she stood silent, breathing heavily, her eyes on my face. In the pause I saw

again the picture of the old Judge, and remembered.

"Why is he here then? What authority has he?"

"Come outside into the garden, and I will tell you the whole story. Somehow I feel here as though we were being watched every minute. Never mind a hat; we will find shade somewhere."

CHAPTER XVII

CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

In front of the veranda, and to the right of the brick walk, the latticework of a small summerhouse could be discerned through a maze of shrubbery and weeds. No path led toward it, yet we made the difficult passage, by pressing aside the foliage, and discovered a rustic seat within, where we were completely screened from observation. I felt the slight trembling of the woman's form from suppressed excitement, but the adventure with Coombs had only served to stiffen my nerves. With flushed cheeks, and eyes bright and questioning, she could scarcely wait for me to begin.

"Now tell me; surely we are out of sight and hearing."

"I do not think I shall ever be entirely assured as to that until I know more of our exact situation," I replied, speaking cautiously. "We may have been seen coming here, and those weeds would easily conceal an eavesdropper. The truth is, I have gained very little information of value, and am as mystified as ever. If that fellow told the truth it is beyond my understanding."

"But you are sure he knows nothing of those men who sent you here?"

"Yes, he had never heard of Vail, and all he knew about Neale was that name was signed to the orders of the new overseer."

"Under what authority is the man acting?"

I hesitated, not venturing to look at her, conscious of a personal feeling which I must conceal.

"Do you not wish to tell me?"

"It is not that," I hastened to explain, but finding the words hard to speak. "I think he lied, and yet cannot be sure. He claims to be working under the orders of Philip Henley."

"What! Impossible!"

"So I felt, and consequently hesitated to tell you, but now that I have been compelled to do so, I will explain in full. He said this under the menace of a revolver, a condition which often inspires men to speak the truth. I can scarcely imagine his making up such a story, for he is a dull-witted fellow, and even before he had threatened to test your claims to be Henley's wife."

"You told him, then?"

"Everything, except the original cause of our being here. I determined this morning to fight in the open, under my own name. That is the right way, is it not?"

"Yes, I think so," and she lifted her eyes to mine.

"I like you better for that."

"I think I like myself better also," I said with a laugh. "I confess I did n't care much at first. The whole affair merely represented a lark, an adventure with me. But after what you said the night of our arrival I began to view the thing in a new light, and to despise my part in It. Yet even then I felt bound to carry out my agreement. It was only when you told me your identity, that I felt free to decide otherwise."

"Why should that make such a difference? If I had not been the one, then it would have been some other woman defrauded."

"True, but a mere unknown, a shadow. Besides, I had no reason previously to know that a fraud was contemplated—those rascals told a most plausible story, leaving me to believe I served the real heirs. Now I comprehend their true purpose and—and, well, knowing you it has become personal."

"I do not altogether understand."

"Why, it is simply this," I went on desperately, "I want to serve you, and I want you to respect me. Down in your heart you have n't really been assured that I was not one of that gang of conspirators. You came down here to watch me. Now I am going to stand up as Gordon Craig, and fight it out for you."

There was a knot of blue ribbon at her throat, and I reached out and unpinned it before she had time to protest.

"See, there are your colors, and I do battle under them. Whatever the final results you are never going to doubt me any more—are you?"

Her eyes were veiled by long lashes, and I could see the heaving of her breasts.

"No—no. I scarcely think I ever did doubt you, only it was all very strange. Nothing seemed real; it was more like a stage-play in which I acted a part—our first meeting, our being thrown together on this quest. I have not known what to think, even of myself."

"We are both getting our heads above the mist now," I interrupted gently, "and deep as the mystery appears, when finally solved it will likely prove a very sordid, commonplace affair. The main thing is for us to thoroughly understand and trust each other."

"You need not doubt me."

"I have already learned that. It is more important that you fully trust me."

"I do," and both her hands were impulsively extended. "I have from the very first. I did not come here to watch, but because I believed in you. Truly this was my motive rather than any thought of the property. Indeed I hardly realized at the start that this was my affair; I merely had a feeling that you needed me. That—that morning on the bench," she paused, her voice choking in her throat, her eyes misted, "why, I—I was scarcely rational; my mind could not even grasp clearly what you endeavored to tell. I was so far from being myself that I failed to recognize my own name. Perhaps that was not strange as I always lived under another. So it was not that, not any selfish motive, which impelled me to accompany you. I came because—because I knew you needed me. I had an intuition that you were going into danger, into some trap. I cannot explain, no woman can, how such knowledge lays hold upon her. I merely acted instinctively. It was not until that afternoon that I realized clearly what this all meant to me personally. I seemed to wake up as from a dream. Then I sat down in the rest room of one of those big department stores, and thought it all out. At first I determined to tell you everything, but I did—did not know you at all. I trusted you, I believed in you; you had impressed me as being a real man. But this was merely a woman's intuition. There were circumstances that made me doubt, that compelled caution. I—I had to test you, Gordon Craig."

"My only wonder is that you retained any confidence."

"Oh, but I did," she insisted warmly. "That alone brought me here. I thought of appealing to a lawyer, to the police, and then your face rose up before me, and my decision was made. I came back to you that night because—because I believed you to be a gentleman."

"And now? henceforth?"

Her eyes never wavered, although there was a high color in her cheeks as my hands clasped her own more closely.

"I am convinced I chose aright. You are the man I thought you to be. I am glad I came."

For an instant the hot blood coursed through my veins; I seemed to see only the beauty of her flesh. Wild words leaped to my lips, only to be choked back unspoken, although I scarcely knew what strength combined to win the swift struggle. Impulse, made with sudden revelation of love, swept me perilously near to outburst, yet reason held sufficiently firm to restrain; the flood of passion. I knew I must refrain; I read it in the calm depths of those eyes fronting me in frank friendship. A word, a single, mad, ill-considered word, would sever the bond between us as though cleft by a sword. With any other I might have dared all, but not with her. Reckless as my nature had grown in the hard school of life, I shrank from this test, dreading to see her face change, her attitude harden. And it would; there had already been sufficient revealment of her character to make me aware of how firm a line she drew between right and wrong. It was not in her nature to compromise. She trusted, me—yes! But as a "gentleman." Should I fail in that test of her faith I could never again hope to regain my place in her esteem. I have wondered since how I ever won that swift, deadly battle; how I ever crushed back the wild passion, the mad impulse to clasp her In my arms. Yet, under God's mercy I did, my voice emotionless, my face white from restraint, my lips dry as with fever. The one thing I was sure about just then was that we must break away from this personal conversation; flesh and blood could stand the strain no longer.

"Let's not talk of ourselves then," I said, releasing her hands, "but of what we must face here. We trust each other; that is enough for the present surely. You will not leave, and let me ferret out the mystery alone, so we must work together in its solution. I have told you that Coombs claims to be working under the orders of your husband. Is that possible?"

"I cannot conceive clearly how it could be, and yet he might have received notice of his father's death in time to assume control of the estate by telegraph, or even by letter."

"I hardly think Coombs has been here so short a time."

"He might have been the old overseer, however, and retained."

"True; yet how could Philip Henley know that he had inherited the property?"

She thought a moment seriously, a little crease in the center of her forehead.

"Of course, I can only guess," she hazarded at length, "but it would seem likely he was notified of his father's death by one of the administrators, and doubtless told at the same time of his inheritance. He was the only son, and there were no other near relatives. It would be only natural for him to retain the old servants until he could come here and select others."

"There is only one fact which opposes your theory," I acknowledged, "otherwise I would accept it as my own also. Coombs plainly threatened to confront you with Henley to test your claim to being his wife."

She pressed her hand to her temple in perplexity.

"Even that would not be impossible," she admitted reluctantly, "for he must have known of the Judge's death even before—before I left. Only I do not believe it probable, as he was in no condition to travel, and had very little money. Besides," her voice strengthening with conviction, "those men who sent you here—Neale and Vail—would never have ventured such a scheme, had they been uncertain as to Philip Henley's helplessness. I believe he is either in their control, or else dead."

"Then Coombs lied."

"Perhaps; although still another supposition is possible. Someone else may claim to be the heir."

This was a new theory, and one not so unreasonable as it appeared at first thought. Still it was sufficiently improbable, so that I dismissed it without much consideration. She apparently read this in my face.

"It is all groping in the dark until we learn more," she went on slowly. "Have you decided what you mean to do?"

"Only indefinitely. I want to make a careful exploration of the house and grounds by daylight. This may reveal something of value. Then we will go into Carrollton before dark. I cannot consent to your remaining here another night after what has occurred. Besides, we should consult a lawyer—the best we can find—and then proceed under his advice. Do you agree?"

"Certainly; and how can I be of assistance?"

"If you could go back to the house, and keep Sallie busy in the kitchen for an hour; hold her there at something so as to give me free range of the house."

"With Sallie!" she lifted her hands in aversion. "It does n't seem as though I could stand that. But," she added, rising resolutely to her feet, "I will if you wish it. Of course I ought to do what little I can. Why, what is this? a seal ring?"

She stooped, and picked the article up from the floor, out of a litter of dead leaves, and held it to the light between her fingers. As she gazed her cheeks whitened, and when her eyes again met mine they evidenced fear.

"What is it?" I asked, when she failed to speak. "Do you recognize it?"

She held it out toward me, her hand trembling.

"That—that was Philip Henley's ring," she said gravely. "Family heirloom; he always wore it."

CHAPTER XVIII

BEGINNING EXPLORATION

This apparently convincing evidence that Henley was not only alive, but had preceded us to Carrollton, left us staring into each others' faces, more deeply mystified than ever.

"He must be here," she articulated faintly.

"At least it would seem that he has been. The seal is a peculiar one, not likely to be duplicated. But I doubt if he is here now, for he could have no reason for avoiding us, unless—"

"I know what you mean," she replied, as I hesitated, "unless he intended to repudiate me, to refuse me recognition."

"Is he that kind of a man?"

"No; not when sober. Under the influence of liquor he becomes a brute, capable of any meanness."

"Perhaps that may be the secret then. The others here may be keeping him intoxicated, and hidden away for purposes of their own. However, this need not change our plans. Will you go in to Sallie?"

"Yes; it will be a relief to be busy, to feel that I am accomplishing something."

I stood upon the bench, from where I could look out above the weeds and tangled bushes, and followed her course to the house. At top of the steps she paused an instant to glance back, and then disappeared within. I waited patiently, knowing that if she failed to discover the housekeeper, she would give some signal. Meanwhile I watched the weed-grown area about me carefully in search of any skulker observing our movements. I could see little through the tangle, yet succeeded in convincing myself that I was alone, and free to begin my explorations. Yet I faced this work with less enthusiasm than I felt when first proposing it. The knowledge that Philip Henley was alive; that any discoveries I might make would benefit him even more than his wife, had robbed me of my earlier interest in the outcome. Nothing I had heard of the man was favorable to his character. I felt profoundly convinced that whatever affection his wife might have once entertained for him had long ago vanished through neglect and abuse. My sympathies were altogether with her, and I had already begun to dream of her as free. She had come into contact with my life in such a way as to impress me greatly; we had been thrown together in strange familiarity. Little by little I had grown to appreciate her beauty, not only of face, but also of womanly character. Already she swayed and controlled me as no other of her sex ever had. I thrilled to the touch of her hand, to the sweep of her dress, and the glance of her eye. Not until now did I realize fully all she had unconsciously become to me, or how I dreaded the reappearance of Henley. Would she return to him? Would she forgive the past? These were haunting questions from which I found no escape. I could not be ignorant of the fact that she liked me, trusted me as a friend. But beyond this rather colorless certainty I possessed no assurance. I thought I had read a deeper meaning in her eyes, enough to yield a flash of hope, but nothing more substantial. And now—now even this must be rubbed out. She was not the kind to ever compromise with duty, nor to pretend. No love for me, even if it had already begun to blossom in her secret heart, would make her disloyal to sacred vows. I knew that, and deep down in my own consciousness, honored her the more, even while I struggled against the inevitable. Yesterday I might have spoken the words of passion on my lips, but now they were sealed, and I dare not even whisper them to myself, yet it was out of this very depth of impossibility that I came to know love in its entirety, and realize what Viola Henley already was to me.

But I was never so much a dreamer, as a man of action, and the necessity of active service forced me to cast aside such thoughts almost instantly. There was work, and danger, ahead, and I welcomed both eagerly. This was the way to forget. Aye! and the way to serve. I felt the revolver in my pocket, took it out and made sure it was in readiness; then advanced cautiously toward the house. The hall was empty, and so was the front room. The latter appeared desolate and grim in its disorder and dirt. My thought centered on that picture of Judge Henley hanging against the further wall. Perhaps it had not moved; the supposition that it did might have been an illusion, produced by some flaw in the mirror opposite, or by a freak of imagination. Yet I could never be satisfied until I learned absolutely what was concealed behind that heavy gilded frame. There was mystery to this house, and perhaps here I had already stumbled upon the secret. I opened the door leading to the rear, silently, and listened. There were voices talking at a distance, two women, one a pleasant contralto, the other cracked and high pitched. The lady was doing her part; I must do mine. I closed the door gently, and stole over toward the picture, half afraid of my task, yet nerving myself for the ordeal.

A black haircloth sofa, with broad mahogany arm, offered two easy steps, enabling me to tip the heavy frame sufficiently so as to peer behind. The one glance was sufficient. Underneath was an opening in the wall, much less in width than the picture, yet ample for the passage of a crouched body. The arm of the sofa made egress comparatively easy, while the frame of the picture, though appearing heavy and substantial, was in reality of light wood, and presented no obstacle to an active man. The passage was black, and I thrust my head and shoulders in, striving to discern something of its nature. For possibly three feet I could trace the floor, but beyond that point it seemed to disappear into impenetrable darkness. This line of change was so distinct that I surmised at once it marked a descent to a lower level, either by ladder or stairs. Well, this would benefit me, rather than otherwise, for if anyone was concealed therein it would be down below, where the light streaming into the upper passage, as I pressed back the frame to gain room for my body, would be unnoticed. There was no hesitancy as to what I must do. Now I had discovered this secret passage it must be thoroughly explored. The safest way was to burrow

through the dark, trusting to hands and feet for safety, and prepared for any encounter. Whoever might be hidden away there would certainly possess some light, sufficient for any warning I needed. Every advantage would remain with me concealed by darkness.

If I felt any premonition of fear it was not serious enough to delay progress, nor did I pause to consider the possible danger. Wherever Coombs had gone, he was not likely to remain absent for long, nor could I expect Mrs. Henley to remain with Sallie a moment longer than she deemed necessary. This was my opportunity and must be utilized promptly. Standing on the sofa arm I found little difficulty in pressing my body forward into the aperture, until, extending at full length, the picture settled noiselessly back into place against the wall, excluding all light. After listening intently, fearful lest the slight scraping might have been overheard, I arose to a crouching position, able to feel both the sides and top of the tunnel with my fingers. Inch by inch, silently, my soft breathing the only noticeable sound, I worked forward, anxiously exploring for the break in the floor, which I knew to be only a few feet distance. Even then I reached it unaware of its proximity, experiencing a sudden, unpleasant shock as my extended hand groped about touching nothing tangible.

I was some time determining the exact nature of what was before me. There were no stairs, nor did any shafts of a ladder protrude above the floor level. Only as I lay flat, and felt cautiously across from wall to wall, could I determine what led below. All was black as a well, as noiseless as a grave, yet there was a ladder exactly fitting the space, spiked solidly into the flooring. My groping fingers could reach two of the rungs, and they felt sound and strong. With face outward I trusted myself to their support, and began the descent slowly, pausing between each step to listen, and gripping the side-bars tightly. The blackness and silence, combined with what I anticipated discovering somewhere in those depths below, set my nerves tingling, yet I felt cool, and determined to press on. Indeed, deep in my heart I welcomed the adventure, even hoped it might end in some encounter serious enough to arouse me to new thoughts—especially did I yearn to learn something definite about Philip Henley. This to me was now the one matter of importance; to be assured that he was living or dead. Nothing else greatly mattered, for nothing could again efface from my memory the woman he had called wife. Right or wrong, I knew she held me captive; even there, groping blindly in that darkness, every nerve strained to its utmost, my thought was with her, and her face arose before my imagination. Unexpectedly, unexplainably love had come into my life—the very love I had laughed at in others had made me captive. And I was glad of it, reckless still as to what it might portend.

I counted twelve rungs going down, and then felt stone flags beneath my feet, although the walls on either side, as I explored them with my hands, were still of closely matched wood. The passage, now high enough to permit of my standing erect, led toward the rear of the house, presenting no obstacle other than darkness, until I came up suddenly against a heavy wooden door completely barring further progress. As near as I could figure I must be already directly beneath the kitchen, and close in against the south wall. No sound reached me, however, from above, nor could I, with ear against the slight crack, distinguish any movement beyond the barrier. Cautious fingering revealed closely matched hard wood, studded thickly with nail heads, but no keyhole or latch. Secure in the feeling that no one else could be in this outer passage, and completely baffled, I ventured to strike a match. The tiny yellow flame, ere it quickly flickered out in some mysterious draft, revealed an iron band to the left of the door, with slight protuberance, resembling the button of an electric-bell. This was the only semblance to a lock, and I was in doubt whether it would prove an alarm, or some ingenuous [Transcriber's note: ingenious?] spring. There was nothing for it, however, but to try the experiment, and face the result.

Almost convinced that the pressure of my finger would ring an electric bell, I drew my revolver, and crouched low, prepared for any emergency, as I pressed the metal button. To my surprise and relief the only thing to occur was the slow opening of the door inward, a dim gleam of light becoming visible through the widening crack. The movement was deliberate and noiseless, but I dropped upon hands and knees in the deepest remaining shadow and peered anxiously into the dimly revealed interior. It was a basement room, half the width of the kitchen overhead, I should judge; the walls of crude masonry, the floor of brick, the ceiling, festooned by cobwebs, of rough-hewn beams. The light, flickering and dim, came from a half-burned candle in an iron holder screwed against the wall, revealing a small table, two chairs, one without a back, and four narrow sleeping berths made of rough boards. This was all, except a coat dangling from a beam, and a small hand-hatchet lying on the floor. There was, in the instant I had to view these things, no semblance of movement, or suggestion of human presence. Assured of this, although holding myself alert and ready, I slipped through the opening. Even as I stood there, uncertain, and staring about, a sharp draught of air extinguished the candle, and I heard the snap of the lock as the door behind blew back into position. About me was the black silence of a grave.

CHAPTER XIX

A CHAMBER OF HORROR

I backed against the wall, crouching low, revolver in hand, scarcely venturing to breathe, listening intently for the slightest sound to break the intense silence. My heart beat like a trip-hammer, and there were beads of cold perspiration on my face. The change had occurred so swiftly as to leave me quaking like a coward at the unknown terrors of the dark. Yet almost within the instant I gripped my nerves, comprehending all that had occurred, and confident of my own safety. There must be another opening into this underground den—one leading to the outer air—judging from that sudden and powerful suction. The very atmosphere I breathed had a freshness to it, inconceivable in such a place otherwise. With the first return of intelligence my mind gripped certain facts, and began to reason out the situation. That sudden sweep of air could only have originated in the opening of some other barrier—a door no doubt leading directly to the outside. I had seen no occupant of the room; without question it was deserted at my entrance. Yet someone had been there, and not long before, as was evidenced by the burning candle. Nor, by that same token, did this same mysterious party expect to be absent for any length of time. Apparently I had intruded at the very moment of his departure. Wherever that second passage might be, the former occupant of this underground den had evidently entered it previous to my opening the inner door. Still unaware of my presence he had unfastened some other barrier, and the resultant draught had extinguished the candle, and blown shut the door at my back. This seemed so clearly the truth that I laughed grimly behind clinched teeth. The solution was easy; I had but to discover the extinguished candle, relight it, search out the second passage, and waylay the fellow when he returned unsuspicious of danger.

Confident as to the correctness of my theory, and eager for action to relieve the tension on my nerves in that black silence, I began feeling a way along the wall toward the right, in the direction where I remembered the iron light bracket to be situated. The rough stone surface was unbroken, and I encountered no obstacles under foot, my groping search being finally rewarded by touch of the iron brace. I could clearly trace the form of the bracket, and determine how it was fastened into place, yet to my astonishment there was no remnant of candle remaining in the empty socket. Grease, still warm to the touch, proved conclusively that I had attained the right spot in my search, yet the candle itself had disappeared. Beyond doubt the draught of air had been sufficiently strong to dislodge it from the shallow socket, and it had fallen to the floor. I felt about on hands and knees, but without result, and finally, in sheer desperation, struck my last match. The tiny flare was sufficient to reveal the entire floor space as well as the wall, but there was no remnant of candle visible. I held the sliver of wood, until the flame scorched my fingers, staring about in bewilderment. Then the intense darkness shut me in.

I crouched back to the wall, revolver in hand, and it seemed as though the blood in my veins had turned to ice. What legerdemain was this! The candle was there, and not half burned, when I entered. I saw it with my own eyes. How then—in the name of God—could it have vanished so completely? There was no germ of superstition in my nature, and, had there originally been, it could never have out lived the practical experiences of the past few years. There was but one way to account for this occurrence—some human, aware of my presence, had removed the candle, had stolen through the pitch darkness silently, and as swiftly disappeared. I was locked in, trapped, and not alone!

I confess for an instant I was panic-stricken, shrinking back from the horror of the black unknown which enveloped me. I could see and hear nothing, yet I seemed to feel a ghastly presence skulking behind that impenetrable veil. My first inclination was to creep back to the door, and escape into the outer passage. Yet pride restrained me, pride quickly supplemented by a return of courage. It was a man surely, a thing of flesh and blood, I was called upon to meet. He was no better armed than myself, and he possessed no advantage in that darkness, except his knowledge of surroundings. I straightened up, and advanced slowly, testing the wall with my hand, every muscle stiffened for action, listening for the slightest sound. I encountered nothing, heard nothing, until my groping fingers touched the rough plank of a sleeping berth. I explored this cautiously, lifting the edge of a coarse blanket, and reaching up to make sure the one above was also unoccupied. Satisfied that both were empty I worked my way blindly along to the second tier. As I reached into the lower of the two bunks my finger came in contact with some substance that left the impression of a human body beneath the blanket. I jerked away, startled, expecting my light touch would arouse the occupant. There was no movement, however, nor could I distinguish any sound of breathing.

Convinced I had been mistaken, I reached in once more to assure myself of the truth, and my hand touched cold, clammy flesh. The shock of discovery sent me reeling backward so suddenly that I slipped and fell. It was a man—a dead man! In imagination I could see the wide-open, sightless eyes, staring toward me through the dark. Trembling with the unreasonable terror of unstrung nerves, I yet managed to regain my feet. It was not the dead body, so much as the black gloom, which robbed me of manhood. I could not see where to go, how to escape. At whatever cost I must procure light. The very desperation yielded me reckless courage. Shaking as with palsy, yet with teeth clinched, I reached forward, groping my way back to the side of the bunk. I touched the edge of the blanket, and thrust it away, feeling the body. The man was fully dressed, lying upon his back, and I experienced no difficulty in attaining the pockets of his coat. In the third I found what I sought—a box of matches.

Never before, or since, have I experienced such relief, as when my fingers closed over this precious find. I struck one, and as the phosphorus head burst into flame, stared about the vacant room, and then down into the dead face within the bunk. The man had been killed by the stroke

of a hatchet, and was almost unrecognizable. Not until the blazing match had burned to my finger tips was I sure of his identity—then, to my added horror, I recognized Coombs. I struck a second match, assuring myself beyond doubt, and drew the blanket up over the disfigured face. As the brief light flickered and died, I grasped the full significance of the man's death, the probable reason for his being stricken down. Whoever had been hidden behind that picture, crouching in the passage, had overheard his confession to me. This was vengeance wreaked upon a traitor, the executed death sentence of desperate men. And it had just been carried out—within the hour! The murderers might be even now lurking within the shadows watching my every motion.

Again a slender match flared into tiny flame, casting about a dim radius of light, partially reassuring me that I was alone. Before it flickered out into darkness my eyes made two discoveries—the opening of a dark passage to the left of the bunks, and a ghastly hand protruding from the upper berth. I was scarcely sure this last was not a vision of my half-mad brain, but a fourth match revealed it all—above the murdered Coombs, hidden beneath blankets, was the body of the strange man shot in the upper room. My God! the place was a charnel house! a spot accursed! I crept back from that ghastly scene of death as though invisible hands gripped my throat. I fairly choked with the unutterable horror which overcame me. And yet I knew I must act, must go on to the end. Even as I crouched there, trembling and unmanned, seeing visions in the darkness, hearing imaginary sounds, my thought leaped back to the girl upstairs. It was the one remembrance which kept me sane. It was not the dead, but the living, I had to fear, and it was not in my nature to shrink back from any man. I could feel the courage returning, the leap of hot blood through my veins as I straightened up.

I risked one more match to make certain of the opening through the wall, dimly glimpsed beyond the berths. My eyes were not deceived; here was a second wood-supported passage, unblocked so far as I could perceive, but black as pitch. I held the flaming splinter aloft, anxiously scanning the few feet thus revealed, but as it sputtered out, the red ash dropping to the floor, I felt renewed confidence that I was alone, unobserved. Whoever those assassins might be, they had departed, leaving only the helpless dead behind. No doubt they would come again to remove the bodies, to seek refuge in this hidden hole. But for the moment I was there undiscovered, and must utilize each precious instant for discoveries and escape. Wild recklessness, a desire to break away from those grewsome surroundings, overcame all caution. Swiftly as I dared in the dense blackness I crept forward, feeling the smooth wall with eager fingers, my right hand still nervously gripping the revolver butt. Then I came to the door, similar to the other, although no groping about would reveal the catch, or enable me to force it open.

Again I struck a match, guarding the infant flame with both hands against a slight draught which threatened its extinction. There was no sound, no warning of imminent danger. All my coolness had returned, and my every thought centered on quickly discovering the lock of the door. Yet, even in that instant, I caught glimpse of a shadow on the wall, and made one swift, automatic effort to leap aside, dropping the fatal match. The movement was too late! Something descended crashing upon my head, and I pitched forward into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER XX

TAKEN PRISONER

It must be I lay there practically dead for some time. I had no knowledge of being approached, or handled, and yet every pocket was rifled, the revolver jerked from my hand, and my coat ripped from my body. Like so much carrion the fellows had flung me back against the wall, so as to make room for the swinging open of the door. I lay there huddled up in shapeless disfigurement, blood staining the stones, one arm twisted above my head. Consciousness returned so slowly, the benumbed brain began to flicker into activity before a stiffened muscle relaxed. I was awake, able to perceive dimly, and to realize my situation, before my body responded to action. Returning life seemed to sweep downward as the mind grasped the realities, bringing consciousness of pain, throbbing head and aching muscles. Little by little, silently, comprehending now what had occurred, and warned by the sound of voices not far away, I changed posture slightly, straightening out cramped limbs, and so turning my head as to enable me to see along the passage where a ray of light streamed. There was a mist before my eyes, but this lessened, and I began to view intelligently the scene.

I lay twenty feet from the entrance to this habitation underground, thrust into the black shadow behind the door which stood partially ajar. My position precluded any possibility of learning what was beyond that wooden barrier, but I could plainly view the entire north portion of the interior, although the only light radiated from a flickering candle. One edge of the table came within my vision, a man sitting beside it, his back turned toward me. I made out little of this fellow's characteristics, as I saw only a pair of broad shoulders, encased in a rough shooting coat, and a fringe of black whiskers. He was smoking a short-stemmed pipe, and contented himself

with a growling, indistinct utterance when addressed. Opposite, however, was a man of a different type, slender and active, his hair very dark and inclined to curl, a rather long face, slightly olive-hued, with a small mustache waxed at the ends. His black, sparkling eyes attracted me first, and then his long, shapely hands. These grasped a sheet of paper, and I noticed others, including several unopened envelopes, lying before him on the table. He laughed a bit unpleasantly, a row of white teeth visible beneath the dark mustache.

"It's just as I thought, Herman," he said genially. "The fellow is a mere adventurer. There will be no one to take his disappearance seriously. Look at this document."

He held out a half-printed, half-written sheet which I instantly recognized as my discharge, but the big man only nodded, his hands in his pockets.

"I not read English—you know dot," he said placidly.

"True, I had forgotten. This is the fellow's army discharge; only issued six or seven weeks ago at Manila. He was serving in the ranks over there. Got back to this country broke, most likely, and fell into the hands of those schemers up North, willing enough to do anything for a bunch of coin. The poor devil probably has n't got a friend on earth."

"But someone know he come here."

"Only the two who sent him, and they 'll never dare tell, and the woman. She is safe enough. Nigger Pete drove them out here, and we can close his mouth easily enough. It's been easy, Herman, and now with these two settled it leaves me a clear field."

"Maybe so—yes. But vat you think it all mean? I would know how eet vas dey come."

The younger man shuffled the papers restlessly, his eyes on the face of the other.

"I confess there are some details missing, Herman," he said slowly, "but in the main it is clear enough. I take it this man Neale is a damned rascal. He went North to find the heir, discovered that he was either dead, or had disappeared, ran into some scamp of the same kidney as himself, and, between them, determined to cop the coin. That's my guess. Then they picked up this penniless soldier, who, by the way, resembles the missing son a bit, and sent him down here to play the part. Wrote him out full instructions," tapping the papers suggestively, "and then sat down there to wait results."

"Vel, maybe so—but vat about the girl, hey?"

"Someone they picked off the streets. He 's told to do it in this letter. They thought it best to prove their man married, and so had to procure a woman. We won't have any trouble with her."

"Vat you do to be sure?"

"Turn her loose in New Orleans with a few dollars," carelessly. "All she knows about the affair can't hurt us if she does squeal. There are plenty of ways to shut her mouth. I 'll know better how to handle her case right when I see her. Broussard is a long time at his job."

"Perhaps she fight heem—hey?"

"The worse for her—that Creole is a wild-cat. But I wish he would hurry, so we can get through the Gut on the flood tide; that boat draws more water than is comfortable in this lagoon."

"You need not worry," said the German, placidly looking at his watch. "I take eet through safe. She dam good sea boat, an' where I come in I can go out. Ach! 'tis the fellow come now."

The newcomer passed so close beside me I could feel his foot touch mine. As he hurried forward I realized the eyes of the two men would be upon him, and that any movement of mine would be unobserved. The door remained ajar, and, if escape was possible, now was the time. With head reeling dizzily, I crept through the opening, yet held the latch, fascinated by the first spoken words within.

"Well, Broussard, what is it?"

"All seen to, sir."

"The bodies are planted then?"

"The men attended to that."

"And the woman?"

"On her way; there was no trouble. Sallie had her doped, sir."

"I expected she would. Then that finishes our job here, Herman, and the quicker we are off the better." The two men arose to their feet, Herman grumbling something in German, but the younger man interrupted.

"We got the fellow after you left, Broussard; hit him a bit too hard it seems, but no one will ever investigate, so it's just as well. Adventurer named Craig, just discharged from the army."

"Where is he?"

"Lying there in the passage behind the door. Have Peters and Sam bury him along with the others, and then join us. We 'll go aboard."

I shut the door, and started down the passage. For a dozen steps it was black as night; then there was a sharp swerve to the right, and a gleam of daylight in the far distance. Already they were at the barrier, and I ran forward recklessly, eager to escape into the open. The way was clear, the floor rising slightly, yet without obstructions. I could hear voices, the pounding of feet behind, and I made desperate effort to outdistance my pursuers. That they were merciless I knew, and my only hope lay in attaining some hiding place in the weeds before they could emerge into the daylight. I thought of nothing else. But as I burst, straining and breathless into the open, hands gripped me from both sides. An instant I struggled to break free, fighting with a mad ferocity, which nearly accomplished the purpose. I had one down, a bearded ruffian, planting my fist full in his face, and sent the other groaning backward with a kick in the stomach, when the three from within burst forth and flung me face down into the earth, and pinned me flat beneath their weight. An instant later Broussard's belt was strapped tightly, binding my hands helplessly to my sides, and I was hurled over so that I stared up blindly into the face of the fellow in command. His black eyes were sneering, while the unpleasant smile revealed a row of white teeth.

"Great God, man," he exclaimed, "you must have the skull of an elephant. Are you actually alive?"

"Very much so," I gasped, defiant still.

"Maybe I finish heem, Monsieur," questioned Broussard, with knee still planted on my chest. "Then he not talk, hey?"

The leader laughed, with a wave of the hand. "You take the fellow far too seriously. Let him up. I 'll find a way to close his mouth if it ever be necessary. Besides, he knows nothing to do any harm. A bit groggy, my man. Hold him on his feet, you fellows."

I stood helpless, my arms bound, gripped tightly on either side, gazing full into the villain's face; out of the depth of despair and defeat there had come an animating ray of hope—they were going to take me with them. Even as a prisoner I should be near her. Would yet be able to dig out the truth.

"You take heem along, Monsieur?" It was Broussard's voice. "Zat vat you mean?"

"Certainly—why not? There's plenty of work for another hand on board. Trust me to break him in. Come, hustle the lad along, boys. I 'll be with you in a minute."

They drove me forward roughly enough, the German marching phlegmatically ahead, still silently puffing at his pipe, and leading the way along a narrow footpath through the weeds. This wound about in such crazy fashion that I lost all sense of both direction and distance, yet finally we emerged into an open space, from which I saw the chimneys of the old house far away to our left. The path led onward into another weed patch beyond, down a steep ravine, and then before us stretched the lonely waters of the bayou. Hidden under the drooping foliage of the bank was a small boat, a negro peacefully sleeping in the stern, with head pillowed on his arm. Herman awoke him with a German oath, and the way the fellow sprang up, his eyes popping open, was evidence of the treatment he was accustomed to. A hasty application of an oar brought the boat's nose to the bank, and I was thrust in unceremoniously, the three others following, each man shipping an oar into the rowlocks. Herman alone remained on shore, scattering the embers of a small fire, and staring back toward the house. A few moments we waited in silence, then the slender figure of the one who seemed the leading spirit, emerged from out the cane. He glanced at the motionless figures in the boat, spoke a few words to Herman, and then the two joined us, the latter taking the tiller, the former pushing off, and springing alertly into the bow.

Lying between the thwarts, face turned upward, all I could see distinctly was the black oarsman, although occasionally, when he leaned forward, I caught glimpses of the fellow I believed to be the captain of the strange crew. Our boat skirted the shore, keeping close within the concealing shadows, as evidenced by overhanging trees. The only word spoken was a growling command by Herman at the rudder, and the oars were noiseless as though muffled. Yet the men rowed with a will, and scarcely twenty minutes elapsed ere we were scraping along the side of a vessel of some size, and then came to a stop at foot of a boarding-ladder.

CHAPTER XXI

ON BOARD THE SEA GULL

The Captain—for so I must call him—went up first, after hailing the deck in French, and receiving some answer. Then, under Herman's orders, I was hustled roughly to my feet, and bundled aboard. My head still reeled dizzily, and the two men gripping my arms, hurried me over the rail so swiftly my first impressions were extremely vague. I knew the sides of the vessel were painted a dull gray, as nearly an invisible color as could be conceived; I recall the sharp sheer of her bow, the clearness of her lines, and the low sweep of her rail. Less than a 1,000 tons burden, I thought, and then, as my eyes swept aloft, and along the decks, I knew her for either a private yacht, or tropic fruit steamer.

"First stateroom, second cabin," said a new voice, sharply. "Lively now."

"Shall we unloose the ropes, sir?"

"Yes; fasten the door, and leave a guard. Stow away the boat, Broussard. Everything ready, Captain."

I went down a broad stairway, shining brass rails on either side, which led to a spacious after-cabin. A table extended its full length, already set for a meal, and a round-faced negro, in white serving jacket, grinned at me, as the men pressed me between them into a narrow passage leading forward. A moment later I was unceremoniously thrust into a small apartment on the right, the ropes about my wrists loosened, and the door shut and locked behind me. For perhaps five minutes I lay where I had been so unceremoniously dropped, weakened by loss of blood, and dazed by the rapidity of events. I found it hard to adjust my faculties to this new situation. I knew what had occurred, but into whose hands I had fallen, and what was the purpose of this outrage, was beyond my comprehension. One thing, however, was sufficiently clear—these men were playing for big stakes, and would hesitate at nothing to accomplish their purpose. They had already killed without remorse, and that I still survived was itself a mere accident. Yet the very fact that I lived yielded me fresh confidence, a fatalistic belief that my life had thus been spared for a specific purpose. It might yet be my privilege to foil these villains, and rescue Mrs. Henley. It was my belief she was also on board this vessel. I had no reason to assume this, except the wording of Broussard's report which I had overheard. But she was a prisoner, and this vessel would be the most likely place for her to be confined. I sat up, my flesh burning, and stared about. The light shining through the single closed port was dim, convincing me the sun had already set, yet I could perceive the few furnishings of that interior. These consisted merely of a double berth, a blanket spread over the lower mattress, and a four-legged stool. Hooks, empty, decorated the walls, and a small lamp dangled from the overhead beam. As I got to my feet I could feel a faint throb of the engine, and realized we were moving slowly through the water. The glass of the porthole was thick, but clear. I knelt on the berth, and looked out, dimly perceiving the shore-line slipping past, with an ever-broadening stretch of water intervening. Then I sat down helplessly on the stool, and waited for something to occur. Escape was impossible; I could only hope for some movement on the part of my captors.

I had little enough to think over, for the few words spoken in the cellar had furnished no clew. My purpose there was known, and these men had considered it worth while to put me out of the way, and to pick up my companion also, yet I could not directly connect this action with Judge Henley's will. We might have merely crossed their path, interfered with their criminal plans. If so, then it was more than likely our release would not be long delayed. Indeed, the man who appeared to be the chief, had already said he would turn the girl free in New Orleans, where she could do them no harm. New Orleans then was, doubtless, the port for which we sailed. My knowledge of distance was vague, yet that could not be a long voyage, nor one involving any great danger. It was clear they meant no personal harm to her, and they would never have brought me on board alive, if they had deemed it necessary to otherwise dispose of me. These considerations were in the main reassuring, and as I turned them over in my mind I drifted into better humor. Besides, my head had ceased to ache, and a little exercise put my numbed limbs into fair condition.

It was fully an hour after the coming of darkness before I was disturbed. Then the door opened, and the entering gleam of a light swinging in the passage revealed the grinning negro steward bearing a well-filled tray. This he deposited in the berth, while applying a match to the lamp overhead. I saw no shadow of any guard outside, but the fellow made no effort to close the door, and I did not move, confident he was not alone. As he turned to go, however, curiosity compelled me to question him, his good-natured face provocative of courage.

"Say, George, what boat is this?"

"Mah name is Louis, sah."

"All right, Louis, then; what's the name of this vessel?"

"She am de *Sea Gull*, an' a mighty fin' boat, sah."

"So I judge; what is she, fruiter, or private yacht?"

"I reckon I don't just know," and he grinned.

"Perhaps then you will inform me where we are bound—I suppose you know that?"

"No, sah; de captain he nebber done tol' me, sah, nothing 'bout his personal plans. All he done said wus fer me to hustle sum grub in yere."

"But surely," I Insisted warmly, "you know what voyage you signed on for?"

"Wal, boss, I did n't sign on fer no vige. I 'se de steward, sah, an' I just naturally goes 'long where ebber de ship does. 'T ain't rightly none o' my business what de white folks 'cides to do. Good Lor', dey don't never ask dis nigger nuthin' 'bout dat. All I got ter do is just go 'long with 'em—dat's all."

The shadow of a man blocked the doorway. He was one of those who had been in the small boat, and I noticed a revolver at his waist.

"That's enough, boy. Come, now, out with you," he commanded gruffly. "Never you mind the door; I 'll attend to that."

He pulled the door to after the retreating form of the negro, and I heard the sharp click of the latch, and then his voice, muffled by intervening wood, ordering the steward aft. There was no appearance of any lock on the door; probably there was none, as otherwise it would not have been necessary to post a guard. However, this was clearly no time to experiment and I was hungry enough to forget all else in the appetizing fragrance of the meal waiting. I fell to eagerly, convinced there was a good cook on board, and enjoying every morsel. This did not look as though I was destined to suffer, and merely being confined in these narrow quarters for a few hours was no great hardship. Probably the girl was receiving very similar treatment, and, as soon as the *Sea Gull* made whatever port was aimed at, we would both be put ashore, and left to proceed as we thought best. Indeed, sitting there alone, under the inspiration of choice food, well cooked, I became quite cheerful, dismissing altogether from my mind any apprehension that this attack upon us had any connection with the inheritance of Philip Henley. These people were lawless enough, without doubt—the murders already committed were evidence of that—but all they desired so far as we were personally concerned, was to get us safely out of the way, where we could no longer interfere with their plans. What those plans might be I could merely conjecture, with little enough to guide my guessing. They might be filibusters, connected with some revolution along the Central American coast, smugglers, or marauders of even less respectability. Their methods were desperate enough for any deeds of crime. Without doubt they utilized this comparatively forsaken lagoon as a hidden rendezvous, and the deserted Henley plantation—from which even the negroes had been frightened away—was an ideal spot for them to meet in, plan their raids, or secrete their spoils. These fellows were doubtless the ghosts which haunted the place, and had given it so uncanny a reputation throughout the neighborhood. They would naturally resent any interference, any change in ownership, or control. Possibly, if they were thieves, as I more than half suspected, they had loot buried nearby, and were anxious to get us out of the way long enough to remove it unobserved. This appealed to me as by far the most probable explanation.

I had cleaned the dishes, and was sitting on the stool, leaning back against the wall, already becoming sleepy, listening to the rhythmic pulsation of the engines at low speed, when the door opened again, and the guard stood revealed before me in the glare of light.

"The old man wants you," he explained brusquely, waving his hand aft as though specifying the direction. "Come on, now."

"What does he want?"

"How the hell do I know! But let me tell you, his orders go on this boat."

I preceded him along the narrow passage, utterly indifferent to the threat in his manner, but still conscious that one hand gripped the butt of his revolver. Without doubt the fellow had orders to be vigilant, and, perhaps, would even welcome some excuse for violence. I gave him none, however, hopeful that the approaching interview might yield new information. The cabin was unoccupied, the table swung up against the beams of the upper deck, the heavy chairs moved back leaving a wide open space. The furnishings were rich, in excellent taste, the carpet a soft, green Wilton; the hanging lamp quite ornate, while a magnificent upright piano was firmly anchored against the butt of the aftermast. It was a yacht-like interior, even to the sheet music on the rack, and a gray striped cat dozing on one of the softly cushioned chairs. Gazing about, I could scarcely realize this was an abode of criminals, or that I was there a captive. It was the sudden grip of my guard which brought the truth relentlessly home.

"This is no movin' picture show," he muttered. "Hustle along thar, in back o' that music box. See—the way I 'm pointin'."

There was but one door, evidence that a single cabin occupied the entire space astern, and I stopped before it, my companion applying his knuckles to the wood, but without removing his watchful eyes from me. A muffled voice asked who was there, and at the response replied:

"Open the door and show him in, Peters, and remain where you are within call."

I entered, conscious of a strange feeling of hesitancy, pausing involuntarily as I heard the door close, and glancing hastily about. I had expected a scene of luxury, a counterpart of the outer cabin. Instead, I stood upon a plain, uncarpeted deck, the white walls and ceiling undecorated. On one side was a double tier of berths, lockers were between the ports, and heavy curtains draped the two windows aft. Opposite the berths was an arm rack, containing a variety of weapons, and the only floor covering was a small rug beneath a desk near the center of the apartment. This latter was littered with papers, among them a map or two, on which courses had been pricked. Beyond these all the room contained was a small bookcase, crowded with volumes, and a few chairs, only one upholstered. The only person present occupied this, and was seated at the desk, watching me, a cigarette smoking between his fingers. It was the olive-hued man of the cellar, the one I had picked as leader, and his teeth gleamed white in an effort to smile. In spite of his skin and dark eyes, I could not guess at his nationality, but felt an instinctive dislike to him, more deeply rooted than before, now that I comprehended how completely I was in his power.

"Take a seat, Craig," he said, speaking with a faint accent barely perceptible. "The second chair will be found the more comfortable. Now we can talk easily. May I offer you a cigarette?"

I accepted it more to exhibit my own coolness than from any desire to smoke, but without other response. The man had sent for me for some specific purpose, and I desired to learn what that might be before unmasking my own batteries.

"A smoke generally leaves me in more genial humor," he continued, ignoring my reticence. "Mere habit, of course, but we are all more or less in slavery to the weed. I trust you have been fairly comfortable since coming on board the *Sea Gull*."

"As much so as a prisoner could naturally expect to be," I replied indifferently. "This vessel then is the *Sea Gull*?"

He bowed, with an expressive gesticulation of the hand.

"At present—yes. In days gone by it has been found convenient to call her the *Esmeralda*, the *Seven Sisters*, and the *Becky N*. The name is immaterial, so long as it sounds well, and conforms to the manifest. However, just now the register reads *Sea Gull*, Henley, master, 850 tons, schooner-rigged yacht."

"You are under steam?"

"Exactly; auxiliary steam power."

"In what trade?"

"Operated for pleasure exclusively," a slight tone of mockery in the soft voice. "A rather expensive luxury, of course, but available all the year around in this latitude."

"I failed to catch the captain's name—yours, I presume?"

He laughed, pausing to light another cigarette.

"Still it is one you seem fairly familiar with—Henley, Philip Henley."

CHAPTER XXII

I CHANGE FRONT

This statement of his identity, spoken calmly, and smilingly, was such a surprise that I could but stare at the man, half convinced I had misunderstood his words.

"You see, Craig," he continued quietly, apparently comprehending my state of mind, "your little game is up. Not a bad plan originally—something of a criminal genius that fellow Neale—but he failed to count on the fact that I was very much alive, and fully capable of attending to my own affairs. By the way, what part did the girl play in this little conspiracy? Merely a friend of yours, who came along for company?"

"Certainly not," I replied indignantly. "Have you seen her?"

"Not yet; I preferred coming to an understanding with you first."

"A condition you may not find as easy as you anticipate," I retorted, angered at his cool insolence. "If you are Philip Henley, then the lady you are holding prisoner is your wife."

He laughed, leaning back again in his chair.

"Well, hardly. I rather surmised that was the idea from a sentence or two, in these instructions," and he touched a bundle of papers on the desk. "Careless way to carry such evidence around—shows the amateur. Thought it would add to the appeal to justice for Henley to have a wife, I presume. Why not a child also? Permit me to state, my dear sir, that I possess no such encumbrance."

"It happens," I contended coldly, "that I have seen the marriage certificate."

He sat up stiffly, the sarcastic grin leaving his face, and replaced by an expression of vindictiveness.

"Oh, you have! As much a forgery as some of these other precious documents. You will certainly grant that I ought to know whether I am married or not?"

"I made no assertion relative to that."

"What did you assert?"

"That Philip Henley was married, and that his wife—or widow, as the case may be—is the lady who accompanied me to Carrollton."

He leaned forward, both arms on the desk, his black eyes narrowed into mere slits.

"Oh, I see," finally. "Driven out of one position, like a good general, you have another in reserve. You are more of an antagonist than I had supposed, Craig. So now it is the widow who claims the ducats. Am I also to understand that you are prepared to submit proof of the death of Philip Henley? By the saints; I am becoming interested."

"Naturally, if you claim to be the man. I have not said he was dead, for I do not know. I came down here believing him alive. His wife is almost convinced otherwise. All I am actually certain about now is that you are not the man."

"You are extremely free-spoken for a fellow in your condition. You will at least confess that I am master on board this ship; that my word here is law, and you are in my power."

"Yes."

"Then why expose yourself, and that young woman, to unnecessary danger? To be frank, Craig, I sent for you just now in a friendly spirit. You can be decidedly useful to me, and I can afford to pay well for services rendered. Now wait! don't break in until I am through. I know who you are, and how you originally became involved in this affair. You have no personal interest in the final outcome, so you receive the amount promised. You are a mere soldier of fortune, an adventurer. Good! Then it is certainly to your interest to be on the winning side. What did Neale, and that other fellow—Vail—offer?"

I sat looking at him steadily for a moment. That he was a shrewd, scheming villain I had no doubt, but the one question which controlled my answer was the thought of how I could best serve her. If I followed my inclination, told him frankly that I had already deserted my allegiance to those men in the North, and only remained loyal to the woman, the confession would possibly react upon us both. We would be held prisoners indefinitely. If, on the other hand, I appeared to hesitate, a way of service might be opened before me, and, with it, a path to freedom, for us both. The decision had to be made quickly.

"Never mind the sum," I said soberly. "I am not altogether mercenary, although I need money. I 'll say this, however, and you can take it for what it may be worth. I originally came into this game believing I was doing a kindness to a helpless man who was being defrauded of his rights. There is no necessity of my going into details, but Neale told me an apparently straight story, and convinced me my part was a mere form. Later I learned different, and promptly quit. I have n't sent in a line of report to my employers."

"What convinced you of the fraud?"

"A conversation with Mrs. Henley."

"Oh, the woman, hey!" his tone again sarcastic. "Always the woman; more to be valued than great riches, aye! even than fine gold. Good Lord, Craig, don't be a wooden-headed fool. I tell you plainly Philip Henley was never married, and I know. This girl is a mere adventuress unworthy of any consideration."

"You claim still to be Henley?" I asked, stifling my indignation.

"Not only claim, but am. My identity is already firmly established in court. Lawyers have the final papers ready to file."

"You do not in any way resemble the photograph shown me of the man."

"A fake picture; we have known something of Neale's plans from the first."

The man was apparently so confident, that I began to doubt my own conclusions, and yet I could not doubt her. Whatever other falsehoods might compass me about, she was to be implicitly trusted.

"Is the woman on board?" I questioned.

He hesitated just an instant.

"Yes."

"Will you have her brought here?"

He walked across the cabin twice, turning the proposition over in his mind. Apparently concluding that the ordeal might as well be over with first as last, he opened the door, and gave an order to Peters. Then he returned to his seat at the desk.

"This is all silly enough, Craig, but I might as well convince you both now, as later, that I hold the cards. The lady may try a bluff, if she is that kind, but it will be soon over."

We waited silently, and I endeavored swiftly to formulate a satisfactory course of action. In spite of all my faith in her—which could never waver—it was clearly evident this fellow had us helpless in his grasp. If I was to become free to act it could only be by yielding to his expressed desires, and apparently accepting his claims. That this would separate me for the time from Mrs. Henley, alienate her friendship, was a certainty. Yet I must risk all this even to be of real service. The end would justify the means. We were confronted by no common scoundrel, and here was a case where fire could only be fought with flame. I did not for an instant believe he was Philip Henley, yet he was apparently fortified with strong evidence to sustain that claim. The very fact that he so strenuously denied that Philip was married, convinced me he was an impostor, that he had never even heard of this secret wedding. Probably the Judge had not mentioned it while living, nor written any memoranda concerning it. Yet Neale knew, and there could be no question as to the truth of the matter. In view of all I decided openly to cast my fortunes with the man, and appear angry at the deceit with which she had ensnared me. I dreaded the result, the expression my apparent desertion would bring to her face, but this seemed the only was possible for me to unmask the fellow. He had clearly enough catalogued me in his own class, as one who would serve any master for sufficient reward. Very well, let him so continue to think, until I could turn the tables, and pay him back in his own coin. And the quickest way in which to convince him that I was altogether his man, was to denounce the girl in his presence, and frankly avow myself on his side. Difficult as this task would prove—at least until I could make some explanation to her—it was the sensible course to pursue. I hardened myself to it, my eyes on the outlines of the man's face, as he shuffled the papers on his desk.

"Do you mind telling me where this vessel is bound?" I asked, not only curious to learn, but also anxious to break the silence.

"No objections whatever, Craig, if I knew myself," he answered carelessly. "The *Sea Gull* being my property sails on my orders, and, at present, those orders are merely to put out to sea."

"You spoke of leaving the lady ashore at New Orleans."

"Oh, back at the house? You overheard that? Well, I am not above changing my mind in such matters. From what you have just told me I infer the young woman is more dangerous than I had supposed. Perhaps some foreign port would be the safer landing place. I shall determine that after our coming interview. This will be the lady now."

We both arose to our feet as she entered, glancing about her curiously at the rather strange surroundings, then stopping irresolutely, apparently recognizing neither of us. The light from the hanging lamp, waving somewhat from the movement of the vessel, served to soften the lines of her face, and reveal the delicate beauty. About her were no signs of fatigue or fear. Suddenly the light of recognition leaped into her eyes, and she took a quick step forward.

"Mr. Craig—you here? Why, I can hardly understand. Were you made prisoner also?"

"I suppose that to be my status, although I hardly know," I answered, yet unable to refrain from accepting the extended hand. "I was certainly brought aboard in chains, and much against my will. I presume you know this person?"

She swept my face with a swift, questioning glance, and then looked beyond me at the man standing beside the desk.

"No, I do not," slowly. "I have no remembrance of ever seeing him before."

"Is that not rather strange," I asked, steeling myself to the task, "after asserting that he was your husband? He is the owner of this vessel—Philip Henley."

She reached out gropingly, and grasped the back of a chair, staring at his face, and then glancing into mine, as though bewildered, suspecting some trick. I could see her lips move, as if she endeavored to speak, but could not articulate the words. Henley—-for I must call him that—

advanced a step toward us, his thin lips fashioning themselves into an ironic smile.

"You receive this information about as I supposed you would, Madam," he said coldly. "I was doubtless the very last person you expected to encounter. Your accomplice here informs me that I am supposed to be dead. I am inclined to think you were both mistaken—but not more so than in regard to my marriage."

She straightened up, her eyes shining.

"You are not Philip Henley," she said firmly. "He is my husband."

The smile widened, revealing the cruel white teeth.

"I expected heroics. It was hardly to be supposed that you would confess your fraud at once, and—before your lover."

She shrank back, her hands still extended.

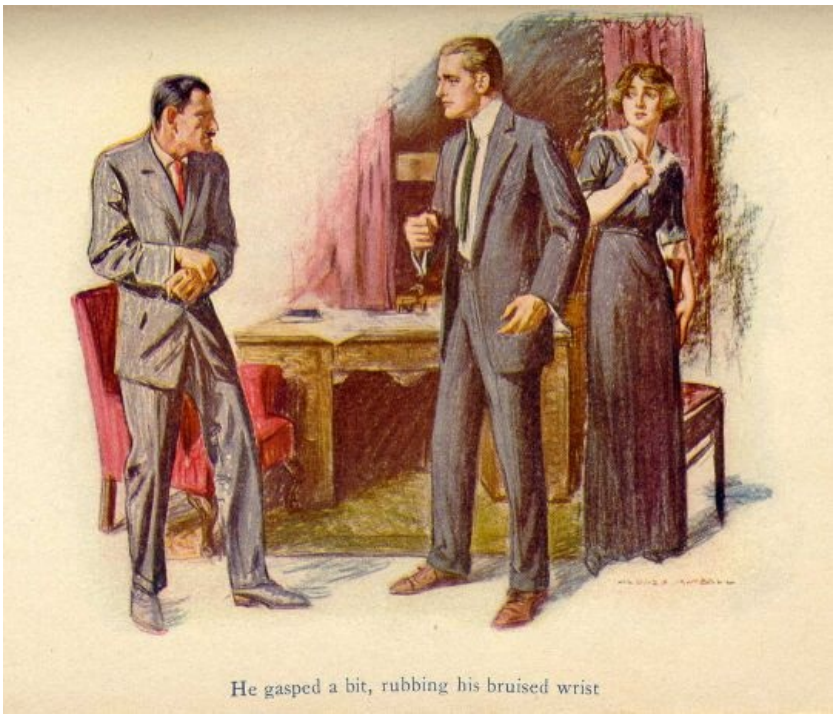
"My—my lover—"

"Now stop!" I broke in, every nerve tingling, as I stepped between them. "Another insinuation like that, and you will learn what I can do. You may be captain of this boat, but you are alone with us now, and I can kill you before you could utter a cry. So help me God, I will, if you dare insult her again."

He reeled back against the desk, although I do not think I touched him, and his hand sought an open drawer. I knew him instantly for a coward, and gripped his wrist, hurling him from me half across the room.

"I 'll stand here, and you over there. I prefer dealing with your kind with bare hands. Now if you have any reply to make to this lady's assertions put it in decent language."

He gasped a bit, rubbing his bruised wrist, his eyes shifting to the closed door as though contemplating an alarm. But I stood where I could block any effort, and I doubt if he liked the expression on my face.



He gasped a bit, rubbing his bruised wrist

[Illustration: He gasped a bit, rubbing his bruised wrist.]

"There is no use going off at half cock, Craig," he snarled. "I did n't mean any insult. And I 'll get you for that some time. You 'll learn yet what the *Sea Gull* is."

"No doubt," I coincided, tired of his threats, and awakened to the fact that this quarrel was not likely to help our chances. "But for a few minutes it will be worth your while to listen to me. I am not defending this woman from anything but unnecessary insults. If she has deceived me I want to find it out. If you are Philip Henley, as you claim to be, you must have evidence to prove it. Convince me that her assertions are false, and you will not find me unreasonable."

"Gordon Craig, do you mean—"

I turned to her, steeling myself to look into her appealing eyes.

"I have been honest with you from the beginning," I Interrupted abruptly. "Now, if I discover that your statements are false, the inducements are all the other way. I am a soldier of fortune."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SECRET OF THE VOYAGE

Henley laughed, the sound grating harshly on my nerves, yet I made no movement of protest as he stepped silently back to his desk. I was no longer afraid of the fellow, even although he might have a weapon concealed in one of the drawers, for I knew I had drawn his fangs. This open avowal on my part was sufficient to convince one of his stripe that I was concerned only with my own interests. Whatever suspicion he may have previously entertained regarding my relations with the lady were now thoroughly evaporated. Assured in his own mind that Philip had never been married, he was now easily convinced that I had merely associated myself with a girl from the streets, whom I was only too glad to desert upon any plausible excuse. His words confirmed my judgment.

"Well said, my man. Now we begin to understand each other. Of course I have the proofs. I would be a fool to sit in such a game without a winning hand. Sit down, both of you, while we talk this over. There is no reason why the three of us should not be friends, providing you are sensible."

She had never removed her gaze from me, standing white-faced and rigid, as though unable to fully comprehend. I doubt if she heard, to distinguish, a syllable he spoke, her every thought centered on my renunciation.

"But—but I am his wife," she panted indignantly. "Philip Henley's wife. I—I showed you our certificate."

"A fake, a forgery," asserted the other roughly, before I could find voice. "You had it framed up all right, if you had never run across me. Show me the paper."

"I cannot, for it is not here. I placed it in my valise back at that house." She stepped forward with hands held out toward me. "But you know—Gordon Craig, you know. I could not have forged that; I had not time; no information which would have led to such an act. You tell him so."

"I hardly think he will, Madam," returned the Captain shortly, evidently feeling it better not to let me speak. "And there is no use going on with this any farther. Answer me a question or two, that is all. Did n't Craig tell you why he was coming down here?"

"Yes," the single word scarcely audible.

"He explained to you in detail what was expected of him?"

"Yes."

"Some hours before you left, was n't it?"

"Yes."

"Then you had sufficient time, and knowledge to complete your plans. When did you first tell Craig you were Philip Henley's wife?"

I clinched my hands at the bewildered embarrassment in her eyes, at the sneer in the voice of the questioner, yet held myself silent.

"It was after we came here; when I was frightened, and felt that I must confess the truth. I—I had begun to trust him."

"Oh, indeed, and you failed to tell him at first because you did not trust him."

"Partially that—yes. Although I do not think the name Henley was even mentioned during our first interview. I am sure I did not realize it was my husband's father who was dead until later."

"Exactly; you picked up a strange man on the street; agreed to go off on a criminal mission with him, and now expect us to believe you perfectly innocent of any wrong intent."

"That will be enough," I interrupted, unable to remain quiet any longer. "The motives of the woman, and how we chanced to meet, are no concern of yours. If you are Philip Henley, prove it, and let it go at that. I have told you plainly enough where I stand."

He gazed with black eyes narrowed into slits at the two of us, too pleased with himself to

doubt his success. The sarcastic smile curling his lips caused me to swear under my breath, but I had gone too far now to retreat.

"Just as you say, Craig," affecting an easy good nature. "That is perfectly agreeable to me. However, as it makes no difference what the late Mrs. Henley thinks, we will dismiss her from the case, and settle the affair quietly between ourselves. I 've got a proposition which will interest you." He touched a button, and I heard the sharp tingle of a bell outside. Almost instantly the door in the cabin opened. "That you, Peters? Conduct the woman back to her stateroom, lock the door, and bring me the key."

He bent forward, searching for something in a pigeonhole to his right, and I caught her eyes, touching my lips with my fingers to signal silence, while an inclination of the head told her to go without resistance. The swift change of expression on her face proved her instant comprehension, as, without uttering a word of protest, she turned, and disappeared. Henley never glanced up from his work of selecting papers from a bundle under his hands, nor did I move, until after Peters returned with the key. Henley dropped it into his pocket.

"That will be all," he said; "you can go."

"You mean I am off duty, sir?"

"Certainly; you understand English, don't you? There will be no more guard work tonight."

As the door closed again behind Peters the fellow rose to his feet, and held out his hand. "You are the kind I like, Craig," he said cordially. "At first I had my doubts about you, and no doubt have been harsh. To be perfectly honest I thought you would be all right under ordinary circumstances, but was afraid the girl had a sentimental hold on you which would make you difficult to handle. Lord, she thought so too. Did you see her face when you first sided in with me? She wilted completely. Well, that will make the rest easy. Sit down again, and I will explain what I want you for."

I accepted the chair indicated, but was not yet altogether ready to hear his proposition.

"Just a moment," I said firmly. "I may be the man you want, and all that, but I have got to be convinced first that I am not making another mistake. I came down here originally believing myself an agent of justice, only to discover I had been duped. This time I insist on the truth. I may be a soldier of fortune, but I prefer choosing the side on which I fight."

"You mean you wish to assure yourself I have the right of it," he asked smilingly, "before you enlist? There is nothing unreasonable to that. Unfortunately, however," and he picked up the papers from the desk, "I can only furnish you corroborative proofs now. Still, I think these will be convincing. The legal papers, which absolutely establish my identity as Philip Henley, are in the hands of lawyers, who represent me at Carrollton. The case will not come up for adjudication for several weeks yet," speaking slowly, and with careful choice of words, "but my contention as heir to the property is thoroughly established. It had to be, for as you know the Judge's son had been away from this neighborhood for years, practically ever since boyhood. He was almost unknown to the local inhabitants, even to the servants. He was even reported as being dead. This state of affairs made identification the most important thing to be considered. Consequently all documents bearing directly on that point are, at present, out of my reach. You understand?"

"Yes; only you must have retained something to substantiate your word."

"Precisely. I was coming to that. I have letters from my father which should be sufficient. You have seen Judge Henley's writing?" and he handed me a half dozen missives. They were without envelopes, each beginning simply, "My Dear Son," relating principally to local conditions on the plantation, and occasionally expressing a desire for the wanderer to return, and assume the burden of management. Instead of names, initials were employed to designate individuals referred to, and it was evident the recipient had been addressed at various places. That they were in the crabbed and peculiar handwriting of the old Judge was beyond all question, and the dates covered several years. I read them through carefully, puzzled by their contents.

"There are no envelopes?"

"No; I never keep them—why?"

"Only that no name is mentioned; they begin all alike, 'My Dear Son.'"

"I never thought of that," he, admitted, simulating surprise, "but can supplement by showing you this picture, taken three years ago at Mobile. Of course you will recognize myself, but may never have seen a photograph of Judge Henley."

"I never have."

"Well, that is his likeness, and there are those on board who will identify it. Does this satisfy you that I am what I claim to be?"

In truth it did not, for I would have believed nothing in opposition to the positive statement of

the woman that he was not Philip Henley. Her simple assertion weighed more with me than any proofs he might submit. Yet his coolness of demeanor, and the tone of the letters, evidently written in confidence from father to son, were unanswerable. Under other conditions—divorced from what I knew—they would be conclusive. Now I could only wonder at them, groping blindly for some solution. Were they really addressed to him, or had he stolen them? If the latter, then how had he succeeded in getting his picture on the same plate with Judge Henley's? And what were those other more important documents on which he rested his claim? These considerations flashed through my mind, yet I was sufficiently aroused to answer quickly, aware that even the slightest hesitancy might awaken suspicion.

"It would seem to be unanswerable," I replied, replacing letters and photograph on the desk. "What hurts my pride is to have been made such a fool of."

"That's nothing, Craig; we have all had that experience. You merely fell into the clutches of some shrewd men, and a designing woman. Fortunately you have discovered the truth before any great harm has been done, and I stand ready to give you a chance now on the winning side. I would rather have you with me than opposed, and there will be more money in it for us both. What do you say?"

"I should prefer to know more about your proposition."

"It has nothing whatever to do with the Henley matter," he exclaimed, leaning back in his chair, and surveying me shrewdly through his dark eyes. "That is practically settled already, so you will not be further involved with the girl."

"You would oblige me by leaving her name out of the discussion then," I interposed coldly. "Even her presence on board is distasteful under the circumstances."

He chuckled, well satisfied with his diplomacy.

"I understand that; however, we cannot obliterate her entirely. Pretty enough to be useful too, I imagine, if she can ever be brought to view this affair from the right angle. Could n't you be induced to attempt a little, missionary work? Love-making at sea is said to be especially pleasant."

I shook my head, gazing directly into his eyes, barely able to keep from throttling him.

"Drop it," I said sternly. "The girl is to be left alone if I have any part in your scheme. Now I want to know what is expected of me; may I ask questions?"

He lit another cigarette, calmly indifferent to all outward appearance.

"Certainly—fire away."

"Where are we bound?"

"Spanish Honduras," lazily, but spreading out a map, and tapping it with his finger. "Perto Cortez, if we can make that port safely; if not then somewhere along the coast between there and Trupillo. There will be signals."

I leaned forward, startled out of my self-restraint. "Honduras! Good Lord! what are you—a filibuster?"

"Hardly," with a short laugh. "That is too dangerous a job, and not money enough in it. I prefer to do my revoluting through others, and cop the swag. That is the safe end of the game. It happens to be Honduras just now; I have been equally interested in other downtrodden countries. In truth, friend, I am a patriot for revenue only."

"You mean you furnish arms?"

"For a suitable consideration—yes. In strict confidence I will state that securely packed away in the hold of the *Sea Gull*—largely in boxes labeled machinery—are twenty thousand rifles, six rapid-fire guns, and a sufficiency of ammunition for a small army. Once safely landed the profits of the voyage will total one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, gold. A rather tidy sum, hey?"

I grasped the idea swiftly enough, and it cleared up some of the shadow of mystery. But the situation was rendered no more pleasant for us.

"Then you are not sailing for New Orleans?"

"Not until my hold is empty. We cleared from there, light, three weeks ago."

"You mean to retain the lady on board?"

"Unless she prefers to jump overboard."

"And what have I to do with all this? You said you had use for me—what use?"

CHAPTER XXIV

I JOIN THE SEA GULL

I can see the fellow still, as he sat there smiling, his teeth revealed under his mustache, his eyes filled with cunning.

"You! why you chance to be the very sort of man I need. The devil could not have sent me a better," he said, with some enthusiasm. "You are an American soldier, the best-drilled men in the world for irregular service. You can understand that the longer I can keep those fellows down there fighting, the more I will sell. Good! that is part of my business. And the better they are drilled, the longer they will keep it up. That is what I want you for—to help make that mob of rags into an army. By God! you can do it, and I am willing to pay the price."

I got up, and walked across the cabin, apparently struggling with temptation, arguing the matter over with myself. In very truth, however, there was little choice. Either I must coincide with his desire, or be thrust helplessly back into my old quarters, under guard. There was no mercy, no weakness, behind the smile with which he watched me. The man was a tiger who would kill me with as little remorse as he would brush a mosquito from his cheek. If I yielded, if I exhibited a willingness to fit into his plans, well and good. But if I decided otherwise the jaws of the trap would close. I did not care so much for myself—it would be a pleasure to defy him—but the memory of the girl was vivid. What would happen to her, alone on this lawless ship, surrounded by the gang of wolves with which it was manned? The thought sickened me. Even already I had imagined a gleam of lust in the eyes of the fellow when he glanced covertly at her, and distrusted him as I would a snake. And he was owner and captain, his word on board the supreme law, even unto death. There was nothing left me but to agree to his proposition, and thus purchase freedom. Yet I must not appear too eager.

"I perceive your point," I said at last, facing him. "But what is there in it for me?"

"A good round sum," he replied. "More than you ever made before, I warrant, not excepting the promises made you in this Henley will case. We 'll talk the details over later."

"Who is responsible for my pay?"

"See here, Craig, the case stands like this. The revolutionists down there asked me to find them a competent drill-master, and they will pay royally. They 've got the money, too, scads of it. There will be no trouble on that score. Besides, I need a reliable man ashore to look after shipments. We have to land our goods in a hurry, you understand, at night, without checking up. I can afford to hand you something pretty nice on the side to assure myself a square deal. I had a fellow picked out for the berth—a retired German officer—-but he failed to show up when we sailed. Now I have run across you I am damned glad he did. You are more the style of man I want. Come, now, I don't believe you can afford to turn this offer down."

"It looks good," I confessed, but still hesitating. "Only I shall have to have it in writing, and more in detail."

"We'll talk that over in the morning; it's late now. Take the third stateroom starboard: it's all ready for you."

"Then I am no longer to consider myself a prisoner onboard?"

"Certainly not. Practically you are one of us."

"And I have the freedom of the deck?"

He smiled grimly, gazing intently at me.

"That is safe enough, I reckon, even if I questioned your interest in this adventure. There must be ten miles of water already between us and the coast. There are no limits on your liberty, but I would n't advise your going forward at present—not until the men understand the situation —they 're a hard lot."

"Revolutionists?"

"Hell, no; plain New Orleans wharf rats, the scouring of the Seven Seas."

"Who is first mate—the German?"

"Yes, Herman, a fine sailor; was with the Hamburg people until he had a wreck. The Creole Broussard is second, and the two of them together could tame a cargo of wild-cats. Is that all,

Craig?"

"All at present."

"Good night then; think this over, and we 'll have another talk tomorrow. The third starboard stateroom is yours."

I took his hand, feeling the sinewy grip of his lean, brown fingers, and turned to the door, cursing myself under my breath for a weakling, and yet utterly unable to perceive how I could choose otherwise. The single lamp in the main cabin was turned low, only faintly illuminating the interior. In the quiet I could feel the movement of the vessel, and realized there was some sea on, although the engines were being operated only at half speed. This seemed odd, if speed was desirable, as I supposed it must be on a voyage of this nature. However that was none of my affair, and, heaven knows, I had enough to consider in my own situation. I was not in the least sleepy, and sank down in the first chair to think, my eyes on the Captain's door. But I was not disturbed. If this was my case exclusively I doubt if it would have greatly worried me. Indeed, I might have rejoiced over the outlook, welcoming the excitement, and rough experience promised in a new land. I possessed the adventurous spirit, and the position offered had its appeal. But the girl stood directly in the way. What Henley meant to do with her was problematical—I had not thought to ask—but he either intended putting her ashore in Honduras, or else holding her prisoner on board until the *Sea Gull* returned North. Either contingency was bad enough, and the suspicion flashed suddenly across me that the final decision would depend on how kindly she might receive the attentions of the Captain. Nor did I question the result. I had not known the lady long, but, in that brief time, our relations had been sufficiently intimate to yield me a good insight into her womanly character. There would be no yielding, no compromise. Neither threats nor promises would change her attitude in the least. Not only did she know the fellow to be a lying knave, but he was not of the sort to ever influence her in the slightest degree. I could imagine how she would look at him, with those searching eyes burning in indignation, and her instant squelching of his first protestations. There would be no need of my help to repel the insults of such a beast. But afterwards there would, for I realized also what he would become after such a repulse—a cold, sneering Nemesis, revengeful, ready to crush even a woman remorselessly. And he possessed the power, the means to make that revenge complete. I felt my teeth lock, my hands clinch in sudden anger. Perhaps I could accomplish little in her defense, but I intended to be free to do that little. Whatever fate might be in store for us, that sneering, olive-hued devil should receive his deserts if ever he attempted wrong to her. That had become the one purpose of my heart, for I realized here skulked the real danger, the deeper peril of our situation.

I may have remained there for a quarter of an hour, motionless, thinking over every incident, and reviewing carefully, and in detail, the various happenings which had led to our present condition. The only result was to enlist me yet more strongly to her service. Believing her statement I could see nothing in her conduct to criticize, and she appealed to me in all womanhood. I would be a dastard to doubt, or desert, her cause now, and the warm blood throbbed in my veins responsive to the memory of what had already been between us. No one disturbed me, the Captain was still in his stateroom, where, once or twice, I imagined I heard him pacing the floor. The steward had apparently retired for the night, although it was not late, as a glance at my watch proved. My eyes traced the doors on either side, ten altogether, each plainly numbered, and I opened the one assigned to me, and glanced within. Except that it was more commodious, and contained a washstand at one corner, it did not differ greatly from the other forward where I had been held prisoner.

I wondered which of these others might be hers, and passed silently from door to door, vaguely hoping for some sign of guidance. They were all tightly closed, and I dare not try the locks, as I was certain one, at least, of the under officers would be sleeping below. My round had brought me to the second door on the port side when, in the dim light, I perceived something lying at my feet, and stooped down to better determine its character. It was the end of a very narrow light blue ribbon, apparently caught beneath the door. Assured that she was the only one of her sex aboard, I drew the strip forth, fondled it, imagined I had seen it before, struggling with a desire to make myself known. The door before which I hesitated was numbered "5." Whether by accident, or design, she had left the one clew I most needed. Indeed, at the moment, I believed the ribbon had been purposely dropped. That last meeting of our eyes had reassured her of my loyalty; with the quick intuition of a woman she had comprehended the truth, and this ribbon, apparently carelessly dropped, was for my guidance. I thrust it into my pocket, but the soft touch of the silk seemed to bring back to me a sense of caution. I knew the door was locked, and assured myself there was no space beneath. If I was to communicate with her, other means must be employed. What? This was the second stateroom on the port side. Judging from my own, the width of each room would be about six feet. There ought to be no difficulty in locating her porthole from the deck above, nor in attracting her attention.

The one thing I desired now was to reëstablish myself fully in her confidence, assure her I was at liberty on board, able and willing to be of service. This necessity overshadowed all else. If I could discover means of communication we could plan hopefully, assured of cooperation. And this seemed possible, the way to its accomplishment open. Shadowed from observation by the thick butt of the after-mast, I wrote a few lines hastily on the back of an envelope, thrust it into my pocket, and ventured up the companion stairs. Reaching the top, and stealing to one side out of the dim range light, I took hasty survey of the deck. It was a dark night, although a few stars were visible, and the *Sea Gull* was steaming slowly through a fairly rough sea, pounding against

her port quarter. Little twinkles of light were visible off the port side, so numerous as to make me suspicion land, while a narrow strip of moon, barely exposed beneath an edge of cloud, convinced me our course was almost directly east. This was strange if the boat's destination was Spanish Honduras, and the Captain was, as he contended, desirous of making a swift passage. I recall this flash of thought, yet my attention almost instantly reverted elsewhere. The closer we hugged the shore the greater the opportunity for escape, the more vital the necessity of immediately establishing communication with the fair prisoner below.

A glance sufficed to convince that I was alone, and unobserved. The deck was unobstructed aft, except for a small boat swung to davits astern, and the cabin transoms. These last were elevated some three feet, but considerable space separated from the rail. I slipped into this opening on the port side, crouching in the dense shadow, until again assured I was alone. My position afforded as good a view forward as the darkness would permit, and likewise enabled me to see into the dimly lit cabin below. The fact that Henley—for whatever his name might be, this was the one to which he laid claim—had not left his stateroom, or made any effort to observe my movements, was a decided encouragement. Beyond all question he believed me safely in his grasp, and his promise of liberty on board was being substantiated. I was not to be watched, or spied upon. For the first time I began to feel a true sense of freedom.

The deck forward of the main mast was too dark for observation, although I was certain of a group of men gathered in the waist to leeward. Occasionally the sound of a voice was blown back, and I could perceive the dull, red glow of a pipe or two. The main body of the watch these would be, and even as I stared at the lumping shadow, a command was roared from the bridge, and two shapeless figures detached themselves from the mass, and ran forward. The bridge itself was partially outlined against the lighter sky, giving me a vague glimpse of two figures, one standing motionless, as though gripping the rail, and peering straight ahead into the smother, the other striding back and forth. The last appeared a huge shadow, his coat flapping in the wind, and I knew he must be the German first mate, Herman.

Satisfied on these points, and with a glance below at the unoccupied cabin, I stepped back and paced off the distance, until convinced that I had safely located where the porthole of number "5" should be. I leaned over, seeking to trace its outline by some reflection of light from within, but the receding side of the vessel baffled me. Yet,

CHAPTER XXV

THE FREEDOM OF THE DECK

The flag locker was astern, and standing on it I could feel inside the boat swung to the davits. It was a small, light boat, fashioned like a cutter, a good sea-going craft for its size. Two oars and a short mast together with a roll of canvas were stowed on top the thwarts, and secured by lashings. I cut one of these, and drew forth about three fathoms of line, sufficiently pliable for my purpose. The severed end of cord I thrust down out of sight, where it would escape any superficial examination. Anxious as I was to carry out my plans rapidly I could not refrain from passing my hands over the boat, impressed by its lightness and sea-going qualities, and inspired by the thought it might eventually aid in our escape. It hung ready for launching, the falls easily unhooked, and two pair of hands would be sufficient to lower it into the water. There was a locker forward I was unable to reach, but two water kegs, filled, were strapped under the stern sheets, leading me to believe the craft was fully equipped for immediate service. My mind filled with a daring hope by this discovery, I fastened the note to the end of the cord, weighted it with a bunch of keys, and crept back to where I had marked the rail. Inch by inch I payed out the line, leaning well over. At last my ears detected the dangling of the metallic keys against glass, and, by manipulating the rope, managed to make them sound with clear insistence. I repeated the effort several times before there was any response. Then the port seemed to be opened cautiously, although no gleam of light shot forth. She had evidently extinguished her lamp before venturing to answer the signal, but I felt her grasp on the cord. Then it was left dangling against the closed port, leaving me to infer that she was reading the hasty note.

I must have hung there gazing down into the black shadows for two or three minutes, before my line was again hauled taut, but, as I straightened up, prepared to haul up the returning message, I saw the shadow of a man passing across the cabin below. He was already at the foot of the companion stairs; in another minute would be on deck. There was no time to do otherwise, and I released my grasp of the rope, letting it drop silently into the water. I had barely turned my back to the rail when Henley emerged within six feet of me. For an instant his gaze was forward, and then, as his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness, he turned slightly and perceived me, peering at me in uncertainty.

"Who is this? Oh, you, Craig," he questioned sharply. "Not asleep yet?"

"Not even drowsy," I said, pretending an ease I was far from feeling. "The crack on my head

yesterday pains considerable, and besides I wanted to think over your proposition a bit."

"You must have the skull of an elephant, or a negro, to have any head at all," he agreed, apparently satisfied. "But I would advise sleep nevertheless. You think favorably of my plan, I hope."

"I see no reason to refuse, if the pay is all right."

"It will be; trust me for that. A beautiful night this—the air as soft as June. I was about to turn in, but decided to take a whiff on deck first."

"Rather a captain's duty, is it not?"

"I believe so, in regular service, but this is decidedly irregular. The fact is, that while I am the owner of this vessel, and technically in command, I am no navigator. I merely give my general orders, and trust the seamanship to Herman. He is perfectly trustworthy and capable, and I never interfere. The last voyage I doubt if I was on deck twice, although, of course," he added soberly, "my word goes if I should care to exercise authority."

I remained silent, staring out across the water, endeavoring to reconcile his statements, and wondering what message it was I had dropped into the deep.

"What are those lights off yonder?" I asked, at length, pointing.

"Shore lights."

"Then we are steering east?"

"A bit south of east, yes; odd course for Honduras, you think?"

I nodded, willing enough to let him talk.

"We are playing the game safe, Craig; that's all," he explained, both hands gripping the rail. "You see we cleared for Santiago, and are not anxious to be seen and reported by any west-bound ships. We are keeping well to the north of their course now, and tomorrow will be hidden among the islands off the west Florida coast. Then, as soon as it is dark, we will shoot out under full steam, into the Gulf. The chances are we 'll cross the lane unobserved; if we should intercept a liner, she won't identify us in the dark, as we burn no lights. By daylight we 'll be well beyond their look-outs, and can steer a straight course."

Vague as my memory was regarding the Gulf and its surrounding coast line, this explanation seemed reasonable enough, and I remained silent, gazing off across the water. He did not speak again, yet the very proximity of the man irritated me, my dislike and distrust of him so deep rooted that I could scarcely bear his near presence. I wanted to be alone, where I could think out some feasible scheme of escape.

"I have had enough for tonight," I said finally, "and am going to turn in."

"Best thing you can do," he coincided, but without looking toward me. "Will follow suit as soon as I smoke a cigarette. See you tomorrow."

I went down the companion stairs directly to my stateroom, not even glancing aside, feeling confident that he would be watching me from above. I had every reason to believe I had won his confidence, that he counted me as already among those he controlled and commanded, yet he was not a man who would ever rise above suspicion, and his trust would always be limited. Without lighting a lamp I lay down, still partially dressed, on my bunk, my mind busily occupied with desperate plans, none of them satisfactory. We would not be far from land, according to his statement, until late the following night. The small boat hanging astern was fully capable of transporting the two of us safely, and I was sufficiently acquainted with such a craft to feel no doubt of my ability to navigate it if once afloat. But unless Mrs. Henley was also given her freedom on board, I could perceive no means of reaching her. With her stateroom key hidden in the Captain's pocket, any plan I might formulate was useless. Nor was it at all probable she would be released until we were well at sea. Baffled by these conditions I tossed and turned for an hour, hearing Henley return to his cabin, and marking a swifter pulsation of the engines. Finally worn out mentally, as well as physically, I fell asleep.

When I awoke the sun was shining through the glass of my porthole, and glancing forth I caught the dazzle of the water. The vessel was motionless, apparently riding at anchor, the sea barely rippled by a gentle breeze. Refreshed by sleep and more eager than ever to be in action, I dressed hurriedly, and stepped forth into the cabin. The breakfast table was set for one, and the black steward was lolling lazily in a chair. At sight of me he got to his feet.

"Ah suah thought you was n't nebber goin' ter wake up, sah," he said genially, showing his teeth. "Ah bin waitin' fer yer mor'n two hours, Ah reckon."

"For me! Have the others eaten then?"

"Mostly, sah, mostly. De Captain he nebber eat no breakfast; he say et ain't good fer his

libber—yaw; yaw!—but de mates dey both bin down."

"What time is it?"

"Most ten, sah."

"I did sleep, that 's a fact, Louis. However, I 'll try and do full justice to anything you got," and I seated myself at the table. "Has Mrs. Henley breakfasted yet?"

"Who, sah?"

"The lady you have on board."

He scratched the wool on his head vigorously, glancing behind the mast as though uncertain what he had best answer.

"Ah suah nebber know'd dat wus her name, sah; no sah, Ah nebber done suspected it. Yes, sah, she had her breakfast, but, Ah reckon she did n't eat much."

"You served her here at the table?"

The negro, apparently anxious to escape from the topic, shook his head.

"No, sah; in her room, sah," his voice low. "De Captain, he unlock de doah, an' then lock it agin. He say she done gone crazy, but Lor' she don't look dat-a-way to me. You like sugah in your coffee, sah?"

In spite of the seeming geniality of the steward, and his eagerness now to question me, I realized that he was thoroughly dominated by personal fear of the man aft. The less I questioned him the better, probably, as there was a strong possibility that he would be interviewed later relative to our conversation. Henley was only testing me, and would use the darky, if he could, to learn more of my plans. So, although, a number of questions trembled on my lips, I left them unasked, and finished my meal in silence. Louis hovered around, dropping a sly hint now and then, which only served to increase my suspicion that he might have received instructions to draw me out. If so, the experiment was a failure, and, after a light meal, I lit a pipe, and, ignoring him completely, strolled out on deck. There was evidently no hope that the woman would be released at present, and I could formulate no plan of communicating with her, but I was no less anxious to view our surroundings.

I found the after-deck entirely deserted, and there was no one visible on the bridge. Two or three sailors—the anchor watch—were forward, engaged in some service about the capstan, and a fellow was swabbing the deck amidship. I heard Broussard's voice at a distance, but could not locate him. However, no one paid the slightest attention to me, as I stood smoking, and gazing curiously around. Everything appeared peaceful enough. We were lying in a small harbor, within a hundred feet of the shore, completely concealed on the sea side, by a thick forest growth lining the higher ridge, of what appeared a narrow island. The *Sea Gull's* fires were banked, only a thin vapor arising from the stack which instantly disappeared. In the opposite direction there was a wide expanse of water, quiet as a mill-pond in spite of a fresh breeze, revealing in the distance the faint blue blur of a far-off coast line. Nothing broke the vista except the white sails of two sloops, evidently fishing boats, far off on the horizon. It was an ideal spot in which to lie—to quietly hide in during the hours of daylight, probably never approached but by stray fishermen. Ashore everything appeared primitive and uninhabited, except for one of the *Sea Gull's* small boats beached directly opposite, the crew hidden in the brush.

I walked leisurely around the cabin transom, peering into the boat swung astern, so as to better familiarize myself with its equipment, meanwhile keeping a wary eye on the cabin below, where the negro was clearing the table, and then, satisfied I had everything photographed upon the mind, sauntered forward toward the bridge, aiming to exchange greetings with the Creole mate. Broussard was not a man to expect favors from, and I had hated him with the first glimpse of his face, yet he possessed his racial characteristic of impulsive speech, and was thus far more approachable than the gruff German first officer. Perhaps, if he believed me an accomplice, he might be led to talk, and even be induced to let drop some hint which would later prove useful. I met him just forward of the chart-house, and the manner in which he eyed me was immediate proof that he remained uninformed as to my new status on board.

"How you com' on ze deck, M'sieur?" he asked, his eyes threatening. "By Gar, I thought you down below, locked in all tight," and he waved an expressive hand aft.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE NEW PERIL

I laughed, but without paying him the compliment of looking at him.

"I 've changed allegiance, that's all, Broussard. It's money which makes the mare go with all of us, eh? The Captain turned me loose last night."

"You wif us? You go volunter?"

"Well, something like that. I 'm to be drill-master, or general, for those tattered battalions down in the jungles. What do you think of the job?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and then grinned.

"What ze dif!" and he swept his hands about in expressive gesture. "Sea—land, if only one gets the price, M'sieur. But for me I like to go, to move; not lie still an' rot."

"Of course," falling into his mood, "that's in your blood, I reckon, but the Captain said we were only to hide here for a day."

"Maybe day, maybe week. No one knows how long. We wait till the sea is clear. Bah! the man 'fraid of shadow. He give me sheep, an' I show heem."

"You 'd take a chance?"

"Oui, M'sieur. I wait till dark, no more, den I take ze chance. But ze Capitaine, he no sailor, M'sieur; I know heem long while."

"How long?"

"Oh, seek, eight year."

"Then you can tell me if he is really Judge Henley's son?"

"Oui, M'sieur; 'tis sure I can. I hav' been with heem there," his brown hand outstretched landward, "where we got you, hey, many the time; besides, the Judge he been on zis sheep. Of course he was son; why you think not?"

I shook my head, unwilling to discuss the affair with the fellow, yet impressed by his statement.

"I am beginning to believe I do not know very much about it, Broussard," I explained briefly, moving aside to the rail. "I came down South with another story pumped into me, that's all."

"And ze young woman," he persisted, following me closely, "why she come?"

"For the same reason I did."

He laughed, his eyes sparkling.

"More like 'cause she love you, hey! Sacre, she was fine-lookin' girl, but," shrugging his shoulders, "'t is the Capitaine, not ze mate, who may admire."

I turned on the fellow, my blood boiling.

"What do you mean by that! That Henley will dare intrude himself?"

"*Sacre*, an' why not, M'sieur! He is ze Capitaine; nobody tell him not on ze *Sea Gull*. I know him seek, eight year, an' he devil with women. She not ze furst to be on board ze sheep. Zar no use you be mad, M'sieur; he laugh at you."

"Then for once he will laugh at the wrong man, Broussard," I said soberly. Regretting the threat even as I uttered it, I left him and walked aft, aware as I turned of the sneer on his face. Yet even then, although burning with anger, I knew better than to remain. I dare not speak the bitter words on my tongue, feeling certain that whatever I said would be repeated to Henley. I despised Broussard, and would have taken the rat by the throat, but for a wholesome fear of his master. I knew men well enough to understand the character of the *Sea Gull's* Captain. With unlimited power in his hands he was not an antagonist to be despised. He was a cruel, merciless coward, and, in spite of my boast, I realized how helpless I was to oppose his will, here, in the midst of men who would obey his slightest command. Nor did I doubt his purpose; now that he had seemingly won me over to his scheme, he would turn his attention to her, feeling secure from interference. I had permitted him to believe that she was but a chance acquaintance, in whom I felt little interest, and he would consequently anticipate no serious protest from me. Even if I did intervene he possessed the power to render me helpless. And he was Judge Henley's son, or, at least, so these men believed who had been associated with him for years. The situation grew more and more complicated; it was no longer merely her word against his, and yet I could not doubt the truth of any statement she had made to me. There was a mystery here unexplained, involving the dead, and strangely complicating the lives of the living.

I paced the deck undisturbed, struggling vainly to evolve some solution. Broussard stared in

my direction for a moment, but made no effort to follow, and finally disappeared forward. There was nothing on sea or land to distract my attention, and I felt that I would be nearer to her below in the cabin than on deck. The skylight was closed, although even then it gave me a partial view, and, as I gazed through the clouded glass, I perceived a shadow pass. The next instant the negro steward emerged from the companion. Some swift impulse led me to crouch instantly out of sight, until the sound of his feet on the deck convinced me the fellow was going forward. I watched him cautiously; he stopped twice to glance back, but, perceiving nothing, finally vanished into the forecastle. While I in no way connected his actions with myself, yet the disquieting thought as instantly occurred to me that the negro's going forward had left the Captain and Viola Henley alone below. If the steward was acting under orders his being dispatched from the cabin at this hour was for a purpose. Determined to learn what this purpose might be, I crept to the door of the companion, and then down the stairs.

The main cabin was vacant, but the door of number 5 stateroom stood slightly ajar. Assured I should find it empty, my heart already beating furiously, I took a swift glance within. It in no way differed from the room which had been assigned me opposite, and everything was in perfect order. Evidently the girl had departed without a struggle, and with full expectation of an early return. Her small hand-bag lay on the berth unlatched, and a handkerchief, together with a pair of gloves, were upon the chair. That she had not gone on deck was a certainty, while the deserted cabin led me irresistibly to suspect the Captain's quarters. He had dismissed the steward on some excuse, opened her door, and, using some pretense, or authority, had impelled her to accompany him. She had no means of resistance even if she had suspected his purpose, and the probability was the fellow had been plausible enough to achieve his point without violence. This was all clear enough to my mind, but what I could do to help her, to overcome him, was not so evident. I was alone, unarmed, surrounded by men under his command.

Possibly, even now, I was under surveillance. The negro had left the cabin, I knew, but where was Herman? Broussard was in charge of the deck, and hence this would be the first mate's watch below. Impressed with this disconcerting thought, I emerged again into the main cabin. The stateroom doors were all closed, and I had to guess which was the German's. I was sure, however, that Broussard occupied the first on the port side; I had heard him open that door while talking to the steward, and it was highly probable the first mate had the apartment opposite. Judging from the position of the doors these would be larger than the other staterooms, and, if Herman was the real navigator of the boat, he would require good quarters. I listened at the door, but heard nothing; then, rendered desperate by the delay, tried the knob cautiously. The door was unlocked, opening noiselessly. A glance convinced me the room was unoccupied, and I stepped inside, gazing about in surprise. It was nearly twice the size of my own apartment, containing a wide single berth, several comfortable upholstered chairs, and a large desk, on which stood a sextant, besides several charts, one unrolled. To my left, close against the side of the vessel was a narrow door standing ajar, and through the opening I caught sight of a porcelain bath tub.

Instantly my mind leaped to a conclusion—the first mate was not on board; he was ashore with the boat party, and that beast Henley, was entirely alone. He had taken advantage of the opportunity. But what in God's name could I do! If I broke down the door into his cabin, the noise would be heard on deck, and besides, the fellow was armed. The only result of such an effort would be my own imprisonment, leaving her in more helpless stress than before. Without knowing why, I stepped around the desk, and peered into the bathroom. It was small, but perfect in arrangement, and, to my surprise, revealed a second door. In an instant I understood—this was not Herman's private bath, but was also used by the Captain; that second door led to the after-cabin. I was there in two strides, my ear at the crack listening. Nothing reached me but the murmur of a voice, the words indistinguishable, yet this was sufficient to convince me that I was on the right trail. The two were together, and here was an opportunity for me to reach them unobserved. Slowly, using every precaution to avoid noise, I turned the knob, and opened the intervening door a scant inch. I could hear the voice now plainly, but my view was blocked by a heavy curtain. Breathless, I drew a fold aside, and caught a glimpse of the interior.

Neither occupant was facing in my direction, and both were too deeply interested to observe. Besides, the possibility of intrusion was not in their minds. Henley stood beside his desk, the same sneering smile I had learned to hate, curling his lips, his eyes on her face in a gaze that was insult. The girl, evidently retreating before him, alarmed by some word he had uttered, or by his approach, had reached the door, and grasped the knob. The expression on her face told me she had discovered it locked, herself a prisoner, and that she had turned in desperation. Her first, swift, unrestraining speech gave me full understanding of her despair.

"You have trapped me here—you—you brute," she burst forth. "What you said out yonder was all a lie to—to get me to come with you!"

"Well, what of it?" insinuatingly. "All is fair in love and war, I have heard, and this is either the one or the other. Why should n't it be me, my dear, as well as the other?"

"What do you mean? Do you connect me with Gordon Craig?"

"Of course," and he laughed. "Why shouldn't I, please? You came with him from the North, did you not—traveling as his wife? Picked the fellow up on the street, did n't you? My dear, this assumption of outraged virtue is all thrown away on me—I happen to know your history."

She took a deep breath, standing straight before him, her cheeks burning.

"Perhaps you think you do," she said, now in full control of herself. "But you are going to learn your mistake. I am here under unpleasant circumstances, yet, I am not subject to your insult. I refuse to answer you, or remain in your presence," she stepped aside, leaving free passage. "You will unlock that door."

"Hardly that," and I could see his fingers shut down on the top of the desk. "It takes more than a few words to change me. Really, I like you better than I did. You are decidedly pretty now you are angry. Besides, what have I to be afraid of? There is no one but us in this part of the ship; I fixed that up before I went after you; even your friend Craig is mooning around somewhere on deck, dreaming about a fortune. If you cry out, no one will hear you, and if they did, God pity the man who attempted to come in here. I 'm Captain of the *Sea Gull*, and there 's not a rapscallion on board who would risk his skull to help you. Even Craig would n't; Lord, he even told me himself you were nothing to him."

"He—he told you that!"

"He certainly did, in this room. Come, now, what is the use of being such a cat? I 'm not a bad fellow if I am treated half-way decent. I 've got money to spend, and know how to spend it." He took a step forward, but she never moved.

"Don't touch me," she said in a tone that stopped him. "I am a woman, but I can defend myself."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TABLES TURNED

There was that about her attitude, and the expression of her face, which restrained the fellow. No doubt he suspected for a moment that she might be armed, for his quick glance swept her from head to foot. Then his eyes hardened.

"That is the worst thing you can do—threaten me," he said sharply. "I never take that from man or woman. See here, do you realize where you are? how completely you are in my power? Do you?"

She did not quail, or look aside; nor did she answer, standing straight, her eyes on his face, her bosom rising and falling from swift breathing.

"I doubt if you do," he went on, angered by her contempt. "Well, think it over. This is my ship, and we 're at sea. I 'm owner and captain, and my word on board here is the law. More than that, there is n't a man-jack of the crew aft of the main mast. They are forward on my orders, and they 'll stay there until I send for them. You could scream your head off, my beauty, and no one would hear you, or dare interfere. Now do you perceive why it is to your interest to be kind to me?"

"I do not."

He laughed, rendered ugly by her open defiance.

"Then I 'll teach you. You are not the first of your kind I have tamed, young lady. The door is locked, and you have n't any weapon; don't try to fool me!"

"I have told you once," she said earnestly, "not to touch me."

He glanced about sneeringly, yet impressed by her manner of speaking.

"Good Lord! do you mean Craig? A lot that fellow will help you. But we 've had enough of this. Will you come over here to me?"

"No!"

"Then I'll take a chance; damn me, but you're worth it!"

Neither one saw me, yet I was across the room before he had taken the two steps forward, and gripped her arm. I saw her struggle to break free, and then, out of the shadow I leaped at him, both hands seeking his throat. There was to be no alarm, no shooting, if it could be avoided. While it might be true, as he had boasted, that the crew was forward, we could afford to take no chance. The very impetus of my rush sent him staggering, and left her helpless on the deck; yet I got grip on his collar, choking back the first cry, and struck him once, a half-arm jolt, which would have sent him sprawling, but for the cabin wall. Yet he rallied so quickly as to overcome

this advantage. Judging him from his size I had underrated his fighting ability, for he was all muscle, swift in movement as a cat, squirming out of my grasp before I could close firmly. His contact with the wall helped him to keep his feet, yet, quick as his recovery was, he failed to break my grip, and we struggled fiercely for advantage. He recognized me, and understood instantly. He was a wrestler, while I must rely upon sheer strength to overcome his tricks. Even as he adventured first I had him pinned tight, and we strained back and forth across the cabin deck, neither able to throw the other, in grim, relentless struggle. My fingers were wrenched from his throat, yet the fellow made no outcry, realizing doubtless he would not be heard. His eyes blazed with hate, merciless, vindictive, and he struggled like a fiend to break free. I saw the girl, still dazed from her fall, struggling to her feet, with face uplifted, then my every consideration was riveted on my antagonist. This was to be no boy's play, no easy victory; his muscles were like iron, his movements so quick and unexpected as to put me on the defensive. I could only hold tight, braced for the strain, yet forced back in spite of every effort, inch by inch across the floor, my feet tangled in the rug. Neither could strike, nor kick; I was weaponless, and I dare not release his arms for fear he might possess a gun. Once I bent him back until he seemed helpless, yet, by some trick, he wiggled free, and thrust me against the desk, its corner gouging into my side. The pain gave me superhuman strength, and I swung him sideways, the two of us tripping over the chair, and coming down heavily on the deck. By some luck I landed on top, and, before he recovered from the shock, had wrenched one arm free, locking my fingers in his throat.

He squirmed under me like an eel, but could not break the grip, his face purpling, until he lost all power. Fierce as the battle had been I retained sufficient sense to loosen my death grip while the man still breathed, lifting my head sufficiently to glance about. My own breath came in sobs, and the perspiration almost blinded me.

"Bring me something to tie him with," I said brokenly. "Anything; yes, that belt will do."

She tore it from the hook on the wall, and thrust it into my hands. With a single movement I had it buckled securely about his arms, and was free to sit up, and stare about. A cord from the portière curtain draping the bathroom entrance completed his lashings. With wicked eyes he stared up at me, unable to move a muscle.

"By God, Craig!" he snarled, "you'll both wish you 'd killed me before ye 're done with this job."

I made no reply, using the corner of the desk to help me get to my feet.

"Do you hear!" he shouted. "What chance have you got to get away?"

"That is for me to decide," I answered. "But if you open your mouth again I 'll gag you. Now stop it; the first word you utter will mean a handkerchief in your mouth."

I stooped down, and dragged him to one side. As I straightened up again she was facing me, her eyes frankly meeting mine.

"You—you know how I came here?" she asked, as though that was the most important.

"Of course; I overheard most of the conversation."

"How did you find out? how did you get here?"

"Your door was left ajar, and I found my way through the connecting bathroom yonder."

"Then—then, we can escape in the same manner."

"I hardly think that will be necessary. I 'll go through our friend's pockets for his keys." I turned him over, and began the search. "Ah, a revolver; I thought probable—in protection against a woman, you cur. Here are keys; now let's see what they fit."

The third one tried unlocked the door, but even as I tried them in the lock, my mind swiftly reviewed the situation in which this affair left us, and leaped forward toward a possible solution. It must be open war from now on. No pretense on my part would ever again win me the confidence of the man I had fought and conquered. Henceforward, we could expect no mercy on board. Yet how was it possible to escape, or avoid discovery? To attempt leaving the *Sea Gull* before dark would be suicidal; no boat could be lowered unseen, and even if one reached the surface of the water, we would surely be overtaken, and brought back. Yet there was a chance that what had occurred in this cabin could be kept concealed for a few hours, until darkness gave us better opportunity for successful action. The memory of what Henley had said to me the evening before—that he was only technically in command; that for days at a time he never appeared on deck in person, gave me the clew. If he could be kept absolutely secure in his cabin, unable to create any alarm, we would be free to plan our escape. There were but two points of danger to be guarded against—Herman and the steward. The former, when he returned from shore, might seek him for final orders, and the latter, if he failed to appear in the cabin for the regular meal, would endeavor to learn his desires. I would have to guard against these contingencies, and, with the first in mind, I stepped across to the bathroom, and was gratified to learn that the door leading into the mate's stateroom could be locked on the inside. With this private approach barred I felt confident of being able to guard the single entrance remaining. I

met her waiting for me as I stepped out from behind the curtain.

"Well, what can we do?"

"Keep the fellow tied, and wait for night," I answered soberly. "That is our only chance. The mate is ashore—we are lying in the cove of a small island off the Florida coast, waiting for darkness, and a chance to slip through into southern waters."

"Do you know where this boat is bound?"

"Yes—Spanish Honduras; we are loaded with munitions of war," I laughed. "I was to be a general down there."

"You!"

"Yes; swift promotion, was n't it! Our friend yonder promised the job; all I had to do was to desert you, and join his outfit."

"And you consented?"

"With a mental reservation. It gained me a few hours' freedom at least, and surely has done you no harm. Did you doubt me?"

"Oh, I hardly know. I was so miserable locked up alone, unable to even learn where we were going, that I lost faith in everyone. You acted so strange."

"I had to play my part. But you received my note?"

"Yes, and it helped me wonderfully, although even then I scarcely comprehended why all this pretense was necessary. Surely you do not believe this man is Philip Henley? that—that I have told you a lie?"

"No, I do not," I answered earnestly. "It is my absolute confidence in you which has held me steadfast. He has shown me evidence of his identity which would have convinced me under other circumstances—letters and pictures; I will show them to you, for I know where they are kept in the desk—but in opposition I had your word, and I believed in that. No evidence would shake my faith in you, and I am certain now there is fraud here—some devilish plot concocted to steal Judge Henley's fortune."

"What letters? What pictures were they?"

"Letters from the Judge to his son—intimate, family letters, and a photograph of the father and this man taken together."

"And were the letters addressed to Philip?"

"The envelopes had been destroyed, and no name was mentioned, but the photograph was endorsed in the Judge's handwriting."

She sank down on a locker, and hid her face in her hands. The pitiful dejection in her attitude compelled me to bend over her in quick sympathy.

"Please do not take it like that," I urged. "We shall find a way of escape if we keep our courage, and work together."

"Oh, it is not that," and she looked up into my face. "I am not afraid. Only I cannot bear the thought that you doubt me ever so little. I know I have been indiscreet, that you might justly deem me an adventuress. But I am not, Gordon Craig; I am a good woman left to fight alone, and I must have your faith, or break down utterly."

"Why do you suppose you have not?" I asked, grasping her hands in complete forgetfulness. "We are together now in open fight against these villains. There is no longer any purpose in acting a lie."

"It was a lie?"

"A bare-faced one. Never for an instant did I intend deserting you, or becoming that man's tool."

"And you believe me—all I have told you; that I am really the wife of Philip Henley?"

"Yes," I answered through clinched teeth, struggling to control myself.

For a moment she sat in silence, and, while I dare not look at her, I knew her eyes were upon my face.

"Then I will do whatever you say, go wherever you tell me," she promised gravely. "I cannot decide for myself. I am too confused to think clearly, but I trust you as a friend."

"Is—is that all?" I stammered, unable to restrain the words.

"All! What do you mean? is that not enough?" in surprise.

My eyes met hers, and I cursed myself for a fool.

"Yes—I—I meant nothing," I managed to explain lamely. "That was a slip of the tongue. Please forget it, and keep faith in me."

I drew aside the curtain draping one of the after ports, and glanced out, eager for anything to distract attention. Through the clear glass I could see the curve of shore-line forming the little cove. Just within the foam of the breakers a half dozen men were launching a small boat. I stared at them an instant, before realizing what it meant. Then I dropped the curtain.

"The mate is coming aboard," I said swiftly. "You must go to your room; here is the key; lock yourself in, and only open when you hear my voice."

"And you—?"

"I must take care of myself; don't worry about me."

She hesitated, yet the expression of my face decided her, and she held out her hand.

"I—I said I would do whatever you told me to, and here I am questioning the first thing. Forgive me."

Without so much as a glance at our prisoner, she opened the door, and, with a swift look about the outer cabin, disappeared.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CREOLE'S STORY

My time of preparation was brief, yet I already had a plan of operation outlined. In truth, there was small choice left me. I must keep Henley concealed and silent until darkness rendered our escape possible. In order to accomplish this it would be necessary to prevent either the steward or the mate from entering the after cabin. All peril from the negro I dismissed quickly, confident that his knowledge of my standing on board would impel him to accept any explanation I might make. But with Herman the situation was not so clear. Whether, or not, the Captain had informed him that I was a volunteer on their lawless expedition, I did not know. We had not met since coming aboard, and, unless he had received direct orders regarding my status, any interference on my part would be apt to arouse instant suspicion. Nor was he the kind to brook any assumed authority. I had him placed as a gruff, hard-fisted sea-dog, who would strike first, and investigate later—one in dealing with whom either diplomacy or force might prove equal failures. Yet I possessed this advantage—I could deal with him alone. With but two watch officers on board, only one at a time could leave the deck, and Broussard, I felt assured, had no privileges in the Captain's cabin. From what I knew of Henley I doubted if even the first officer felt privileged to invade the privacy of his chief without some special reason. There was discipline on board, strict discipline; there had to be to control such a crew, and it was my impression Henley was the very kind to insist on every privilege of his station. Herman was of value merely for his ability as navigator; socially, the Captain and he had nothing in common. It was on this theory I decided to work.

As I lifted the helpless Captain into his berth, his eyes glaring at me in impotent rage, my ears could distinguish the sound of oars as the small boat rounded the stern of the *Sea Gull*. Much as I despised the fellow, I hated to gag him, yet our safety depended on his silence, and I dare not neglect the precaution. Even as the boat grated along the side, I stepped forth into the main cabin, and sat down to wait. To my surprise and relief, it was Broussard who came down the companion stairs, driving the steward before him.

"Vat for you loaf, hey!" he snapped fiercely. "By Gar, I teach you. I work four—seek—hour an' nodding to eat. You say ze Capitaine send you; bah! eet vas not so—nevaire! Vat you hav'—hey?"

The negro mumbled something through thick lips, and the irate mate gripped him by the collar of his jacket, shaking the fellow as he might a dog, and hurling him half across the deck.

"Sacre! I keel you for five cent. Queek now—jump! Put all on right way, by Gar, or I show you. Here you—ze brandy furst."

The steward slunk into the passage leading to the pantry, and the Creole, turning, saw me.

"Ah, M'sieur; I saw you not. Pardon ze roughness, but consider, no dinare, an' I been on deck seek hour; no sleep, no eat, only work. I lose ze tempair, M'sieur."

"That is not to be wondered at," I answered, affecting good humor. "Has the first mate been ashore?"

"Oui, M'sieur; asleep in the sun, I bet you. Bah! any man could watch the sea from the cliff. Dat job not need ze furst officer. Sacre! but 't is a dog's life at sea."

I nodded my head, too busily engaged with my own thoughts to give much consideration to his troubles. Still, this situation, as revealed by Broussard's complaints, would afford us a respite of at least four hours. If this was the Creole's watch below, then Herman would keep the deck. Even lying there at anchor those fellows would not leave the crew alone. There was too much at stake, and besides there must still remain a look-out ashore. However it was a relief to know that the German had nothing of importance to communicate to Henley, no occasion even to come below. Broussard sank back into a chair, watching the frightened negro hurry back and forth. At last, satisfied that everything available had been produced, the former strode across to the table, jerked out a chair, and waved his hand toward me in invitation to join him.

"The lazy dog! 'T is likely all you will get, M'sieur. Maybe you eat with me—hey? Or would you wait for ze Capitaine?"

"I 'll take pot-lunch with you, Broussard," I agreed genially, speaking loud enough so the negro would overhear. "I 've got to get accustomed to camp fare, and am hungry enough to begin. Besides, Captain Henley is laid up in his berth with a sick headache, and does n't wish to be disturbed. He told me to tell you, Louis."

"Yes, sah! Shall Ah make you sum coffee, sah? Massa Broussard he don't nebber drink none."

"Yes, and, by the way, Louis, take a lunch in to the lady; fix up something neat if you can, and let me know when it is ready. All right, Broussard, a nip of that brandy would help me."

He passed the bottle, and a clean glass across the table, watching me pour out the liquor with a sarcastic smile.

"You know ze Capitaine before, maybe?" he asked.

"No," I answered, wondering what he could be aiming at, but willing to give him a free rein. "Only since he tapped me on the head back in the cellar. However, he has been square with me, and seems to be a pretty good fellow."

"You think so—hey! Maybe so while he get you with heem. Den he ze devil. I know, M'sieur. I see heem for long while on ze ocean; zat whar' you fin' out."

I began eating slowly, exhibiting an indifference I was far from feeling, yet swiftly determining that no matter how much antagonism might exist between the two men, I would never trust the Creole. Still I might use him to advantage; induce him to talk freely under the spur.

"What has he done to you?" I asked carelessly.

"By Gar!—what!" firing up at the recollection. "Get out o' here, yer damn coon!" turning fiercely upon the steward, and then leaning across the table, lowering his voice, which yet trembled with passion. "Sacre, M'sieur, it was I do his dirty work five—seek—year. He no sailor, but I sail ze sheep for him—see? Tree, four time I sail ze sheep, an' he make ze money. Vat he geef me? Maybe one hundred ze month—bah! eet was to laugh. Zen he fin' zat Dutch hog, Herman, an' make of heem ze furst officer. He tell eet all me nice, fine, an' I tink maybe eet all right. You know he promise beeg profit—hey! an' I get ze monies. Oui, it sound good. But Herman big brute; he gif me ze ordaire, and I not like eet. I tells ze Capitaine, an' by Gar! he keep me tied up before ze port watch. You stan' zat, M'sieur?"

I shook my head, uncertain just what stand to take.

"Nevar!" he went on, barely pausing for breath. "I show ze damn half-breed; you vait, I git heem."

"What do you mean by half-breed, Broussard?" I questioned, surprised.

He laughed, but not pleasantly.

"He vas ze mongrel—sure; you know not zat? Sacre, I tell you zen. What you zink him, white man? Pah! you see hees mother—she mulatto. Ze damn dog!"

"How do you know that?"

"How I know! I tell you I sail with heem long while. He nevar tell, but I fin' eet out. I listen, I hear ze talk, but I say noddings, M'sieur. Vat I care while he treat me right? But now I show heem vat I know. He not lord eet over me ven ol' Sallie vas his mother—by Gar! no!"

"Sallie! You cannot mean that mulatto woman back on the plantation?"

"Sure, the ol' rip."

"Then his name is not Henley?"

"Why not, M'sieur? The ol' Judge was his father."

The whole thing came to me in a flash, as I stared across at the mate, who scarcely realized yet the revelation made. He was brooding over his wrongs, and how he was to be avenged.

"Good God!" I breathed, "so that 's the way of it!"

Broussard looked up, a cunning smile on his face. "By Gar, I forget," he said softly. "You vas after ze monies too, hey! Bah! eet make no difference vat you know. He haf you here all right, var' you keep still or—" and he drew the back of a knife across his throat. "I vonder he not keel you furst, M'sieur; maybe he use you, an' then, hav' you shot in ze South. Oui, zat be ze easy vay. Why you ever cum down, an' claim to be Philip Henley—hey?"

"That was all a mistake," I returned deliberately. "I came merely to look after his interest?"

"Interest! Why a dead man hav' interest?"

"Do you mean Philip Henley is dead?"

"You pretend not know? By Gar, eet queer. Vell, I tell you, M'sieur. Ze hole back ov ze picture; I lie there one night an' leesten, week, ten days ago. Ze Capitaine talk with Sallie. He hav' letter from North—one, two sheet paper—an' eet tell heem how eet all vas. Someone write heem—I link maybe Pierre Vonique who went way long time. No matter; vat he told was zat M'sieur Philip die—die queek frum accident. Nevah speak, an' when zey pick heem up, zar was noddin' in hees pocket. See, M'sieur! He vas robbed. Vonique he hear about eet, an' fin' ze body. No one know who ze man is, but Vonique know. To prove eet he send ze ring—ze signet ring—off ze finger. Zen he write, 'Look out, someone has ze papers. Watch who comes.' Zat vas true, M'sieur."

I hung on his words, fascinated, never doubting, the very thought of her freedom obscuring all else. It was only as he stopped speaking, and resumed his meal, that I gained control of my voice. The affair was clear enough now, except for some few corroborative details.

"And someone did come, Broussard?"

"Oui, damn queek—a fellow with a letter from Philip; eet was sign hees name, hees handwrite, appoint heem overseer."

"And what became of him?"

The Creole shrugged his shoulders.

"'T is not my business, M'sieur. He go way somewhere queek. Maybe he not like ze place."

The dead face of the bearded man in the rear room rose before me. But Broussard went on.

"Zen you came, M'sieur, 'long wiz ze girl. Ze Capitaine he laugh, eet was so easy. Why ze girl, M'sieur?"

"Philip Henley was married."

"Non, non, impossible; eet cannot be shown. 'T is not of ze record. Ze Capitaine not 'fraid any more; he just play wiz you like ze cat wiz ze mouse. He know Philip dead; he has ze proof, an' now he breaks ze will, an' gets ze monies. Ze damn dog rich now; zen he be more rich."

"Do you know an executor of the will named Neale—P. B. Neale?"

"Oui, M'sieur."

"Who is he? What does he look like?"

"He vas a planter two mile west Carrollton. I see heem maybe ten days ago—leetle short man wif bald head."

He poured out another drink of brandy, and, downing it, pushed back his chair.

"By Gar, I talk too mooch, maybe," he said, yawning. "But eet make no dif. Ze Capitaine he cop ze monies just ze same, an' eet better you know. Now I turn in an' sleep."

He crossed the cabin to his stateroom, and closed the door.

CHAPTER XXIX

UNDER WAY

The negro brought the girl's lunch on a tray, and I took it in to her, barely pausing long enough to speak a few encouraging words, for fear of some interruption. Then I sat down and watched while the remnants of our meal were being removed. Except for an occasional footstep on the deck above, and the swift movements of the steward, nothing interrupted my thoughts. After Louis had carried the last dishes into his pantry, and run the table up on its stanchions, he also disappeared, and in the silence I could hear the heavy breathing of the sleeping mate. For the first time I comprehended clearly the entire situation, and I could face it with understanding. Broussard's anger had served me well, and it never occurred to me to doubt this story, told under the inspiration of liquor. It dovetailed in with all I previously knew.

The facts were clear. Philip Henley was dead, killed while intoxicated, either accidentally, or for purposes of robbery. And he had been robbed when picked up by the police, nothing to identify him being found. Beyond doubt this half-breed brother had dispatched a man North to look him up—possibly to assassinate him if necessary. The fellow had either done the job, or been anticipated in his purpose. In either case he was present to identify the body, and had written at once, enclosing the signet ring as proof. That was the same ring we had round in the arbor, and which Viola had instantly recognized. And those men who had made a tool of me were the robbers. They had found papers and letters which opened before them this scheme of fraud; then, with his residence address, using his keys, they had learned everything necessary for the completion of their plans. A copy of the Judge's will must have been in Henley's possession, and, no doubt, some lawyer's letter, describing the situation, received since the departure of his wife. Apparently everything two clever crooks needed to know was in their possession. All they needed to do was pull the strings, using a figurehead to represent Philip Henley. That was the part for which I was chosen. They had to construct a lie in order to interest me, yet that was comparatively easy, and there was a strong probability of success but for peculiar conditions of which they could know nothing. The half-breed had never been mentioned; he was the monkey wrench thrown unexpectedly into their well-oiled machine. Yet, even without him, the reappearance of Philip Henley's wife was sufficient to cause disaster.

Philip Henley's wife! The magic of the words halted me. Then now, if all I had learned was true, she was his widow. What would that mean to me! The swift beating of my heart answered. As I sat there alone, in the silence I forgot everything save her, and my mind dwelt upon every word and look which had passed between us. These had been innocent enough, and yet, to my imagination, stimulated by this discovery, formed the basis of a dream of hope. I knew this, that however sincerely she might have once supposed she loved Henley, his neglect, cruelty, dissipation, had long ago driven all sentiment from her. Before we met, her girlhood affection had been utterly crushed and destroyed. Loyal, she was, and true to every tradition of her womanhood. No audacity, no boldness, could penetrate her reserve, or lower her self-respect. Before I knew who she was, when I had every reason to doubt and to question, I was still restrained by an invisible personality which kept me helpless. It was to guard his interest, not her own, that she had accompanied me on this expedition, risking her good name in the belief that he was unable to care for his own. What would she do now? how would she feel toward me? What change would it make in the friendly relationship between us? I longed to tell her, and yet shrunk from the task. She could not fail to know how much I cared; careful as I had been in word and action, yet a dozen times had my eyes revealed the secret. I had seen her draw back from me, half afraid, had her restrain me by a gesture, or a word. This could be done no longer—we were free now, I to speak, she to listen, but I could only guess the result. Back behind the rare depth of those eyes her heart was hidden, and thus far I had probed for its secret in vain.

The sunlight streaming in through the upper transom told me the sun was dipping into the west. If we were to get away when night came there were many things to consider first; especially was I obsessed now with a desire to overhaul the Captain's papers, and secure those which would be of benefit. We must possess more proof than the garrulous talk of the second mate, and surely that proof would be discovered in the after cabin. The noise of the steward's dish-washing had ceased, and cautious investigation discovered him sound asleep, curled up like a dog, on the deck. Assured as to this, I ventured up the companion stairs, and indulged in a glance forward. Except for a group of sailors doing some sail patching in the shade of the charthouse, no one was visible. The vessel rocked gently, and far forward there was a sound of hammering. The mate would be there, overseeing the job whatever it might be. There was a dark cloud overshadowing the eastern horizon, with zigzag flashes of lightning showing along its edge, but the sea was barely rippled. There was no sign of any boat along the beach of the cove, and the fishermen had disappeared, not a glimmer of white sail showing above the waters. Surely no better opportunity than this could be given.

I stole back, silent and unobserved, listened an instant to Broussard's steady breathing, then unlocked the Captain's door, and entered his cabin. His wicked eyes, blazing with hate, glared at me as I approached, and, inspired by some sudden feeling of sympathy, I bent over, and removed

the gag from his mouth. The result was an outburst of profanity, bristling with threats, but these as instantly ceased as I picked up the cloth again.

"It's just as you please," I said soberly. "Either lie quiet, or have this back—it's up to you."

"Do you mean to kill me?"

"Not unless I have to, but I hold some things more valuable than your life. Just at present I mean to look over your papers."

He must have realized I was beyond playing with, and impervious to threats, for he lay quiet, but with glaring eyes following my every movement, as I threw open the drawers of the desk, and began handling their contents. For some time I discovered nothing of special interest, only an accumulation of business letters, manifests and old sea charts, showing that the *Sea Gull* had been concerned in a vast variety of enterprises. It was only after I had thus emptied the unfastened drawers that I came upon one securely locked. I tried key after key before discovering the right one, realizing from Henley's squirming that I must be drawing near the goal. The first paper touched was a copy of the will, and a little further rummaging put me into possession of various documents which, I believed from a cursory glance at their contents, were of utmost value. These I hastily transferred to my coat pocket, making sure I had the original letter descriptive of Philip Henley's death, as well as the copy of a memorandum which the half-breed had evidently drawn up for the convenience of his lawyers. I ran through this last swiftly, surprised at its frankness, and convinced that the attorneys employed must be as great rascals as the man who commanded their services. Evidently they had requested full particulars so as to be prepared for any emergency.

I presume this search, swift as I endeavored to conduct it, occupied fully a half hour, every nerve strained by fear of interruption. However, I could not desist until I had handled every scrap of paper, and the result well repaid the risk. Once I heard steps above on the deck, but, so far as I knew, no one entered the outer cabin.

"I think I've got your number," I said finally, wheeling about to look at him.

"You 've got to get away first," he sneered defiantly, "and you 'll not find that so easy. My turn will come yet, you spy, and then you 'll learn how I bite."

I laughed, feeling no mercy.

"All in good time, friend; I think you have had your innings; now it's mine. So you are Charles Henley?"

He did not answer.

"The illegitimate son of Judge Henley and a negro mother. That's a clever forgery, that paper of legal adoption, I admit. Must have had legal advice for that. What did you pay the lawyers?"

He stared at me with compressed lips.

"Not ready to confess yet? Well, you will be. By the way, who was that Pierre who wrote telling you of Philip's death? Not Vonique, was it?"

"You damn white devil!" he burst forth, tortured beyond resistance. "What do you know about him? Who told you?"

"You 'll learn it all soon enough."

"You 're a sneaking detective!"

"Oh, no, Henley; I 'm merely a man who drifted into this adventure blindly, but now I am going to fight it out for sake of the woman. It's a pity for you that you did n't tap me on the head a bit harder back in the cellar."

His teeth ground together savagely, and he burst into a string of oaths.

"That's enough," and I got to my feet. "I see I 'll have to gag you again."

"Where 's the steward?"

"Asleep in the pantry when I came in here."

"And Herman—has n't he got on board yet?"

"Oh, yes; two hours, or more, ago. He has the deck watch, while the Creole is below. Anything else you desire explained?"

"You think you 're smart, but you 'll sing a different song before I 'm through," he snarled. "I 'm hungry, and I want to know why that Dutchman did n't come down here and report."

"You 'll have to stand the hunger for awhile. As to Herman, I suppose he had nothing to tell.

Well, I 've wasted time enough."

I replaced the gag, and took a survey of the cabin to make sure all was secure. Uncomfortable as the man was, he was not in the slightest danger, and I felt little tenderness. He would not remain long undiscovered after we got away, and our only possible safety required harsh methods. Nothing had occurred in the outer cabin during my absence, but the growing shadows evidenced the approach of twilight. In those waters night came quickly. Locking the Captain's door, I entered my own stateroom, and sat down on the lower berth to wait, leaving my door slightly ajar. The cabin grew constantly darker, although outside, through the open port, I could still distinguish gleams of light along the water surface, and the heights of the island. Herman came down, and entered his stateroom, but without closing the door. He remained but a moment, or two, and then hurried back on deck. Suddenly a gust of wind blew in through the port, and it began to rain gently, but in huge drops. Far away was the rumble of thunder, echoing across the open sea. The storm was evidently coming up slowly from the east, as all the western sky was clear, and streaked with golden red.

Then a sailor—I thought he was Peters, but could not tell—came shuffling down the companion stairs, his oilskins rustling, and pounded on the second mate's door.

"All hands, Mr. Broussard!"

There was a muffled response, and the Creole, buttoning his jacket as he passed, followed the other on deck. A moment later I heard the slow throb of the engines, and glanced out to note the shore-line slipping past into the gloom. The *Sea Gull* was under way.

CHAPTER XXX

WE MAKE THE EFFORT

It would be some time yet—fifteen or twenty minutes at the best—before I dared attempt to carry out my plan of escape. In spite of the overspreading cloud, and steady rainfall, daylight lingered in the west, and a spectral glow hung above the ocean. It was a peculiar, almost ghastly light, yet of sufficient intensity to render objects visible for a considerable distance. However, there were preliminaries to be attended to, and I was eager to be busy.

The steward had aroused from his nap, and I watched him lower the table, and spread it with a white cloth. Now the distant clatter of dishes proved him to be in the pantry. He could be dealt with there even to better advantage than in the cabin, and, noncombatant as he undoubtedly was, I felt it safer to place him beyond power to create any alarm. The task confronting me was far too serious to leave our rear unguarded. I slipped silently along the short passageway, and, watching his back closely, investigated the lock on the pantry door. It was of the spring variety, easily set to fasten, and could not be operated from the inside. As I pressed in the catch there was a clicking sound, which caused the negro to turn around, the whites of his eyes gleaming oddly.

"Oh, my Lordy! I nebber heard you, Massa Craig. By golly, sah, dis yere niggah sure thought he was shot."

"Not yet, Louis," I replied quietly, standing in the opening, one hand still on the latch. "But it is just as well for you to be serious about it—I 've got the weapon all right—see," and I pushed the revolver butt forward into his range of vision. "I don't mean to hurt you so long as you keep still."

"What—what you a-goin' fer to do, sah?"

"Get away from this ship if I can, and you are going to help by remaining right where you are, boy. First, what's in that small boat, hung to davits astern—provisions, I mean?"

His teeth chattered so he could hardly answer, but finally words came through his lips.

"Thar 's a breaker of fresh water, an'—an' a package o' sea-biscuit, sah. Ah—Ah reckon that's all."

"Good; do you happen to know how far we are away from the main coast?"

"A a-bout thirty-five mile, sah."

"Florida?"

"Yes, sah."

"What is the nearest town?"

"Ah—Ah reckon it would likely be Carlos, sah, but it don't 'mount ter much."

"Can you tell me the compass point?"

He scratched his head, his confidence that he was not going to be hurt returning, as I questioned him.

"Wal', sah, I ain't no sailor man myself—no, sah; but de second mate he done point it out dis mohnin' when Ah was on deck, an' he say it lay nor'east by east, sah. Ah members dat distinctly."

"That will be all, Louis. Now listen to me. I am going to shut this door, and lock you in. I 'll be on board here for an hour yet, and if you utter so much as a whimper I 'll come down here, and fill you full of lead. Are you going to keep still?"

"Ah—Ah sure am, sah; my Lordy! Ah don't want fer to be no dead niggah."

"Well, you will be if I hear a peep out of you."

I closed the door, testing it before turning away, smiling grimly to myself at recollection of those white eyeballs glaring at me through the gloom. Louis was evidently not the stuff of which martyrs are made.

There was a small tell-tale compass fastened to a beam over the table. I unscrewed this without difficulty, and dropped it into my pocket. It would be a dark night with that cloud shutting out the sky, with probably not a shore light visible. Then I climbed the companion stairs to take a survey of the deck. As the cabin lights had none of them been lit, I could stand in the shadow of the hood without fear of being seen, and my eyes, accustomed to the slow approach of darkness, could see fairly well. No attempt had been made to spread sail, although doubtless a closely reefed jib helped to steady the vessel, which was advancing steadily under medium engine power. Quietness, and secrecy was clearly the aim sought, for the stacks discharged only a faint haze of smoke, instantly disappearing into the cloud mass above, while the sound of the revolving screws was scarcely discernible. Nevertheless we were slipping through the water at fair rate of speed, leaving a very perceptible wake astern. Judging from our present progress the *Sea Gull* would prove herself a clipper once under full steam. The open decks glistened with water, although the rainfall was light and intermittent; thunder rumbled to the northward, with occasional flashes of lightning. Even as I stood there, staring forward, endeavoring to make out certain objects in the gloom, the overhanging cloud seemed to close in across the western sky, instantly plunging us into night. Like a spectral ship we swept through the slight smother, gently lifted by the long swell, without a light burning fore or aft. I heard no movement of men, no voice shouting orders, yet before that last gleam faded, I had seen outlined several figures on the bridge. To better assure myself that no watch was upon the after deck, I circled the cabin, and then, crouching in the shadow of the rail, advanced even with the chart-house. From this point I could distinguish voices in conversation, but the forms of the men could not be discerned. Still, without accurately locating them, I had ascertained all I required to know, and made my way back along the slippery deck. All hands were on duty forward, and would be held there for a time, at least, while the *Sea Gull* was slipping through the danger zone. But supper had not been served, and one of the watches might be piped down at any moment. This would bring one of the mates aft to the cabin.

Driven by the thought, I rapped softly on her door, and she came forth instantly, fully dressed.

"You are ready?"

"Yes."

"You 'll need a waterproof of some kind—it's raining outside. Wait a moment; there will be a coat in some of these staterooms."

I found one, a fisherman's slicker, and wrapped her in it. It was a world too big, but I tightened the belt, and turned up the skirts, so she managed to walk. It would serve to keep her dry, although worn under indignant protest.

"Oh, I can't," she proclaimed. "Why, I must be a perfect fright."

"Not to me; besides, it's dark as Erebus. Here, let me take your hand; I know every step of the way."

I led her forward slowly, so that the flapping of the oilskins against the stair-rail would not be heard. The steady patter of rain on the deck planks drowned what little noise we made, and as we emerged into the hood a gust of wind drove the moisture into our faces. I could feel my heart thump, yet it was more because of her proximity than any excitement of adventure. So far as I could perceive, peering out into the storm with hand shading my eyes, the way was clear, and, bidding her stoop low, we slipped back along the narrow deck passage into the shadow cast by the boat. Here, protected as we were by the bulge of the cabin, there was slight probability of our being observed, and I stood up, again examining the tackle to reassure myself of its proper working. I even tested the boat's weight in sudden fear lest I could not hold it alone. Then I

whispered to the shapeless form crouched beside me.

"Now," I said, "step on my knee, and I 'll help you over. Don't hurry—only be quiet."

"How can I with this ridiculous thing on?"

"You must try. That's it; now just let me lift you—steady yourself with the tackle."

She peered back at me over the side of the boat, her hair shining with moisture.

"Now are you coming?"

"No; I shall have to remain here and lower the boat."

"But I don't know what to do."

"Listen, and I 'll tell you. Turn about and face the stern. Yes, that is the way I mean; keep your hand on that rope so as not to make a mistake. Now take this knife; don't drop it. The moment the boat touches the water—an instant before, if possible—cut the rope you have hold on. Then hurry forward and cut the other. You understand?"

"I—I think so; I am to cut this first and then the other."

"Yes; now don't fail. You see we are launching this boat above the screw. There is bound to be suction. If you cut as I say, you will drift off bow on to the course of the vessel, and will float free; otherwise the boat is likely to be swamped. You see what I mean?"

She nodded.

"The quicker you can get to that second rope," I added seriously, "the better your chances."

"Then I 'll get out of these oilskins," and she struggled out of them, with every semblance of relief, tucking the bundle out of sight. "I don't care if I get wet. But—but, what are you going to do?"

"Jump for it, as soon as you are fairly afloat. I 'll be aboard before you know it. Are you ready?"

She was looking forward, and her hand gripped mine. Her failure to answer, and the sudden pressure of fingers, was a warning of danger. I glanced back across my shoulder. In front of the cabin stood a man staring aft. His huge bulk, even in that darkness, told me it was Herman.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE OPEN BOAT

Following the first impulse of this alarming discovery I pressed her back into the boat, and crouched low myself behind the protection of the flag locker. The fellow might not have seen us. How still it was; only the swish of water astern, and the continuous patter of rain. The pounding of my heart was like that of a trip hammer, as I listened intently for any movement. For a long moment of suspense there was none; then I heard his heavy step on the deck, as he came slowly forward around the bulge of the cabin. The very manner of his advance told me his uncertainty; something had occurred to arouse suspicion—he had heard a noise, or seen a shadow—and was investigating curiously. He came up to the stern rail, standing still, a huge bulk in the gloom, his gaze on the swinging boat. Then, unsatisfied, he leaned forward, and began to explore with one hand. Apparently he touched something strange; the edge of her skirt it must have been, for there was a bit of cloth in the lifted fingers. Noiselessly I arose to my feet, planting myself firmly on the wet deck. There was but one means of escape now, and big as the fellow was, I must accept the chance. Another minute would mean discovery, and his bull voice would roar the length of the ship. He neither saw, nor heard me, his whole attention concentrated on the boat. Without warning, putting every ounce of strength into the blow, I struck, landing square on the chin. There was a smothered groan, and he collapsed, hurled back bodily, his arms flung up. I heard him thud against the rail, his great form bending to the shock, and then he went over, whirling through the air.

The result was so sudden, so unexpected, as to be all accomplished before I realized its possibility. I saw him go down, blindly clawing with his hands at the open air, and yet it was more a delirium than a reality. There was no splash, no cry, and I leaned over the rail, rubbing my bruised knuckles, and staring down into the black void where the fellow had disappeared, scarcely believing the truth of what I had actually witnessed.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice barely audible. "What has happened?"

Her voice seemed to recall me instantly, to restore my numbed faculties.

"Why, really I hardly know," I answered, yet stepping back to grip the ropes. "The fellow had hold of your dress, did n't he?"

"Yes, oh! I was so frightened, and—and then he jerked me horribly."

"That was when I hit him. I must have got the big brute just right. He fell back as if he had been pole-axed, crashed into the rail, and went overboard."

She looked down into the swirl beneath, clutching the edge of the boat with her hands.

"Is—is he down there—in the water? Do you—you suppose he is drowned?"

"I don't see what else he could be. I did n't mean to kill him; just to knock him out, but I don't believe he had any swim left by the time he hit the water."

"I—I cannot bear to think of it!"

"Now see here," I said, coming back to my senses. "This is all foolishness, and losing us time. I 'm not sorry he is out of the way; it was either his life or ours. He was a big, lawless brute, a murderer at heart, if he was n't in deed. Now there is all the more reason for us to hurry. Have you got the knife?"

"Yes."

"Then get hold of that stern rope; I am going to lower away."

She obeyed me, but it was mechanical, her eyes still fixed upon the water.

"Be quick now," I said sternly, and my hand pressed her shoulder. "Your life depends on your promptness."

I loosened the ropes, permitting them to run slowly through the blocks. There was no creaking, and I rejoiced at the ease with which I sustained the weight, as the boat descended. Slowly it sank below into the darkness, until it was merely a black, shapeless shadow outlined against the water. I felt the strain on my arms as the swell gripped its keel; then the stern swung free, and I knew she was scrambling forward, knife in hand, for the other rope. Almost before the boat could swing about, the second stay dangled, and all my straining eyes could perceive was a dark, indefinite shadow drifting out of sight astern. Without uttering a sound, or wasting a second, I dived from the rail. I came up to the surface, swishing the water from my eyes. Five fathoms away was the shapeless outline of the boat, tossing helplessly on the swell, the girl still in the bow, her very attitude bespeaking terror.

"It's all right," I called, loud enough for her to hear. "Throw out an oar on the left, and hold her. I 'll be there in a minute."

She heard me and understood, for with one sob of relief plainly audible in the still night, she shipped the oar. Weighted by sodden clothes even that short distance tested me, yet her efforts, small as they were, halted the boat's drift, and I made it, almost breathless, when I finally gripped the gunwale, and hung on to regain a measure of strength.

"Oh, thank God!" she exclaimed, staring at me, "I—I thought you were lost."

"My clothes are like lead," I panted. "They dragged me down twice. That's over with now."

"But—but what could I have done if you had not come!"

"Don't think of it; the danger is all over. You need n't pull on the oar; just hold it straight out; that will keep the boat's head forward."

"Can you get over the side?"

"In a moment—-yes; as soon as I get my breath back. Did you notice any alarm on board the *Sea Gull*?"

She shaded her eyes with one hand, holding the heavy oar against her body, and looked ahead.

"No; I was not thinking about that—only of your danger, and my awful position. I was never so frightened before."

"Can you still see the vessel?"

"Just a shadow against the sky. I—I think she is moving straight ahead."

"Then we have not been missed, nor the mate. Doubtless he was going below for his supper.

Now lean well over to port—yes, the left—and balance the boat; I am going to climb in."

With a struggle, I made it, rolling over the low gunwale, the water draining from me into a pool at the bottom, the slight chill of the night air making me shiver. It was not raining now, although there was a vapory mist in the atmosphere, almost a drizzle. I sat up, and touched her hand where it grasped the oar.

"You are a fine brave girl," I said sincerely, unable to restrain my admiration.

She dropped her head, and began to sob.

"Oh, no, no! I am not," she replied, tremblingly. "I am such a coward. You cannot know the terror I have felt."

"That is the test of courage; you faced peril realizing all you risked. Not one in a thousand would have done as well."

"You—you really think so?" and she glanced toward me, "or are you merely seeking to encourage me? But you are soaking wet, and must be cold."

"A little damp—yes," and I laughed, stretching my limbs, "but there is plenty to do now to keep me warm. Where is the *Sea Gull*? I hardly know in which direction to look."

She pointed over the port bow, and, with an effort, I managed to make out, through the misty gloom, a faint shadow against the sky. Not a light was visible, nor could I decipher any real outline of the vessel. Even as I stared in uncertainty this dim spectral shade vanished, swallowed up in the night.

"Why," she said, "it is gone now; I cannot see it at all any more."

"The best luck that could happen to us. Now we will widen the stretch of water as much as possible." I leaned over, and clawed about until I found the discarded oilskins, and wrapped them about her, despite protests.

"No, not another word, young lady. I shall have to work and cannot be bothered with such things, while you must sit there and hold that oar until we have some sail spread. This mist is as bad as rain; your jacket is soaked already. Have n't you learned yet to obey your captain's orders?"

"I was never very good at that."

"Obeying, you mean? Well, you have no choice now. Hold steady while I step the mast."

Fortunately the spar was not a heavy one. Except for the roll of the boat I could have handled it alone, but fearful of capsizing, I lashed the oar into position, and she helped me steady it down until it rested solidly in the socket. Our eyes met.

"You are not so frightened now."

"Not when I am busy; it—it was being left alone, and—and thought of that drowned man."

"Of course, but my being here makes a difference?"

"Always," she confessed frankly. "Somehow I can never be afraid with you. But—but what shall we do now?"

"I hardly know what to put you at—oh, yes, here is a tin, and you can bail out this water sloshing about in the bottom. That will be valuable service."

"What will you do?"

"Rig up the sail the best I can in the dark; there is breeze enough to give us some headway, and ship the rudder."

"Do you know which direction to steer?"

"Not now, but I have a compass in my pocket; a northeast course would be sure to bring us to the coast, and towns are scattered along. I found that out from Broussard yesterday."

She made no response, bending over with the tin dipper, and I went at my task, straightening out ropes so they would work easily through the blocks. In spite of the darkness I was not greatly hampered, as everything had been stored away in shipshape manner, and came conveniently to hand. The wind freshened perceptibly while I was thus engaged, veering into the southeast, so that all the cloth I dare spread was the jib and a closely reefed mainsail. The boat acted a bit cranky, but, confident she would stand up under this canvas, I crawled back to the tiller, eased off the sheet a trifle more, and waited results. We shipped a bucket full of water, and then settled into a good pace, a cream of surge along our port gunwale, and a white wake astern. The woman kept on bailing steadily, until the planks were dry, and then crept cautiously back to the thwart

just in front of me, leaning over slightly to keep clear of the occasional flap of the sail.

I hoped she would speak, and thus afford me some excuse for telling what I had discovered on board the *Sea Gull*, but she sat there in silence, staring straight ahead into the ceaseless drizzle, her oilskins gathered tightly. Holding the tiller under my arm I unscrewed the face of the compass, and made a guess at our position. However, there was no star, or other mark of guidance, by which I could steer; only the wind, which apparently shifted in gusts, and I could merely hold the leaping craft in the course I deemed safest. I doubt if the eye penetrated twenty feet beyond the boat's rail, but we raced through the smother in a way that gave me a certain thrill of exultation. At least we were clear of the *Sea Gull*, and safe enough, unless a storm arose. With the return of daylight a course could be set for the coast, which would n't be far away. So I stared into the darkness, and waited, scarcely bold enough to break the silence.

CHAPTER XXXII

A TALK IN THE NIGHT

I wondered what awaited us ahead in that black mystery of waters; had they discovered yet our absence on board the *Sea Gull*? If so, what would Henley do? Knowing that I had rifled his desk, his one thought upon release would naturally be the recovery of the papers. Besides, smarting from his bonds, and thirsting for revenge, he would never permit the vessel to depart from these waters without an effort to overtake us. Private vengeance would outweigh all other considerations. God pity us if we ever fell into his clutches again. And there would be no doubt as to the manner of our escape—the trail left was a plain one. I could imagine the scene on board when the discovery of our escape was first made—the search for the missing mate, the discovery of the loss of the boat, the dangling ropes proving how it had been lowered. Then would follow an excited investigation below, revealing the steward locked into his pantry, and the raging captain tied and gagged in his berth. I could not forbear laughing to myself at the picture, and yet never was insensible to the danger still confronting us.

There was in my mind, now I had leisure to consider, no doubt as to what those on board that vessel would do. They would realize we were somewhat astern, and, in the hope of sighting us at daylight, would cruise back and forth in those immediate waters. Any moment the *Sea Gull's* sharp prow might loom up out of the black wall. As she carried no lights there would be no warning. It occurred to me that they would be more apt to take a course well in toward shore, anticipating I would endeavor to reach the protection of the coast under cover of darkness. Someone would discover the loss of the tell-tale compass, which would naturally confirm that suspicion. Convinced of this I steered more to the eastward, feeling of the face of the compass again to assure myself of the direction. I found even this small change an advantage in more ways than one, as the boat moved steadier, and I was able to spread a larger amount of canvas. Lashing the tiller, I crept forward and shook out an additional reef, hauling the ropes taut. By this time the wind had steadied into a brisk breeze, and the rain had ceased. Crawling back across the thwarts, I took the jumping tiller again into my hands, and held her nose to it, seeking every advantage. I had brought back with me a tin of biscuit from the bow locker, more as an excuse for opening conversation than from any feeling of hunger.

"It must be pretty close to midnight," I said finally. "Are you hungry?"

The shapeless form in the oilskins straightened slightly, and I knew she had turned her face toward me.

"Hungry! Oh, no; I had not thought of that."

"You have been crying?"

"Yes; it is so foolish, but I am so frightened out here in this little boat. The darkness, and that awful water has got upon my nerves. You—you must n't scold me."

"Of course not—I feel the weight myself," I replied kindly. "This experience is almost as new to me as to yourself. You must remember I am no sailor."

"Yet you understand boats; you know the sea."

"Only a little about small boats; I picked that up in the Philippines; but I have never had to rely entirely upon myself before."

"But you are not afraid?"

I laughed softly, hoping to reassure her.

"Not of those things which most affect you, at least. I can handle the boat all right in this sea

and wind, while the darkness possesses no special terror."

"Nor the memory of that dead man float—floating somewhere yonder?"

"I have hardly thought about him. I have seen so many dead men in the past three years I have become hardened possibly. You must n't let your mind dwell on that grewsome incident. It was unavoidable, our only means of escape. His death was an accident."

"What is it then you are afraid of?"

I told her, dwelling upon our situation so far as I could understand it, and describing the change in my plans. She listened quietly, asking a question now and then, sitting erect, the oilskins thrown aside, and one hand grasping the boat's rail.

"What papers did you find in the desk?"

"Letters mostly, establishing the identity of the Captain."

"Who is he—really?"

"Charles Henley—Philip Henley's half brother by a negro mother. Did you ever hear of him?"

"No; I was never told there was such a man."

"I doubt if anyone, outside those immediately interested, ever knew the circumstances. Of course the family kept it a close secret. This is where the man had all the advantage. As soon as the Judge died he determined to represent himself as Philip, and claim the property.

"As Philip had been absent so long, no one could dispute successfully his claim to be that individual. He possessed ample evidence that he was the son of Judge Henley."

"But surely he would anticipate that my hus—Philip—would hear of his father's death?"

"He took the chance of getting the property into his hands first. As I understand the matter he possessed no knowledge that the Judge was in communication with Philip. He believed the latter had disappeared utterly, and would only learn of his inheritance through accident. To prevent this he dispatched a man North to discover him, if possible, and keep him under surveillance. He thought he had every avenue guarded."

"And—and you said his mother was a negress?"

"Yes—old Sallie."

"What! That awful creature!"

"Probably she was not that in her younger days."

"I cannot imagine such a thing. How did you learn this?"

"From Broussard first. They have been together for years, but I happened to discover the fellow when he was angry over a punishment. He talked more freely than he intended to do, and later I verified all he said by the letters found."

"Then, strange as it sounds, it is true?"

"Without doubt. Moreover," and I lowered my voice in sudden embarrassment, "within the last two weeks the Captain had received news from his agent in the North, which gave him fresh confidence. From his standpoint he no longer had any cause for fear from the chief source."

"What—what do you mean?"

"You will believe me? You will not think I manufacture this?"

"Certainly not:—but—but I do not understand."

"Well, the man reported that he had found trace of Philip Henley; he told of the life the man was leading, and where he lived. I think all this must have been immediately after your separation, as he mentioned no wife. However, he described something even more important."

"You must tell me," she burst forth, as I hesitated. "Don't be afraid to trust me with all you know."

"I am not afraid," I returned stoutly enough, "not in the sense you mean, at least, yet it is never easy to be the bearer of evil news."

"It is evil?"

"Misfortune, certainly. The man reported the death of your husband."

"His death! You are sure?"

I could hear her quick breathing, as she leaned forward, all attention riveted on me.

"Yes."

"You saw the report?"

"I have it with me; as soon as it becomes daylight you can read it yourself."

"Yes, but tell me now what he said; how it happened."

"The report was specific, and would seem to be true. He says that Philip Henley, while intoxicated, was struck and killed by an automobile. The date given was after you left him. His body was found by the police but his pockets had been rifled, and there were no marks of identification on his clothes. He was buried unknown, but the informant claimed to have visited the morgue, viewed the body, and states positively the dead man was Philip."

"And—and you think—tell me what you believe, Gordon Craig."

"There is but one conclusion to my mind. I have no doubt as to the entire truth of the story. The silence and disappearance of your husband is evidence that he is either dead, or, in some other way, helpless. The former explanation is the most probable, and, coupled with this fellow's statement, seems unquestionable. There would be no apparent reason why he should lie."

"No; there is none. I—I—really, I have thought this all the time; but about those others?"

"Vail and Neale, you mean? It seems to me they fit in exactly with the story. Everything had been removed from Philip's pockets, and all ordinary means of identification destroyed. There must have been a purpose in this, and it must have been done by a second party, as there is no suggestion of suicide. My theory is this—the body was either found by others before the police arrived, or else the automobile party which killed him paused long enough to ascertain the extent of his injuries. In either case his pockets were searched, and all contents removed. Do you comprehend what that would mean?"

"I—I think so; but tell me yourself."

"He certainly had papers with him dealing with his inheritance. To a shrewd, criminal mind they would be suggestive. He also, undoubtedly, had keys to his apartments. With these in their possession it would be comparatively easy for unscrupulous persons to ascertain the entire nature of the case, and secure all necessary documents. Then there would be nothing more needed except a man capable of passing himself off as Philip Henley."

"And Vail was not a lawyer," she asked breathlessly, "nor Neale one of the executors?"

"In my judgment the fellows merely took those names to impose upon me, to help bolster up their story, and make it appear probable. They were simply two crooks, willing to take a chance for a pot of money. I happened to be the one selected to pull their chestnuts out of the fire."

I saw her head sink into the support of her hands, and knew she was sobbing silently.

CHAPTER XXXIII

WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER

"You think my conclusions must be correct?" I could not refrain from asking.

"Yes; even without seeing the letter, but," and she glanced up quickly, "the ring—Philip's ring—we found?"

"I forgot to mention that. Its presence here alone is convincing. It was sent to Charles Henley by his agent, who claimed to have removed it from the finger of the dead man."

"Then every doubt is removed; the one killed was my hus—husband."

There was a long, painful silence, during which I stared out into the dark, mechanically guiding the boat, although every thought centered on her motionless figure. What should I say? how was I to approach her now? Before there had always been a frank spirit of comradeship between us; no reserve, no hesitancy in the exchange of confidences. But with this assurance of Philip Henley's death, everything was changed. I longed to go to her and pour out my sympathy, but some instinct held me back, held me wordless. I knew not what to say, or how any effort on my part would be received. Instantly there had been a barrier erected between us which she

alone could lower. Those were long minutes I sat there, speechless, gazing straight ahead, my brain inert, my hand hard on the tiller. Suddenly, with a swift thrill which sent my blood leaping, I felt the soft touch of her fingers.

"Are you afraid to speak to me?" she asked, pleadingly. "Surely I have said nothing to anger you."

"No, it is not that," I returned in confusion, not knowing how to express the cause of my hesitancy. "I am sorry, and—and I sympathize with you, but I hardly know how to explain."

She was looking at me through the darkness; I was able to distinguish the white outline of her uplifted face.

"I am sorry—yes," very slowly, "but perhaps not as you suppose. It is hard to think of him as dead—killed so suddenly, without opportunity to think, or make any preparation. He—he was my husband under the law. That was all; he was no more. I do not believe I ever loved him—my marriage was but the adventure of a romantic girl; but if I once did, his subsequent abuse of me, his life of dissipation, obliterated long since every recollection of that love. He is to me scarcely more than a name, an unhappy memory. I told you that frankly when I believed him still alive. We were friends then, you and I, and I cannot conceive why his death should sever our friendship."

"Nor has it," I interposed instantly. "It was not indifference which silenced me. Rather it was the very strength of my feeling toward you. I was fearful of saying too much, of being too precipitate."

"You imagine I would fail to value your friendship at such a time?"

"Don't," I burst forth impetuously; "you talk of friendship when all my hope centers about another term. Surely you understand. I am a man sorely tempted, and dare not yield to temptation."

She drew her hand away from my clasp, yet the very movement seemed to express regret.

"You speak strangely."

"No, I do not; the words have been wrung from me. I am in no way ashamed, although I realize this is neither the time nor the place. Remember you have been under my protection ever since that night we met first on the streets; you are alone here with me now, but still under my protection. I cannot take advantage of your helpless condition, your utter loneliness. If I did I should never again be worthy of the name gentleman."

"I regret you should say this."

"No more than I do; the words have been wrung from me."

"And we are to be friends no longer? Is that your meaning?"

"You must answer that question," I replied gravely, "for it is beyond my power to decide."

Her head was again uplifted, and I knew she was endeavoring to see my face through the gloom. There was silence, the only sounds the slash of the boat through the water, and the slight flapping of the canvas.

"I am a woman," she said at last, "and we like to pretend to misunderstand, but I am not going to yield to that inclination. I do understand, and will answer frankly. We can never be friends as we were before."

My heart sank, and I felt a choke in my voice difficult to overcome.

"I was afraid it would be so."

"Yes," and both her hands were upon mine, "in our position we cannot afford to play at cross purposes. You have been loyal to me, even when every inducement was offered elsewhere. There was a moment when I almost doubted, but it was only for a moment. Then I seemed to sense your plan, your purpose, and from that time on I have trusted you more completely than ever before. This is confessing a great deal, for it is my nature to be reticent—I have always been hard to become acquainted with."

"I have not found you so; I feel as though I had known you always."

"That comes from the peculiarity of our first meeting, the unconventional manner in which we were brought together. I was not my natural self that night, nor have I ever been able since to feel toward you as I have in my relations with other men. Indeed I have been so frank spoken, so careless of social forms, as to make you question in your own mind my real womanhood."

"No; never that!" I protested.

"Oh, but you have," and she laughed softly, a faint trace of bitterness in the sound. "You need

not deny, for I have read the truth in your face, yet without resentment. Why should you not, indeed? No man would wish his sister to take the chances I have with an absolute stranger. My only excuse is the seeming necessity, and the confidence I felt in my own strength of character. I permitted myself to come South with you, knowing your purpose to be an illegal one; I placed myself in a false position. In doing this I was actuated by two purposes; one was to save this property which had been willed to my husband by his father. Do you guess the other?"

"No," I said, impressed by the earnestness with which she was speaking. "You will tell me?"

"I mean to; the time has come when I should. It was that I might save you from a crime. You had been kind to me, sympathetic; I—I liked you very much, and I knew you did not understand; that you were being misled. I could not determine then where the fraud was, but I knew there was fraud, and that you would eventually become its victim."

"You cared that much for me?"

"Yes," she confessed frankly, "I did. I would never have told you so under ordinary conditions. But I can now, here, where we are—alone together in this boat." She paused, as though endeavoring to choose the proper words. "We both realize the changed relations between us."

I drew a quick, startled breath.

"That—that I love you!" the exclamation left my lips before I was aware.

"Yes," she said calmly. "I could not help that. At first I never deemed such a result of our friendship possible. I was Philip Henley's wife, and I gave this possible danger scarcely a thought. Indeed it did not seem a danger. While it is true he was husband in name only, yet I was wife forever. That is my religion. Now the conditions are all changed, instantly changed by his death."

"You believe then he is dead?"

"I am as sure of it as though I had seen his body. I feel it to be true." There was an instant of hesitation, while I waited breathlessly. "Do you understand now why because of the fact we can no longer remain friends?"

"Yes," I burst forth, "because you know how I have grown to feel toward you; you—you resent —"

"Have I said so?"

"No, not in words; that was not necessary, but I understand."

"Do you, indeed?"

I stared toward her, puzzled, bewildered, yet conscious that the hot blood was surging through my veins.

"You cannot mean the other?" I questioned, the swift words tripping over themselves in sudden eagerness. "That—that you love me?"

"And why not? Am I so different from other women?"

I held the tiller still with one hand, but the other arm was free, and I reached out, and drew her toward me. There was no resistance, no effort to break away. I could see her face uplifted, the wide-open eyes.

"Different! Yes; so vastly different, that I misunderstood everything. But now I know, and—and sweetheart, I love you, I love you."

It could not have been long, not to exceed a moment or two, when a sudden leaping of the boat brought us back to a realization of our position. As soon as I had regained control of the craft, I reached out again and touched her hand.

"This is all so strange, so unexpected, I can scarcely comprehend what has occurred."

"Strange, yes, in the way it has happened," she coincided. "But we cannot afford to dwell upon that now. We are in peril. Do you really know where we are? for what you are steering?"

"It is largely a guess; there is nothing to give me guidance, except as I unscrew the face of this compass and feel the needle."

"Then we may still be within view from the deck of the *Sea Gull* at daybreak?"

"Yes; that will depend entirely upon luck."

She turned away, and sat quiet, staring forward intently into the black void.

"What time is it now?"

"Nearly three."

"In two hours it will be dawn."

"Yes."

I thought I could see her clasp her hands together; then suddenly lean forward.

"Why, look there!" she exclaimed quickly. "See! to the right. Merciful Heavens! it is a ship!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE REVENUE CUTTER

The vision, indistinct in the gloom, was blotted out from me by the intervening sail. It was only as I leaned well to one side that I could distinguish the dim outlines. By that time we were almost upon it, and I could only sheer away to avoid collision. It was hard to determine the nature of the vessel, the sides looming so close above us, but it was not the *Sea Gull*. I was certain of that from the height of the rail, and the outline of a square foresail showing dimly against the sky. From poop to bow there was not a light visible, and the hull moved through the water like that of a spectral ship. Apparently we were unnoticed, and as the stretch of water widened slightly between us, I called out:

"Ahoy there! Take us aboard!"

I shouted twice, before a head popped over the rail, and stared down in apparent amazement.

"Hullo, the boat! Who are you? What do you want?"

"Small boat adrift; two passengers; throw us a rope."

"All right; standby!"

I could hear his voice up above, shouting orders; there was a rush of feet, and a rope's end fell within reach. The head bobbed over the rail again, and, a moment later I had helped her up a swaying boarding ladder, and felt the solid deck under my feet. The intense darkness puzzled me, not a gleam of light showing anywhere. Suddenly a hand touched my arm.

"This way, sir; help the lady aft—the deck is clear."

I could see nothing, barely the planks underfoot, yet there was nothing to do but obey, with his fingers gripping me.

"What kind of a boat is this?" she whispered.

"I 'm sure I don't know; not big enough for a passenger liner."

"The officer is in uniform."

"Are you sure?"

We were at the head of the companion stairs, and descended carefully, clinging to the rail. The officer, groping in the darkness, opened a door at the bottom, and hurried us into the lighted cabin. Facing us, one hand resting on the table, stood a short, sturdy man in uniform. Before I could speak, or do more than glance about the interior, my eyes still blinded by the sudden blaze of light, he began questioning.

"Who are you? how did you come to be adrift in these waters? Answer up, sir—you 're no fisherman."

"We escaped from a vessel last evening, sir."

"Escaped! By Gad! are we in a state of war? What do you mean by escaped—run away?"

"Yes, sir," and I stepped aside so he could see her more clearly. "We were being held as prisoners."

His eyes flashed to her face, rested an instant, and then his cap was in his hand.

"I beg your pardon, young lady," he said gravely, "but this is all most strange. I could almost imagine this was a century or two earlier when pirates roamed these seas. You were prisoners you say, and escaped."

"Yes," I answered, before she could do so, "but you must pardon us details until we know who it is that questions us."

"Oh, exactly; you are unaware of the nature of this vessel."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, this is the revenue cutter *Saline*, which I have the honor to command."

I understood the situation in a flash, my heart leaping in fierce anticipation.

"Mr. Smith, assist the lady to a chair, and have the steward bring a glass of wine. Now, sir, are you ready to answer."

"I am; we were prisoners on board the *Sea Gull*. It is a long story, envolving a will, in which the master of that vessel was interested. We escaped in a small boat last evening, and have been floating about since."

"The *Sea Gull*? Do you remember the name, Mr. Smith?"

"No, sir; perhaps a description—"

"A schooner-rigged steam yacht," I explained briefly, "clearing from New Orleans for Santiago."

The two exchanged glances.

"I begin to see light," said the Captain calmly. "I think the *Sea Gull* must have originally sailed as the *Mary Somers*. Do you happen to know, sir, where she was really bound, and the nature of her cargo?"

"I do; Spanish Honduras, with munitions of war."

"Exactly, under command of a half-breed named Henley. By Gad, Smith, this sounds too good to be true."

He walked across the cabin twice, thinking, not even glancing up as he passed us. Suddenly he stopped, facing me.

"Where did he get you two?"

"In a bayou off the Alabama coast."

"And you got away last evening—how?"

"By imprisoning the Captain and steward below; I was obliged to knock the first mate overboard, but we were unseen by any others. Let me tell you the whole story; it will scarcely require five minutes."

He nodded his head, walking back and forth as I reviewed the events swiftly. I hardly think he asked so much as a single question, his eyes upon my face and then upon the face of the girl.

"A rather strange tale," he commented when I had concluded, "and, perhaps, the whole is not told. However that is none of my affair. Now listen; this is a revenue cutter. We were ordered out of Pensacola four days ago to intercept this boat on which you two were prisoners. We have n't even sighted the vessel, and if we did would be perfectly helpless; as she can steam three knots to our one. Only some streak of wonderful good luck would ever enable us to capture her. I half believe you are the good luck, if you do what I suggest."

"What?" I asked. "I will be willing. Would you need Mrs. Henley also?"

"Yes," he turned to the officer who was still standing.

"How large was the boat, Mr. Smith?"

"Capable of transporting about fifteen, sir."

"Hardly enough; still I don't know; we could afford to take a chance. What crew did the *Sea Gull* carry?"

"I do not know how many were below, sir," I answered, beginning dimly to conceive his purpose. "I never saw to exceed a dozen on deck in a watch."

"Any evidence they were armed?"

"I know they were not; the officers carried weapons, but would never trust the crew."

"And only two officers remaining?"

"There may be an engineer, sir."

He pondered a moment, grave-faced, and silent.

"It is not a very complicated plan, but we will try It. I don't think Henley will leave these waters without an effort to recover his boat, and prisoners. He will want those papers, and revenge on Craig here. He has no warning that we are after him. I believe the fellow will cruise about in the same neighborhood until daylight. What do you say, Smith?"

"I agree with you, sir."

"Good; then all we have got to do is lay a trap; the boat's the trap."

"You mean conceal a squad of men in the bottom, and send it adrift again?"

"Exactly; lower the mast, as though Craig here had been unable to step it; or, better still, heave it overboard; the loss of weight will give room for another man. Then cover the lads over with the canvas. They will never suspect the ruse on the *Sea Gull*, or study it out through glasses. They 'll simply recognize their boat, and steer for it."

"The fighting odds will be pretty heavy, sir," said Smith soberly.

The Captain's smile lit up his stern features.

"I would not so consider if it was my privilege to be along," he replied. "We must trust to surprise, and get the crew below fastened down before an alarm is sounded on board. A dozen armed men ought to clear the decks. How do you look at the affair, Craig? Will the plan work?"

"I am not sure I understand exactly what is proposed, sir?"

"My thought is, that this man Henley will be sufficiently anxious to get hold of you two again, and regain those papers, so that he will steam about slowly all night, hoping to get sight of the missing boat at daylight. He has no means of knowing that the revenue officers are after him. If he sights us at daybreak, he 'll make a run, and show us a clean pair of heels. He 'd be hull down in five hours, for this is a slow old tub. Now what I propose is this," and the Captain counted off the points on his fingers. "There is about an hour of darkness left—sufficient to enable me to run this cutter in behind Cosmos Island safely out of sight. In the meanwhile we 'll dismantle that small boat a bit, slip a dozen good men under the canvas, and turn her adrift."

"And you wish me to go also?"

"Yes, if you will."

"And Mrs. Henley?"

"That would be the only way to allay suspicion on the *Sea Gull*."

I hesitated, half turning so as to look at her. Our eyes met, and she must have instantly read the question in mine, for she arose to her feet, and rested one hand on my arm.

"You wish to say yes?" she asked quietly. "You believe the plan will succeed?"

"It sounds feasible. I would gladly go myself, but I hesitate at exposing you; there will be fighting."

"But my being there is one of the requisites of success?"

"I suppose so. If you were not visible in the boat, they might suspicion the truth."

She glanced toward the waiting Captain, and then back into my face.

"Then I will go, of course," she said smilingly. "Let us not discuss it any more."

The Captain stepped forward, bowing, bare-headed.

"Most bravely spoken," he said soberly. "I owe you a debt, madam. Mr. Smith, have the boat prepared at once to carry out my idea."

"To leave the impression that an incompetent seaman had been in charge of it through the night, sir?"

"Exactly; the mast overboard, and the canvas stowed badly."

"Yes, sir, a big sheet."

"Bunch it so as to leave all the space possible; leave the jib set; it will help conceal the men. Send Lieutenant Hutton here."

"He will have command of the party?"

"Yes; let him pick his own men, and then report to me; arm them with a revolver apiece. Be lively about it."

He turned to us as Smith left the cabin.

"I cannot offer you much at this hour," he said genially, "but the boy has some hot coffee ready. Bring on what you have, Joe."

CHAPTER XXXV

THE DECK OF THE SEA GULL

The dawn broke gray and desolate, the vista of restless waters growing gradually wider, as the light spread out across the eastern sky. The clouds yet hung thick and low, yielding a ghastly aspect to the dawn, somberness to the picture of breaking waves tipped by flying vapors of mist. I sat at the tiller, grasping one of her hands in mine, and staring anxiously about the broadening circle. The boat in which we rode, while buoyant enough, still bore the outward appearance of a wreck, the broken stump of a mast barely showing sufficiently high to support the flapping jib, and the wet canvas of the mainsail completely concealing everything forward. The men were lying low, so completely hidden as to be invisible even to us, but the Lieutenant sat upright, with head above the mass of sail, and was scanning the sea with glasses. He was a resolute-looking fellow, with brown eyes, and a reddish tinge of hair. As he lowered the glasses a moment, I saw him glance back at us curiously.

"Had n't seen you before," he explained cordially enough. "Dark when we came over the side, you know. Bad morning."

"The fog is lifting. What is that black mass out there?"

"Cosmos Island," and he turned his lenses the other way. "The next ten minutes will give us a clear view."

I looked at her, noting how tired her eyes appeared in the gray light, although they smiled courageously.

"I wish you were not here," I whispered.

"Please do not say that. I—I really I wished to come. I do not think I could have let you go without me."

"But you are so tired—"

"No more than you, I am sure. Why, I have done nothing except to stay awake. You have had all the work and worry. It will not be long now."

"No; we shall know in a few minutes if the *Sea Gull* is standing by hunting us. If she shows up, you must do exactly as I say. You promise that?"

"Of course," and the clasp of her hand tightened. "You have no reason to doubt me."

The Lieutenant's eyes were on the widening sea line, and I bent down and pressed my lips to her bare arm. I glanced up again into flushed cheeks.

"It has been a great night," I said sincerely. "The one in all my life best worth living through."

"I almost believe you mean that."

"Don't you?"

"Can you not read my answer in my eyes?"

"Craig," exclaimed the Lieutenant suddenly, "that must be the fellow off there to port. Here, try the glasses—just where the cloud is lifting a bit."

I was some time gaining the proper focus, but when I once had the distant vessel caught fairly in the lens, I recognized her instantly.

"That's the *Sea Gull*, and, by heavens, they are keeping a sharp lookout on board. See! she is swinging on her heel already; they've sighted us."

He grasped the glass, and stared out through it in silence for several minutes. Then he thrust it into a pocket and settled back out of sight behind the canvas screen.

"You have called the turn," he said quietly, "and the dance is about to begin. Unship your rudder and let it go. Let them think you are wrecked, helpless to escape, and they will be more careless. You men there, loosen your guns, and be ready to scale a ship's side in a jiffy, but lie perfectly still until I give the word." He turned his head.

"You understand what you are to do, Craig, you and the lady?"

"I think so. We are to obey Henley's orders, and go on board."

"Yes, but do something as soon as you reach the deck to attract attention, and get them away from the rail. Try and get the lady as far astern as possible, for there is likely to be some fighting. Are you frightened, miss?"

"No," although her voice trembled from excitement. "You need not worry about me."

I caught the gleam of admiration in the Lieutenant's eyes as he looked at her, but almost instantly his thought centered on his own work.

"All right, then; I shall not wait for any signal. Now listen, men; these are my last orders. When I say go, get up any way you can, and hit the first man you see. Hit hard, but no shooting unless they use firearms. But fight like devils, and do it quick. They outnumber us three to one. Marston, you and Simms take the stoke hold and the forecastle. Keep those fellows below down with your revolvers. Shoot if you need to. The rest of you stick close to me. All clear, lads?"

"Aye, aye, sir," returned the muffled voices from beneath the canvas.

I unshipped the rudder, letting it disappear noiselessly beneath the waves, and the boat's head swung slowly around, and we drifted helplessly, the jib flapping. With our eyes on the approaching vessel we remained motionless in the stern, our hands clasped. The flush had faded from out her cheeks, yet once she turned toward me and smiled. Forward not so much as the twitch of a muscle revealed any other presence in the boat, the only visible thing a jumble of ropes and canvas, apparently dragged hastily from the water by inexperienced hands. The waves tossed us about so that any seaman would recognize instantly our predicament. The manner in which the jaunty *Sea Gull* bore down upon us was proof that those on board had already grasped the situation, and had no remaining suspicion of treachery. She was under steam, with no sail set, and the rapidly increasing light gave me a fairly clear view. In low monotone, without turning my head, I managed to convey my observations to the motionless officer.

"She 's heading straight toward us under low pressure. There are two men on the bridge, and a lookout on the bow. Now she 's swinging to port to bring up close. There 's a group at the rail near the starboard gangway. About ten, I should say. Can you see, Viola?"

"Twelve," she answered quietly, "and three forward. The third man at the rail is the Captain, and he has a glass."

"By George! you are right. I recognize the fellow now. Broussard is on the bridge. They expect no trouble, Lieutenant, and only have the regular watch on deck. They are getting too close for me to talk any more."

It was indeed a beautiful picture had we only been in a mind to enable us to enjoy the scene. The deserted ocean, rolling gray and dismal under the cloudy sky, white caps showing in every direction as our boat was flung helplessly aloft on the steady roll of the sea. The coast line was not visible from our elevation, and nothing broke the gray round of horizon but clouds of floating vapor, slowly drifting away before the sun, which was already yielding a faint crimson glow to the east. Behind us, probably two miles distant, arose the rough ridge of Cosmos Island, while bearing down upon us from the north, with a westward sheer sufficient to expose her beautiful lines, came the *Sea Gull*. Yet graceful, handsome as she appeared, my entire attention centered on the group of men at her rail. They were watching us intently, Henley with a glass at his eyes. Twice I saw him turn, and wave his hand to Broussard on the bridge, slightly altering the vessel's course, and once the sound of his voice echoed faintly across the intervening water.

It was quite evident that as yet he perceived nothing to arouse suspicion, for, with a swing like a hawk, the *Sea Gull* bore down upon us, the engines slowing, and then reversed. We were staring up into the faces that looked curiously down at us. Henley gripped a stay and swung himself to the rail; farther aft the negro steward hung over, his mouth wide open, grinning at the spectacle.

"Hard down!" yelled the Captain, motioning with one arm. "Plug her, man. Now you damned army hound," he called to me, "catch that rope, and make fast."

One of the hands flung the coil so that it fell at my feet, and I did as directed, as otherwise we would have been crushed under the vessel. As it drew taut, the boat swung in gently against the side of the *Sea Gull*. Above us Henley hung, leaning far enough out so he could look down.

"Now, you damn thief," he screamed, "it's my turn to play jailer. Come up, both of you."

"Just a moment, Captain Henley," I answered, rising to my feet. "If there is anyone to be

punished I am the one; this woman had nothing to do with it."

"That 's for me to decide," he snarled, and whipped out a revolver. "I know how to handle both of you. Come, jump now, you dog, or you never will move again. Pass the girl up first, and be lively about it. Give them a hand there, Peters, and don't be too easy."

There was no excuse for delay; besides, those lads under the heavy canvas must be nearly smothered. With my arm about her I lifted her up to where Peters could reach down, and grasp her hand, and then followed as quickly as possible. Henley had swung down to the deck, and stood there, his men grouped about him, the revolver still in his hand. One glance at his face told me he was insane from rage, thinking only of revenge.

"Take the woman below," he snapped, his cruel teeth gleaming. "By God! she 'll get her lesson. Here, Louis, you damned nigger, don't you hear me? Lock her in, and bring me the key. I 'll handle this sniveling thief first. So you could n't run a boat, hey! Not so easy as it looked, was it, you dog. Thought we 'd be gone this morning, didn't you? You 'll find I 'm not quite as easy as all that. Now, by God! you 'll take your medicine!"

I still stood motionless, my back to the rail, letting him rave, but watching every movement. I knew the girl's eyes were on my face, although I did not venture to glance toward her, not even when the negro guided her aft through the ring of seamen. Yet this was the one thing I was waiting for, my heart beating fiercely, in fear lest the Lieutenant might give signal for attack too soon. I remember the faces about me, fierce, scowling faces, of men wild to lay hold upon me at the first word of command, yet it was Henley I looked at, measuring the distance between us, and watching the revolver in his hand. What did he mean to do? Kill me, or give me over into the hands of those merciless devils? All I could read in his eyes was hatred, exultation, consciousness of power. Suddenly he laughed, a sneering, cynical laugh, as though he thought me cringing before him in terror. The man judged me by himself, and believed me helpless.

"Hard luck, Craig—hey!" he began tauntingly. "Played with the wrong man, did n't you. Now I 've got the girl just as I want her, and as for you—Lord! but I 'll keep you to play with all the way to Honduras. It will be a pleasant voyage, my friend. Here, Masters, you and Peters stand by. Now, you robber, give me those papers."

I handed them out, watching closely. Peters stood at my right, one hand on my arm; the other fellow must have been behind me. Henley grasped the envelope, opening the flap to be sure of its contents. The movement caused him to lower the revolver, and avert his gaze, for just an instant. With one motion I flung Peters aside, and jammed a clinched fist into the Captain's face.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN POSSESSION

Masters must have struck me at almost the same instant my fist landed on Henley, for we went down together, his revolver discharging, the flying bullet gouging my shoulder, burning the flesh like a red-hot wire. Yet I grappled him even as we crashed to the deck, but the fellow lay stunned, motionless as a dead man. Everything happened quicker than I can tell it; with such rapidity, indeed, that not a hand touched me. I could barely struggle up on one knee, dazed still by the stroke which had floored me, and glance about, when the blue-jackets came tumbling over the rail, and leaped at the astounded crew of the *Sea Gull*. It was a swift, short fight, the assailants having every advantage. I saw the Lieutenant, bare-handed, dash into the group, striking out left and right, his men at his heels. There was a volley of oaths, a thud of falling bodies, a sharp command, and the shrill pipe of a boatswain's whistle. Two men rushed forward, the first disappearing behind the chart-house. The second encountered Broussard stepping off the bridge ladder, and hurled the fellow to the deck with one blow of a sledge-hammer fist. Scarcely pausing to see whether he was alive or not, the assailant ran on toward the forecastle.

The whole affair was over in two minutes, the blue-jackets circling out like a fan, and pressing their enemy into a helpless mass against the rail. For a moment the fight was furious, every man for himself, then the Lieutenant drove like a wedge into the bunch, and it was all over. I struggled to my feet, still viewing all through a mist, and swaying back and forward as I endeavored to steady myself on the rolling deck. There was no one at the wheel, and the bow of the *Sea Gull* was swinging slowly about.

"On to the bridge there, Coates, and hold up her head," sang out the officer. "Boatswain, take charge of these beauties, and run them into the forecastle. Leave two men on guard, and take a squint into the engine room. Report to me here."

He took off his coat, examined a long slit in its side where a vicious knife had ripped it from shoulder to tail; then slipped it on again, and watched his men drive their prisoners forward.

"I 'd like to know which one of them did that," he growled, glancing toward me. "Say, what 's the matter with you—shot? You 're white as a sheet of paper, man."

"I got one on the head with a belaying pin from the heft of it. The bullet touched me—here. Lord, how it burns."

"Who did the shooting?"

"Henley here," and I touched the fellow with my foot. "He fired just as I hit him."

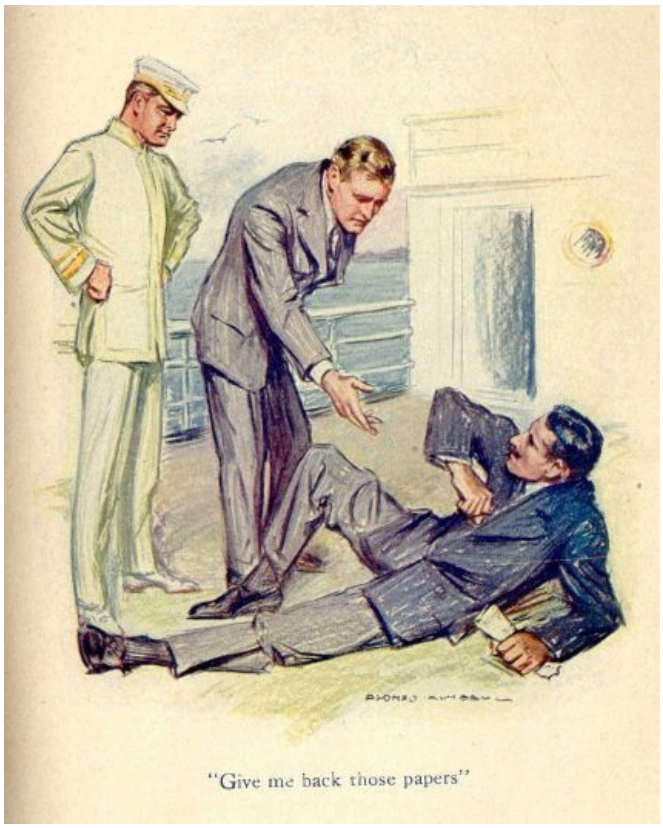
The Lieutenant stepped forward and looked down into the upturned face.

"So that's the man!" he exclaimed. "We 've done a good day's work. I 've heard stories of that half-breed ever since we 've been on this coast. He must be a natural devil, but he 's played hide and seek with Uncle Sam for the last time. This will be a feather in the 'old man's' cap. He 's waking up."

Henley stirred as he spoke, and opened his eyes, staring up into my face, and then at the Lieutenant's uniform. The sight of the latter perplexed him.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked angrily, making an effort to rise. "Where is Broussard?"

"Henley," I said, stepping in between them, "the game is up, and the best thing you can do now is keep quiet. This gentleman is Lieutenant Hutton, of the Revenue Cutter *Saline*, and his men have the crew of the *Sea Gull* under hatches forward. Give me back those papers."



"Give me back those papers"

[Illustration: "Give me back those papers."]

He had the envelope still clasped in his left hand, and he glanced at it dully, and then beyond me toward Hutton. Apparently his brain, yet numbed by the blow, failed to entirely comprehend. The Lieutenant, however, was a man of action. With grip on his collar he jerked the poor wretch to his feet, and held him there.

"Hand over those papers to Craig," he ordered shortly, "and be lively about it. I have n't anything to do with that affair, and I don't think you will have much more from now on. You are my prisoner, and you are good for a ten spot at least. Stand up, you coward." He forced him back against the rail, and glanced about the deck. The boatswain was coming aft.

"Well, Sloan, how did you find things?"

"All serene, sir; the whole crew bottled up, and mighty little fight left in them."

"The engine room?"

"The engineer was a bit ugly, sir, and had to be man-handled proper. He 's lyin' in a coal bunker with a sore head, cussin' blue. But the assistant is a young fellar, an' kin run the engines. I left him in charge with a couple o' lads lookin' after him."

"Who has the wheel?"

"Somers, sir."

"All right; have steam kept up, and make the course south, southeast. Send a couple of men here to get this boat on deck. Put all the fire-room fellows who won't work into the forecastle with the others. Here, take this man along also. He 's the Captain, but no better than the rest."

Henley started back, with some crazy hope of resistance, but the great fist of the boatswain gripped his collar.

"Come on, you," he said, jerking him savagely. "Yer bloody pirate; make another crack, an' I 'll land yer one. Is he that Henley, sir?" of the Lieutenant.

"Yes; ever hear of him?"

"Have I! Aye, many the time. He 's wanted in Galveston, sir, for somethin' worse than runnin' arms—it was a knifin' job, sir."

"And not the last either, if what Craig says is true. Take the fellow forward. Ah! there comes the *Saline* now—just poking her nose out from behind the ridge."

I looked as he pointed, clutching the recovered papers in my hands, and forgetful of Henley. The sun had discovered an opening in the cloud bank, and a long shaft of golden light played across the water, gleaming with white caps. Into its radiance the revenue cutter was gliding, outlined against the leafy shade of Cosmos Island, her flag standing out like a board in the fresh breeze, her cutwater churning up a mass of foam. She made a beautiful picture, one that fascinated me for the moment, and caused me to forget my own immediate incidents. I was brought back to a realization of the situation by Hutton's hand on my shoulder.

"Nice-looking old girl, but, like all of her sex, a gay deceiver. Slowest tub that ever floated a U. S. flag; any coal barge could get away from her in a fair wind. Take her half an hour now to get within hailing distance, and the old man raging to learn the news. How do you feel? still groggy?"

"All right, except for a stiff headache."

"Then come into the cabin. There is nothing more to do on deck, and I want to get sight of the ship's papers. Where was the fellow cleared for?"

"Santiago."

"And his cargo?"

"Miscellaneous; mostly farm machinery—worth investigating."

"I 'll have some of the boxes broken open, but will take a squint at the papers first. What became of the girl?"

"The steward took her below, and locked her in before the fracas started."

"I thought so; I heard a little of the talk, and hung back so as to give you plenty of time." He laughed, good-humoredly. "Nice little scrap, Craig; those fellows never even heard us, until I was over the rail. By the way, is the young lady married? I never heard the whole story."

"She is a widow," I replied, a bit stiffly, resenting his flippancy of tone. "She was the wife of this Henley's half brother, but I have every reason to believe he is dead."

He looked into my face, a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"Let us hope the good news is true," he said soberly. "Come, don't flare up, man; I recognize the symptoms. But don't you think she will be crying her pretty eyes out down below?"

We went down the companion stairs together, into a deserted cabin. No steward was in evidence, and, finding the Captain's stateroom locked, the Lieutenant kicked open the door, and entered. I turned back, explored the passage, and finally dragged Louis out from a dark corner of the pantry. That darky was plainly in a state of funk, his legs trembling, and the whites of his eyes much in evidence.

"Oh, Lor', Massa Craig," he whined. "Ah ain't done nuthin', deed Ah ain't, sah!"

"You locked up the girl."

"Ah just had to, sah. Captain Henley he just nat'rally skin me alive, sah, if Ah don't. But Ah nebber hurt her none."

"Where is she?"

"In number five, sah; here—here am de key."

"All right, Louis," and I tossed him into one corner. "Now listen; set that table, and get some food on it quick. Make coffee, but don't wait for anything else."

"Yes, sah."

I crossed the cabin, and inserted the key. As the door opened she stood there waiting, her hands held out.

CHAPTER XXXVII

A HOMEWARD VOYAGE

"It—it is all over with? You have been successful?"

"Yes, don't worry," and I held her hands fast, looking into her eyes. "There can be no further trouble. Captain Henley and his crew are prisoners."

"And no one was hurt? You were not?"

"Oh, there are a few sore heads, but nothing serious. I got a crack myself; bled a little—see."

She placed her fingers on the wound, stroking the hair gently, her eyes full of anxiety.

"Is that all? Please tell me; I—I heard a shot fired."

"Henley's revolver; no damage done. Really you must accept my assurance. Come out into the cabin; Louis is getting breakfast ready."

"Where is the Lieutenant?" hesitating slightly.

"In Henley's cabin, going through the papers. He wants to have a full report ready when the *Saline* comes up. The three of us will breakfast together."

"You must permit me to wash the wound on your head first," she insisted. "The hair is all matted with blood. Please."

"Of course," and I laughed. "Even then I will not be very presentable; these clothes are frightful; the last week has been a strenuous one."

"What about me!" and she shot a look downward. "I 've only had the one dress."

"The marvel of it," I interrupted ardently. "You look as though you had just come from the dressing-table."

"You do not think so!"

"But I do; still, it may be a case where love is blind."

The fresh color swept into her cheeks.

"That is the only explanation possible, I am sure. See how the skirt is stained, and the lace ruffle is almost torn off."

"Oh, well, don't worry; the Lieutenant has lost his natty appearance also. Some villain slashed his coat its full length. However, I accept your offer."

She ministered to me with womanly gentleness, parting the matted hair, and cleansing the wound with water. While in no way serious it was an ugly bruise, and required considerable attention. Sitting there on a stool while she worked, I could hear Louis bustling about in the cabin, but my mind was busy with a thousand matters requiring settlement. At last I refused to be ministered to any longer, laughing at her desire to bandage my head, and insisting that all I needed now was breakfast. As we entered the cabin, the Lieutenant stood in Henley's door.

"I was looking for you, Craig," he said, coming forward, and bowing to my companion. "Here is a newspaper clipping which may be of interest. I found it on the deck."

I read it hastily, and, in silence handed it to her, watching her face as she read. It was a local item describing the finding of a dead body which could not be identified. The details of the man's appearance as well as the clothes worn were carefully depicted, evidently in hope someone might thus recognize the party. She remained with the bit of paper in her hands for what seemed a long while, while we waited. Then her eyes were slowly lifted to our faces.

"That was Philip Henley," she said soberly.

"You are sure?"

"There is no possibility of mistake; the description is almost photographic and the clothing I remember well."

"Your husband, madam?" asked the Lieutenant, as I remained silent.

"Yes; legally my husband, although he had driven me from him by dissipation and neglect. I—I cannot tell you the wretched story now."

"Nor do I ask it," he hastened to assure her. "What is it, Mapes?"

A blue-jacket stood at the foot of the stairs, one hand lifted in salute.

"The *Saline*, sir, is alongside, and hailing us. The boatswain sent me, sir."

We followed the two on deck, and, after one glance about, I led her around the bulge of the cabin to the narrow deck space astern. The boat in which we had escaped had been hoisted into its davits, and we halted in its shadow. The sea was gently rolling in great crested waves, with no land visible except Cosmos Island. The most of our crew must have been busy forward, as only three or four hung over the port rail in idle curiosity. The two vessels moved side by side, separated by a narrow stretch of green water, a thin vapor of smoke visible. I could perceive the whiteness of the *Saline's* deck, and the group of officers on the bridge. The Captain, facing us, hollowed his hands.

"What have you to report, Mr. Hutton?"

"The vessel is in our possession, sir, and the crew under guard below."

"Any injuries?"

"None serious, sir."

"And the Captain—the half-breed Henley; did you get him?"

"He 's with the others."

"Better put the fellow in irons, Hutton. There are some serious charges against him, you know. Have you men enough?"

"I could use a half dozen more."

"Very well; I 'll send them over with Mr. Steele."

"What is to be our course, sir?"

"Pensacola. Don't wait for us."

"Aye, aye, sir. Shall I hold Craig and the lady?"

"Not on this case; we have all the evidence needed. If you take their addresses that will be all that is necessary. Pleasant voyage!"

He waved his hand, and then, perceiving us as he turned away from the rail, lifted his cap in salute. A moment later a boat heavily manned shot out from the cutter's black side, and headed toward us. We stood there alone in the shadow, watching its approach.

"It is all over now, dear," I whispered.

"Yes, but—but I do not feel as though I could ever touch that money."

"You will have no choice. The courts will decide that."

She glanced aside at me shyly, and one hand rested on the rail of the boat.

"I know what I would like to do with some of it."

"What?"

"Buy this—this boat."

"In memory?"

"Of course—you loved me then."

"And now, and always. Do you know what is the first thing I shall do when we make Pensacola?"

"No."

I clasped the straying hand and drew her to me, looking down into her eyes.

"Telegraph my father I am coming home."

"Is that all?"

"And that I shall bring a wife with me. Right here I end my career as a soldier of fortune."

Under the protecting shadow of the boat our lips met.

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