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JOHNSTONE OF THE BORDER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Alton of Somasco
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The Gold Trail
Sydney Carteret, Rancher
A Prairie Courtship
Vane of the Timberlands
The Long Portage
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The Dust of Conflict
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Masters of the Wheatlands
Delilah of the Snows
By Right of Purchase
The Cattle Baron's Daughter
Thrice Armed
For Jacinta
The Intriguers
The League of the Leopard
For the Allinson Honor
The Secret of the Reef
Harding of Allenwood
The Coast of Adventure



"An occasional word or phrase reached her: '. . . submarine . . . coast of . . . this line marks. . .'"—[Page 220](#)

JOHNSTONE *of the* BORDER

By HAROLD BINDLOSS

Author of "PRESCOTT OF SASKATCHEWAN,"
"RANCHING FOR SYLVIA," "FOR THE ALLINSON
HONOR," "THE SECRET OF THE REEF," ETC.

WITH FRONTISPIECE IN COLOR



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JOHNSTONE OF THE BORDER

[Pg 1]

CHAPTER I THE SUMMONS

Sable Lake shone like a mirror among the ragged pines, as it ran back between the rocks, smooth as oil except where a puff of wind streaked its flashing surface with faint blue wrinkles. Behind it the lonely woods rolled on, south to Lake Superior and north to Hudson Bay. At one place a new transcontinental railroad cut its way through the forest; hammers rang and noisy gravel plows emptied the ballast cars along the half-graded track; but these sounds of human activity were quickly lost and in a mile or two only the splash of water and the elfin sighing in the pine-tops broke the deep silence of the woods. This belt of tangled forest, where the trees are stunted and the soil is sterile, offers no attraction to homesteader or lumberman. In consequence, it has lain desolate since the half-breed *voyageurs*, who crossed it with canoe and dog-team, abandoned the northwest trail when the Canadian Pacific locomotives began to pant through the rock-cuts by Lake Superior.

The solitude itself had drawn Andrew Johnstone into the quiet bush. The lone trail had a charm for him. He knew the empty spaces of Canada; for his inaptitude for an idle life had led him on adventurous journeys through many leagues of its trackless forest. He was of the type that preferred some degree of hardship to conventional comfort. His one ambition had been to be a soldier; it was the career which from early boyhood he had chosen. He had entered Woolwich as a prize cadet, and had left it with honors; but a few weeks later he had met with an accident on a mountain crag, and his military career was suddenly closed. The surgeons did what they could; but it soon was obvious that Andrew never again would be able to take his place in the British Army. He was not crippled; he could still walk well; but he limped slightly and his injured knee gave him trouble sometimes.

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He sat alone now, on a rock that jutted out into the lake. The thick branches of a spruce sagged above him and furnished a welcome shadow, for it was a close, hot day. A few feet behind him a gray trout lay in the frying-pan beside a log hearth; and beyond that stood a small weather-beaten tent, with flecks of bright sunlight filtering through the trees and spreading over it in fantastic shapes.

Andrew lighted his pipe and looked about him in languid content. The pines that came down to the lake's edge were small and ragged; some had been blackened by fire and some leaned drunkenly, but their resinous sweetness hung about the camp. In the shadow, the reflection of

worn rock and rigid branch floated on the crystal water; but the reflections quivered, and there was a soft splash upon the pebbles near Andrew's feet. He heard it with reminiscent satisfaction and a touch of longing. It reminded him of the swirl of the salt tide along the Solway shore; and his thoughts went back to the Old Country he had left two years before.

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He wondered what Elsie and Dick were doing at home at the old house in Annandale. He called Appleyard home because he loved it, better perhaps than Dick did, although the place did not belong to him. When he was left an orphan, Dick's father had brought him up with stern kindness, and he had afterward spent a month or two at Appleyard whenever it was possible. Indeed, in the old man's last illness he had promised that, so far as things permitted, he would look after his somewhat flighty cousin. Andrew remembered with a twinge that he had not done much to keep his promise; but, after all, there seemed no reason to believe that Dick needed him.

Then he thought of little Elsie, as he had called her, though she must be grown up now. He was much the elder, but they had always been good friends. No doubt they would try to marry her to Dick. Andrew was fond of Dick, but he did not think him good enough for Elsie.

For nearly an hour he sat on the rock, lounging back against an outcropping boulder, thinking of Appleyard and little Elsie. Then his thoughts were interrupted by a sound near the tent—some animal scampering past—and he stood up and looked out across the lake. His pose, easy and virile, showed a wiry figure of medium height; and the strong sunshine touched his brown face. It was not a face that attracted attention, but the eyes were gravely good-humored and the mouth was firm.

Andrew was watching for the gleam of a varnished hull. Whitney, his American partner, had gone to the railroad for provisions three days previously and should have returned. The canoe he had taken had been built in Toronto, especially for them. Andrew would have been satisfied with an Indian birch-bark; but Whitney not only was a keen sport but he had enough money to afford the best of everything.

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At last something twinkled far up the lake, and Andrew's keen eyes distinguished a small dark speck amidst the play of light. He knew that it was Whitney; for only a canoe from which the varnish had not worn off would so catch the sunshine. When the craft had grown into shape, Andrew sat down again and watched her draw nearer with quiet approval. He liked to see things done well and there was a rhythmic precision in Whitney's movements that suggested well-directed power. The paddle flashed at exact intervals, the lithe form behind it bent with a graceful swing, and a curl of foam broke away from the gliding hull. Modern as she was, the canoe did not jar upon the primitive austerity of the wilds. Andrew felt this, though he could not have put it into words, for there was something innately primitive in him.

He sprang from a rugged stock, for he was a descendant of the Annandale Johnstones, whose crest was significantly the flying spur. Appleyard stood on the edge of the bleak moorlands that drop down to the western marshes of the Scottish border, and he knew every lonely rise and boggy flat that his mosstrooper ancestors had ridden on moonless nights. It is possible that in his youthful rambles across the high, wind-swept waste, he had acquired something that linked him to the past. In later times, his people had made some mark as soldiers and explorers, but for the past two generations the head of the house had been a quiet country laird.

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Whitney drew near and in a few minutes ran the canoe upon the shingle and stood smiling at Andrew when he had pulled her up. He was young and athletic, with brown hair and eyes, brown skin, a rather thin face, and an alert, half-humorous air. His clothes had been specially designed for hunting trips by a fashionable New York tailor, but they now looked much the worse for use in the wilds.

"I've got the grub and brought our mail," he said, throwing Andrew a packet. "Here's your lot; you can wade through it while I fix supper."

"I'd have had things ready," Andrew replied; "but I was stuck for flour and pork. You've covered some ground to-day."

"Some," laughed Whitney. "It was pretty fierce clambering over the portages with the canoe on my head, but I made much better time than I could have done when I struck the woods two months ago. Looks as if the harder you have to work, the stronger you get. Nature's way of fixing things. But I'm not tired; so I'll fix supper while you read your news."

Andrew opened a letter in a girlish hand, and while he read it, lingering over the words, his thoughts went back with longing to Appleyard on the Solway shore. He pictured the low house, built of Scottish granite and beaten by the winds; the red moorland rolling north in waves; and the flash of wet sands in the distance edged with white surf by the savage tides. It was an artless letter, treating of loved, homely things, but it showed sweetness of temperament and, Andrew thought, half-concealed uneasiness. The reason for this became obvious when he read the postscript:

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"I am anxious about Dick. He is not very strong, you know, and I wish that you were here."

Andrew felt troubled, for he knew that Elsie never made the worst of things. Dick was weak of will as well as of body, and his dissipation had a marked effect on him. There was nothing vicious in the lad, but he lacked stability, and it looked as if Elsie could not counteract the rather

demoralizing influences to which Andrew imagined the boy was subjected.

He opened a Montreal newspaper and then soon forgot Appleyard. It was some time since any news from England had reached him, and the cablegrams predicted coming war. He read on until Whitney took the trout and a can of coffee off the fire, and called him to supper. Andrew ate as usual, because he was hungry, but he said very little and wore a preoccupied air.

Whitney waited until the meal was finished; then he turned to his comrade as he lighted his pipe.

"There's something worrying you," he said bluntly. "Out with it!"

"I was wondering whether you'd mind my not going north with you on the hunting trip this fall."

"I certainly *would* mind. All the same, I'll let you off if there's a reason."

Andrew folded the letter so that the last page came on top and handed it to him with the newspaper. Whitney carefully read the first column in the paper before he looked up. He wanted to understand the situation, and Andrew was not good at explaining.

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"I don't quite get the drift of things," he said. "First of all, who's Elsie Woodhouse?"

"In a way, she's like Dick's sister; they were brought up together and Elsie always tried to take care of him—though she's really no relation. Dick is my cousin."

Whitney nodded and tried to be patient.

"Do you want to go home because she's anxious about the fellow?" he asked.

"It's rather complicated," Andrew answered with some hesitation. "You see, Dick's father raised me, and I always thought, in his way, he was fond of me."

Whitney found the workings of his companion's mind more interesting than the particulars about his relatives. Andrew was sometimes slow, but one could rely on his doing the right thing in the end.

"And Elsie?" Whitney suggested. "Did he raise her too?"

"Oh, no. When he died, Dick's mother soon married again, a man called Staffer; clever fellow, but I never quite trusted him. Then she died, and Staffer was left in charge of Appleyard until Dick came of age. He brought his sister there, Mrs. Woodhouse, a widow; and Elsie's her daughter. Dick and Elsie were both quite young then, but from the beginning Elsie made it her business to take care of Dick."

"You like her," said Whitney, noticing a certain tenderness in his companion's voice.

"Yes," said Andrew slowly; "I never liked anybody quite as much. But that's all there is to it. She's much younger than I am, and she'll probably marry Dick."

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"If she's like his sister and has been looking after him, she more probably won't. I'm getting Dick fixed as a bit of a maverick. He and his stepfather don't get on."

"On the contrary, they get on very well; that's the trouble."

"How?"

Andrew hesitated.

"Well, you see, Staffer does most things well; he's excellent company and a witty talker, the kind of man a lad would try to copy."

"Makes the pace pretty hot, eh? One of your smart set?"

"He's extravagant, but he never gets into debt. He'll play cards on champagne half the night, and get up next morning as steady as a rock and bring down a cork-screwing snipe with the first barrel. I've seldom seen a better man on a horse."

"Think I've got him placed. Your cousin will want nerve and judgment to play up to him. But we'll take the newspaper now. Why do you want to go back? You won't fight."

"I can't," Andrew replied with some color in his face. "It's my misfortune; after I fell on the Pillar Rock."

Whitney gave him a sympathetic nod.

"You take me wrong; I mean your countrymen. It's been stated in your parliament that they have no obligation to fight for France."

Andrew filled his pipe before he answered.

"They won't see her smashed," he said quietly.

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"I'm not sure of it, after reading the English newspapers."

"You don't know us yet," Andrew replied.

Whitney smiled, for he knew that his comrade would carry out an obligation to the farthest limit;

but he said nothing, and for the next few minutes Andrew thoughtfully looked about.

The sun was getting low, and dark shadows stretched across the glassy lake, but in the distance a small gray dot moved amidst a ring of widening ripples. A loon was fishing. Presently a wild, unearthly cry rang through the stillness as the bird called its mate; and after that everything was very quiet except for a soft splash of falling water a long way off. The dew was settling on the brush about the camp, and the cooling air was heavy with the fragrance of the pines. It all appealed to Andrew; the lonely woods had a strange charm for him.

"I'm lame and not much use, but it doesn't seem quite the thing to stay here enjoying myself, just now," he said. "Perhaps something I could do might turn up when I got home."

"But you haven't a home! You lived in a boat for some years, didn't you?"

"I thought of living in one again. It's cheap and gives you liberty; you can move about where you like. Then there's good wildfowl shooting in the bays, along our coast. That would keep me occupied—if I could find nothing else."

"Pretty lonely though, isn't it?"

"Sometimes. When you're wind-bound in a desolate gut among the sands, the winter nights seem long. Then, if you have to clear out in a hurry, with a sudden breeze sending the sea inshore and there's the anchor and kedge to get, you feel you'd like an extra hand."

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"Then why don't you ship one?"

"It's hard to find the right man. Living on board a small cruiser hasn't much attraction, unless you're used to it."

Whitney chuckled.

"That's easily understood. I think you need a partner. How'd I do?"

Andrew gave him an eager look, and then answered discouragingly:

"It's rough work; you're often wet through and can't dry your clothes; and sometimes there's not much to eat. You can't cook on a miniature stove when she's rolling hard. Then there's no head-room and you get cramped because you can't stand up straight."

"Well," Whitney declared smilingly, "it can't be much rougher than clambering over rock ledges and smashing through the brush with a canoe on your head. So, my friend, if you have no marked objection, I'm coming along. For one thing, an English friend of ours who lived in New York has a shooting lodge in the Galloway district and my mother and sister are over there. I can plant myself on them, if I get tired of you."

Andrew said nothing and Whitney thought him reluctant to take advantage of his rash offer.

"It's settled, old man," Whitney went on lightly. "We'll pull out at sun-up and get on to the Canadian Pacific at Whitefish Creek. I'll try to catch a trout now, and then we'll go to sleep."

He launched the canoe, and when he paddled out across the darkening lake, Andrew sat by the sinking fire, feeling quietly satisfied. He did not know what he might find to do when he reached Scotland, but he would have a partner in whom he had confidence.

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CHAPTER II

A PAINFUL MEMORY

A week after leaving Sable Lake, Andrew and Whitney stood one night on Portage Avenue, Winnipeg. The air was hot and oppressive, as it often is in the prairie city during late summer, and smooth sidewalks and roadway, wet with heavy rain, glistened like ice in the lamplight. The downpour had now slackened to a scattered splashing of big, warm drops, and thunder rumbled in the distance. At one place, the imposing avenue was blocked by a crowd through which the street-cars crept slowly with clanging bells. The crowd seemed bent on holding its ground, but there was not much jostling, and its general air was one of stern interest rather than excitement. The small dark figures that filled the gap between the towering buildings were significantly quiet, and where a ray of light fell across them, the rows of faces were all turned in one direction.

Andrew studied them as he stood on the outskirts of the throng. Human nature always interested him. He noticed first that these men were better dressed and looked more prosperous than the members of similar gatherings he had watched in the Old Country. It was, however, not altogether their clothes that conveyed the impression: there was a hint of self-confident optimism in their faces and bearing; though one could see that they were graver than usual. Their appearance was rather American than British, and although this was mainly suggested by certain mannerisms and the cut of their clothes, Andrew was conscious of a subtle difference he could not explain. For one thing, an English street crowd is generally drawn from one particular walk of life, and if units of different rank join it they stand apart and separate. This gathering in

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Winnipeg included men of widely different callings—farmers from the plains, merchants, artisans, clerks, and flour-mill hands—but they had, somehow, an air of common purpose and solidarity.

Whitney indicated them after he had lighted a cigarette.

"It's almost an hour before our train goes out, and these fellows evidently expect a new bulletin to be posted up soon," he said. "They interest me because I don't know how to class them. They're developing themselves on our lines, but they don't belong to us. If this were a city in the United States, there'd be something doing: joshing and pushing, or somebody would start a song. Yet I guess they wouldn't like you to call them Englishmen."

"That's true," Andrew agreed.

"Then they're pretty good customers of ours and anxious to trade," went on Whitney, "and yet when we offered them reciprocity they wouldn't have it. They had all to gain, because the natural outlet for their commerce is to the south, but they said they were British and shut the door on us. On the other hand, I get on with them better than you can, and if we wanted a job in this city, I'd get it before you. Now our States are sovereign, but they're all American."

"Ours are sovereign, but not English," Andrew replied. "One's strictly Canadian, another frankly Australian, and so on. We're an individualistic race, and our different branches grow their own way. It looks like a loose arrangement, but we've found we hold together well. You'll see when the bulletin comes out—if it's what I expect."

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"We'll wait. What's this fellow talking about?"

A short, dark-skinned man had buttonholed a neighbor and was speaking vivaciously, his dark eyes snapping.

"But, *mossieu*, the alliance, *la belle alliance*!" he exclaimed, and wheeled around to Andrew. "Is it not determine in London that we fight?"

"Spotted you first time, partner," Whitney laughed, and then turned to the man: "When did you come over?"

For a moment the fellow looked puzzled.

"Two hundred year, *mossieu*'. That is, the family she arrive. Me, I am born in Kebec."

Whitney smiled at Andrew.

"You haven't made much of a Britisher of him yet. They'll speak better German in Alsace in much less time, if the Prussians keep their grip."

"Alsace!" cried the French-Canadian. "*Attendez, mais attendez*; the great day come. Together we take her back. It is an obligation, *Mossieu*!. *Vive la belle alliance*!"

"Your people claim there isn't an alliance," Whitney said to Andrew.

"I don't know. This is certain: if our friend's attacked, we step into the ring."

There was a sudden movement in the crowd, which pressed closer upon the newspaper office opposite, and a cry was raised as a lighted car came clanging down the street:

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"Hold that driver up!"

The car slowed, but still came on, until a well-dressed citizen stepped quietly in front of it.

"Stop!" he said. "You can't get through."

The car stopped and as the passengers got out, a window in the tall building opposite was opened. A bulletin board was hoisted in, and for the next two minutes the crowd stood silent and motionless. Andrew felt his nerves tingle and noted that Whitney's face was tense, though his interest in the matter could hardly be personal. There was something that stirred the imagination in the sight of the intent, quiet throng that awaited the result of a crisis not of their making. They had had no say in the quarrel that began far off in the obscure East; but one could not doubt that they meant to make it their own. Their stern gravity caused Andrew a half-conscious thrill of pride.

After all, they sprang from British stock and he knew what kind of men they were. He had seen the miles of wheat that covered the broken, prairie waste, cities that rose as if by magic in a few months' time, and railroads flung across quaking muskegs and driven through towering rocks, at a speed unthought of in the mother country. He had heard the freight-trains roaring through the great desolation between the Ottawa and the Western plains, where no traffic would ever be found, and had wondered at the optimism which, in spite of tremendous obstacles, had built eight hundred miles of track to link the St. Lawrence to the rich land beyond. These Canadians were hard men who tempered with cool judgment a vast energy and enthusiasm, and the mother country's foes would have to reckon with them.

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There was a strange, dead silence, as the board was replaced and the bold black letters stood out in the lamplight. So far as Andrew could afterward remember, the bulletin read:

War inevitable. England must keep her word!

Kaiser's armies marching. British fleet sails with sealed orders.

A few cablegrams followed, and when they were read a deep murmur rose from the crowd; but there was no strong excitement. These were not the men to indulge in emotional sentiment; their attitude indicated relief from suspense, and steady resolve. Perhaps it was characteristic that the man who had stopped the car waved his hand to the driver.

"Now you may go ahead," he said.

Breaking into groups, they began to talk, and Andrew caught snatches of their conversation.

"A big thing, but we're going to put it through," said one. "If you hadn't fired out Laurier, we'd have been rushing our own fleet across the ocean now."

"Well," his neighbor replied, "we've got the boys. We want to call a city meeting right off. Manitoba can't be left behind."

"Manitoba's all right!" another declared. "We'll send them all the flour they want, besides men who can ride and shoot. They'll put the Maple Leaf right up to the front. But we want to hustle before Regina and Calgary get a start on us."

The man turned to a companion and the two moved off. They were followed by other groups, and as one passed, Andrew heard an exultant voice.

"I tell you what happen. *Vive la belle alliance!*"

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Whitney and Andrew crossed the emptying street and walked toward the station. "I guess you noticed they didn't talk about the Old Country's program," Whitney remarked. "It's what Manitoba and the West are going to do that interests them. My notion is that it will be something big."

"One feels that," Andrew agreed. "Somehow, it's stirring."

"And it's contagious. When they hoist the flag you'll see some of the boys from our side riding across the frontier to the rally."

"You're bound to keep neutral," Andrew objected.

"Officially, yes. But when a man can drop a flying crane with the rifle and bust a wild range horse, they won't ask if he was born in Montana or Saskatchewan."

They walked up Main Street and it was obvious that the news had spread, for talking men blocked the sidewalk here and there, and the wide windows of the hotels were full. When they reached the station, Whitney went off to check their baggage, and Andrew sat down, rather disconsolately, in the great waiting-room. The damp weather had affected his knee, and he frowned as he stretched it out, for his aches reminded him painfully of his disadvantages. While he sat there, a summer-evening train from Winnipeg Beach arrived and a stream of smartly-dressed excursionists passed through the hall breaking off to ask for the latest news. Their keen interest was significant, and Andrew felt downcast. Canada approved the Old Country's action and meant to do her part; but he was useless, nobody wanted him.

Moodily lighting a cigarette, he recalled his youthful ambitions, for he had meant to follow where his ancestors had led. It was not for nothing that their crest was the flying spur, and their traditions had fired him to the study of difficult sciences, which he had mastered by dogged determination rather than cleverness. His heart was in his work; he meant to make a good horse-artilleryman; and he had thrilled with keen satisfaction when the examiners placed him near the top of the list. Then came the momentous day in Ennerdale that altered everything. Six months after the accident he had resigned his commission, knowing that he would never walk quite straight again.

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Well, all that was done with; but now, when Britons everywhere were springing to arms, he was good for nothing. He reflected gloomily that he might as well stay in Canada. Yet, if he were in England, there was a chance that something might turn up for him to do.

Besides, there was little Elsie. . . .

Whitney came swinging across the marble floor of the waiting-room just as an official at the door announced that their train was ready to start.

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CHAPTER III

THE SOLWAY SHORE

There was a light wind from the westward, and the flood tide, running east, smoothed the sea to a faintly wrinkled heave, when the *Rowan* crept across Wigtown Bay on the southern coast of

Scotland. Andrew lounged at the tiller while Whitney sat in the cockpit, holding a tray on which were laid out a pot of smoke-tainted tea, several thick slices of bread, sardines, and marmalade.

Whitney wore a woolen sweater—which had been white a few days before but now was a dingy gray—new blue trousers, already streaked with rust, and an expensive yachting cap which had got badly crushed. His hands were not immaculate, and there was a soot-smear on his face.

"This kind of yachting's not quite what I've been used to," he remarked. "On Long Island Sound you don't get the sea we ran into coming round the head last night; and when we went cruising in small craft we always hired somebody to do the dirty work."

"There's not much room for a paid hand on board the *Rowan*," Andrew replied hesitatingly. "Still, if you'd like—"

"You don't want a man."

"He would be rather in the way, and I don't know what he'd find to do, except the cooking."

"And hauling the dinghy up a muddy beach, taking out the kedge on a stormy night, and pulling twenty fathoms of heavy chain about when you shift your moorings! I could think of a few other trifles if I tried; but I won't insist. It looks as if I were going to get some muscle up."

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Whitney thought his companion had a private reason for dispensing with a paid hand; and an extra man was certainly not needed for open-water navigation, for Andrew had shown himself quite capable of sailing the *Rowan* alone. After searching the Glasgow yacht-agents' registers for a boat of sufficiently light draught, they had bought the *Rowan* at an Ayrshire port; and Whitney got a surprise when his partner drove her through the furious tide-race that swirls around the Mull of Galloway, in a strong breeze of wind. He had confidence in the little yacht after that. She was thirty-two feet long, low in the water, and broad of beam, but her mast was short and her canvas snug: Whitney knew the disadvantages of a long heavy boom. Her deck was laid with narrow planks, no longer white, for there were stains like blood upon them where the rain had run from the mainsail, which was tanned with cutch.

Now the canvas glowed a warm orange in the evening light as its tall peak swayed gently across the sky, and the ripples that lapped the gliding hull united beneath the counter and trailed astern in silky lines.

To starboard, far off, the Isle of Man rose in a high, black saw-edge above the shining sea; ahead to the east, water and sky were soft blue; to port, the Scottish hills rose in shades of gray and purple.

Andrew named them as the boat crept on.

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"Cairn Harry, running straight up from the water; Dirk Hatteraik stored his brandy in a cave on Raven Crag, and John Knox hid in Barrholm tower, in the long patch of woods. The black ridge behind is Cairnsmoor o' Fleet, and a waste of moors runs back from it toward the head of Clyde. The water of Cree flows through the dark hollow."

"The Cree!" Whitney exclaimed. "That is where my mother and sister are. Our friend has a grouse moor and some salmon rights." He paused and laughed. "I can imagine them sitting down to dinner under the electric light in somebody's ancestral hall, with a frozen British butler running the show. Wonder what they'd say if they knew I wasn't far off, living like an Indian on board this craft!"

"There are no ancestral halls beside the Cree, and electric lights are scarce in the Galloway wilds," Andrew explained.

Whitney chuckled. He was not thinking of ancestral halls, but was wondering what his sister Madge would think of his comrade. On the surface, Andrew was easy-going, ingenuous, and diffident, but beneath this lay an unwavering firmness.

"Historic country, isn't it?" he remarked, to make Andrew talk.

"Yes," said Andrew in an apologetic tone, and started off on his favorite hobby.

Slowly the sea grew dimmer; the sunset glow behind them faded to a smoky red; and while they drifted east with the flood tide a black island detached itself from the dusky shore. Soon a trembling beam flashed out from its summit.

"The Ross," Andrew said. "I was wrecked there."

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"Tell me about it," requested Whitney, lounging in the cockpit, lazily watching a razor-bill which had risen with a hoarse croak from the boat's rippling wake.

"It was the only time such a thing ever happened to me, and I don't understand it yet. I was living on board the *Arrow* then, shooting from a punt. She was a stiff, roomy boat, of nearly nine tons, and I'd just had her pulled up at Glencaple for an overhaul. Staffer, Dick's stepfather, found me a Glasgow carpenter who had been building some anglers' boats at Lochmaben."

"And what had the carpenter to do with your being wrecked?"

"Nothing, so far as I can see; though I've thought about him now and then."

Andrew paused for a moment, and Whitney, knowing his comrade, waited for him to go on.

"The ebb had been running for some time when I left Gibb's Hole, and a nasty surf broke on the sands. There was not wind enough to account for it, but everything was harshly clear and that's often threatening. However, I set the big jib and topsail, because I wanted to clear the banks before the flood tide made. It runs from four to six knots an hour among the Solway shoals, and there's some risk of knocking the boat's bilges in if you get aground. The breeze fell light, and near dusk I came round and stood inshore on the port tack, so that I could, if necessary, slip back into Rough Firth. The Scotch channel of the Solway is no place to run for on a dirty night.

"When I got down to Abbey Head the swell was growing steep and the sea looked ragged where it cut the horizon—which showed there was wind out there. The shooting-punt I was towing was a drag, and I didn't make much progress until a smart southwesterly breeze sprang up soon after dark. I could just lay my course down the coast, and I hung on to big jib and topsail while I could. With two or three hours of that wind I'd be able to run in behind the Ross, which you see ahead. Then the breeze freshened suddenly and she listed over until most of her lee deck was in the water. For a time after that I had my hands full."

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"So I imagine," Whitney remarked. "I've seen a big jib give two men trouble when they had to take it in, and you were alone and had the topsail up. I'm not surprised that you got wrecked."

"I wasn't wrecked just then. In fact, I made her snug, with two reefs in the mainsail, and I lighted the compass binnacle. The trouble was that the wind was drawing ahead and the night had turned very dark. I couldn't get a glimpse of the coast, and it wouldn't have been wise to run back yet. There's a light on Hestan Island, but I wouldn't have found water enough across the sands in Rough Firth. She'd have gone down at her anchor if I'd brought up to wait.

"Well, I ate some sandwiches I had ready, and stood on. She was plunging wildly and putting her storm-jib into the sea that was getting up; but she was an able boat, and the punt towed pretty well when I'd made an extra rope fast to her."

"You wouldn't find that easy," Whitney suggested, as he pictured the lonely man's struggle to haul up the heavy craft while the yacht on which he must relinquish control rolled with thrashing canvas athwart the combers.

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"I let the *Arrow* come up and dropped the peak. The worst was that I had to lean right out with both hands on the punt while I made the second rope fast, and I nearly went overboard when she lurched. I made it fast, but when we went on I got a shock, for the water was washing up from under the cockpit floor. You see, as she'd shipped two or three combers, I'd thought it was washing down."

"The floorings would be nearly two feet above her bottom planks," Whitney said.

"Yes. It meant she was leaking hard, and I'll admit that rather staggered me, because she'd always been a remarkably tight craft. Well, I hove her to again, lighted the cabin lamp, and pulled up the floorings. This wasn't easy; they were closely fitted and the carpenter had nailed one or two of them down. I can't tell you why he did it, but I tore my hand before I got them loose. You can understand that I had to be quick. She wouldn't lie to well with nobody at the helm, and kept forging up head to wind and falling off again. The way she lurched about threw me against the lockers and once or twice I heard a sea come on board. There was too much water for me to find where it was coming in, and when I crawled out and tried the pump it wouldn't draw, so I went back and felt for the bottom of its pipe. There was a suction-box at the end, and it seemed to be stuffed up with shavings. The carpenter must have thrown them under the floor."

"Rather a curious place to put them!" Whitney commented. "I suppose a shaving had stuck under a valve and stopped the pump. But, as you'd have a grid on the suction-box, how did they get in?"

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"I've never found out, but I'd like to meet that carpenter," Andrew replied grimly.

He felt for his pipe and lighted it, and Whitney had to prompt him before he resumed:

"Things didn't look hopeful. It was blowing hard; she was leaking fast, and I couldn't pump her out. I had to make the Ross while she kept afloat. I thought about cutting the punt adrift, but it seemed a waste, and afterward I was glad I didn't. As it was a dead beat to windward, speed was important, and the only thing was to keep her sailing hard and let the seas come on board. There was so much spray flying that I couldn't see the punt astern, but the drag on the tow-lines showed that she was there. Then the old boat began to get sluggish, and it made me savage. She'd brought me through many a stiff blow, and I was fond of her. The Ross light was getting brighter; but a sea that came over the coaming washed out the binnacle lamp when I was ready to make the Sound. If I'd been able to take the light's bearing and look at the chart, I might have sailed her in.

"Well, with the compass gone, I had to run for it blind, and she was so waterlogged that she would hardly steer. Then suddenly she stopped with a shock that threw me from the helm. What had happened was plain, and when the next sea washed over her I pulled up the punt, cut the lines, and fell into the well. She swung away on top of a comber, and I wondered where she'd take me; for there were crags about and the paddles had washed overboard. She was full and waterlogged, but I lay along the deck and she kept right side up until we came ashore on a bank of shingle. Rocks ran up behind it, and there was a gully I couldn't cross at the end of the cove. I pulled the punt up, and spent the night lying behind her out of the wind, when I wasn't tramping

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about the shingle to keep myself warm. In the morning a coastguard showed me a way up the cliff; and when I came back there later there was no sign of the *Arrow*."

Andrew stopped, and for some minutes the silence was broken by the rustle of the flapping topsail and the soft splash at the bows. It had grown dark and the sea was faintly phosphorescent: pale blue and green spangles glimmered down the wake. Ross Island had faded into the black head behind it, but a bright beam of light still glittered across the water.

"On the face of it, the reason you were wrecked is obvious," Whitney said. "The boat began to strain when she was pounding, overpressed with sail, through a steep head sea, and you couldn't pump her out. Besides, as she'd just been hauled up for repairs, a butt may have got started by the hammering or a seam have been left open."

"The carpenter was a good workman," Andrew replied quietly.

"He may have neglected something, for all that. Boats will leak when they're driven hard; pumps get out of order; and a stranger might nail down a floor board you kept loose. The curious point is that all these things should happen together." Whitney paused and smiled. "Of course, if you had some dangerous secret or were heir to a great estate that somebody else wanted, one might suggest a melodramatic explanation."

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"I've no secret anybody would give twopence for, and I inherit nothing except a very small annuity."

"Then you'll have to put the series of accidents down to coincidence. Where were you bound for when you came to grief?"

Andrew glanced back toward a stretch of water that still shone faintly among the shadowy hills.

"Up yonder, near the head of Wigtown Bay, to shoot geese. Dick was to come on by train and join me. He's fond of wildfowling, and I took advantage of it to get him away."

"Away from what?"

Andrew hesitated.

"Well, you see, he was inclined to go the pace, and Staffer had some friends at Appleyard just then—clever, amusing men-about-town, who were fond of cards and knew all about the turf. Dick tried to play up to them, and he was losing a good deal of money and drinking rather more than was good for him."

"And his stepfather encouraged his extravagance?"

"Oh, no. Staffer gave him good advice in a cynical, witty way; told him he must pull up because the pace was too hot for a lad. I never quite liked the man, but one must be fair, and he was willing to let me take Dick. In fact, he agreed it was the best thing to do."

"But as it turned out, you didn't take him. Were you much at Appleyard afterward?"

"No. One of Staffer's friends offered me a pretty good post abroad, and everybody thought I ought to seize the chance, but I didn't. In consequence, a kind of coolness grew up and I haven't stayed long at Appleyard since. Dick sends a message and Elsie writes long letters now and then."

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Whitney stood up and stretched himself. A rhythmic throb of engines stole out of the silence, and, some distance off, a yellow and a green light moved across the level sea. Overhead, the topsail cut black against the sky, and the water had grown more luminous in the eddying wake. To the east, a thin, silver moon was shining above the dim heights of Cumberland. Tiny ripples lapped the *Rowan's* side, but the breeze was faint and everything was still.

"The flood will take us to Rough Firth, and we may as well stand on," Andrew said. "You can go below. I'll call you if you're wanted."

Carefully lowering his head, Whitney crept into the small cabin and lighted the lamp. Its illumination showed the oilskins swinging against the forecastle bulkhead, and the narrow table on top of the centerboard trunk, which ran up the middle of the floor. On each side were lockers that served as seats, and two folding cots were strapped against the skin of the boat. Whitney let one down and got into it with his clothes on: he had found that this was prudent when cruising in small vessels. There was a rack, loaded with odds and ends, a few inches above his head; and a smell of tarred rope, paraffin and mildewed canvas came out of the forecastle; but this did not trouble him, and he was soon asleep.

In the meanwhile, Andrew sat at the helm, his mind busy with gloomy thoughts.

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CHAPTER IV

APPLEYARD

It was a stormy evening when Whitney caught his first glimpse of Appleyard. He felt disappointed. He had expected to see an ancient Border tower with modern additions; but the low, straight-fronted house did not look much more than a century old. It was solidly built of gray granite, with mullioned windows and a small pepper-box turret at one end, but while it made no pretense of architectural beauty, Whitney admitted that it had some charm. For one thing, Appleyard stood boldly on the breast of a knoll, with dark firs packed closely about it, and the landscape it commanded was ruggedly wild. Bleak pastures and lonely moorland, stained a purple-red, rolled back to the hills that melted into leaden cloud in the north. To the south, a strip of green littoral was dotted with white farmsteads and traversed by the curves of a river that flashed where it caught the light.

Beyond this level strip, the Solway sands ran far out to sea, glowing red in the angry sunset and pierced by channels of slate-green water. In the distance, a narrow white line showed where their edge was washed by the receding tide. On the western shore of the wide estuary, Criffell's lonely height stood out, a harsh dark-blue, against a saffron glare.

The car sped across an iron bridge spanning a ravine where hazel, mountain-ash, and scrub oak grew among the stones, skirted a broad lawn, and stopped at the door. Whitney was presented to Mrs. Woodhouse and Staffer, who welcomed him cordially, and then he shook hands with Dick. They entered the house at once, and Whitney found himself in a large, square hall, which looked older than the rest of the building. The light was dim, for the windows were narrow and were placed unusually high in the massive walls. A wood fire burned in the big, old-fashioned hearth, but the place felt chilly and especially cheerless.

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Dick took them up a staircase that led to a gallery at the back of the hall.

"Your kit arrived from Glasgow, and I think you'll find all you want laid out in your rooms," he said. "Dinner will be ready as soon as you have changed."

They went along a passage, and Whitney was glad to be left alone in his room. It was his first visit to an old Scottish house, and although not an antiquarian he was capable of receiving impressions from places, and he wanted to discover what influence Appleyard had on him. He noted that a fire was laid ready in the grate, although it was August and until that morning the weather had been warm. The room was rather bare, but the few articles of old-fashioned furniture were solid and were made on a good model. They were marked by a certain austerity of taste, and he thought of them as business-like. The plain, self-colored rugs and curtains had a similar effect. Everything that utility demanded was there, but he marked the absence of luxury and ornament.

The walls were very thick, and there were seats in the deep window recesses. Opening one of the casements, Whitney stopped a minute and looked out. He could see a stretch of wet sands that were now growing dim, and the faint line of surf, and then, by turning sharply, black hills running back into gathering cloud. The air was unusually keen, and although darkness was fast coming on, the distance was clean-cut and sharp. The landscape somehow harmonized with the house; it was perhaps a trifle harsh, but it had a peculiarly distinctive character.

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Andrew came in while Whitney was dressing, and finding him not ready, he went down first.

There was no one in the hall when Andrew reached it, and he was satisfied to be alone as he stood by the hearth, looking about. A lamp had been lighted, but the illumination did not carry far, and the high roof and the corners were shadowy. The hall occupied the lower story of the old central tower, which had served as a fort in bygone years but had since been partly rebuilt and incorporated in the house. Andrew knew its history, for he loved Appleyard. He was, in some respects, truer to the type of the men who had built and fought for it than Dick. He was not jealous of his cousin, but it was hard to feel himself a mere passing guest in the old house, and a vague discontent tempered his satisfaction at coming home. Besides, he was poor, and was condemned by an accident to a life of obscurity. He wondered why Elsie had not been there to welcome him, as she had always done on previous visits. He remembered her frank regret when he last went away. Indeed, he had often pictured her as she stood by the lodge gate, a slender, fresh-faced girl, with ruffled hair and a hint of tears in her blue eyes. She was as graceful as a fawn; but her beauty as yet was immature.

Andrew heard a sound behind him, and turning from the fire he saw a girl coming down the stairs. She stood out against the dark-paneled walls, for her pale green dress caught the light and shimmered. It went well with her auburn hair, emphasizing the pure white and pink of her skin; and it matched her eyes, which had the changing color of the sea. The immature grace Andrew had known had gone; there was something of distinction in her carriage.

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While he gazed at her, she came toward him with a frank smile of pleasure.

"It's very nice to have you back," she said. "I couldn't get home until a few minutes after you arrived. Roy lost a shoe as I was driving up the Lockerbie road."

Andrew took her hand and held it for a moment, but the only remark he could think of was:

"You have Roy yet?"

Elsie laughed as if she understood, and rather liked, his embarrassment.

"Oh, yes. He's still going strong, and when Kevan re-shod him he brought me home in record

time. But you're very brown and looking well."

"It's good to be back at Appleyard," he said quietly.

"You're still very fond of it? So am I, though that may seem curious, because I'm really an outsider."

"That applies to me more than to you, because the old place would never be the same without you."

Elsie looked at him as he stood, gravely quiet, studying her.

"Well," she said, "Appleyard is Dick's. His father was a true Johnstone, his mother a Jardine, but you make one feel that you're more at home here than he is. I can't account for it. Can you?"

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"I might blame your imagination," he answered, smiling.

Elsie gave him a roguish look, which made her seem more like the little Elsie he had known two years before.

"You haven't told me how I'm looking," she said. "Perhaps you don't realize that this gown was made in Paris and was put on in your especial honor."

"You're rather wonderful," Andrew replied gravely. "But then you always were. For all that, I had a pleasant surprise when you came downstairs."

Elsie's eyes twinkled, and he thought they looked like the sea when the sun touched it in a breeze.

"A surface change," she laughed. "Munich and London account for it. I'd run wild, you know, when you saw me last. But there's no difference underneath. You're the same too, and that's what I like. I want to keep my old friend. You must promise you won't alter."

"I'll try not to," he answered. "Perhaps I'm incapable of it; I'm not progressive. Still, there are times when I feel rather old."

"Oh, I know," she said with understanding sympathy. "But after the cheerful letters you wrote from Canada, I hoped the lameness didn't trouble you very much."

"One mustn't grumble, though it's rather hard to feel useless—just now."

Elsie's face grew thoughtful.

"Yes," she said slowly, "that must hurt. I've felt that we don't realize the seriousness of the great struggle here. It's easy to subscribe to funds and go on committees, but that kind of service leaves you cold, and we haven't practised much self-denial at Appleyard. I was glad Dick wanted to enlist, even though they wouldn't have him; but he'll tell you about it himself."

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Mrs. Woodhouse and Whitney came toward them, with Dick close behind. Dick was not unlike Andrew, but it was as if his cousin's prominent characteristics had been watered down. Although the handsomer of the two, he somehow looked a feeble copy of Andrew when they were together. He had twinkling eyes and a humorous way of regarding things, but his face was weak. His figure was light, well-poised and athletic, but his color was unusually high, and on close study he showed signs of bad health.

When he had spoken a few words to Andrew they went in to dinner, and during the meal Whitney devoted some attention to the company. One of the differences between him and his comrade was that he was most capable at managing people, and Andrew in handling things. Andrew knew all about a boat and a gun, and could be relied upon to deal with contrary tides and dangerous shoals, but he was less acquainted with the intricacies of human nature.

Whitney dismissed Dick as not counting; Elsie he reserved for future study. Mrs. Woodhouse he found interesting because baffling. She was rather fat, with regular features but an expressionless face, eyes of light china-blue, and flat, flaxen hair. She answered his remarks with conventional politeness, but he could not, as he thought of it, strike a spark from her. He could not tell whether she was reserved or merely dull. Her brother, Staffer, was of very different stamp. His face was clean-cut and intellectual, his manners were polished but easy, and Whitney had no trouble in placing him as a man who knew the world. Indeed, since there was a hint of force and command about him, Whitney wondered why he was, so to speak, vegetating in the Scottish wilds. Staffer clearly belonged to the busy cities and the centers of action.

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Nothing that Whitney thought worth noting occurred at dinner, except that Dick drank a good deal of wine and Elsie watched him with half-veiled disturbance. Whitney thought her attitude was protective and motherly; she would have interfered had it been possible. This suggested that a supposition of Andrew's was wrong. A girl like that would not marry a man whom she must guide and control.

When they went back to the hall, Andrew found a quiet corner, hoping he might get a few minutes alone, for his meeting with Elsie had a disturbing effect. When he last went away, she had told him that when he came back things would not be the same; and he now recognized the truth of this. The girl who had treated him as a trusted elder brother had grown into a beautiful, accomplished woman. Indeed, she had, so to speak, left him behind. She was cleverer and more

composed than he; she grasped things at once while he clumsily searched for their meaning. The old frank confidence and the comradeship were no longer possible, but in essentials she had not changed. The world could never spoil Elsie's freshness nor blunt her keen honesty.

After a while she came and sat down near where he stood in the shadowy recess of the great hearth.

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"I believe you were trying to hide, and we must have a talk," she said. "I'm half afraid I brought you home from Canada."

"No," Andrew replied awkwardly; "anyway, not altogether. I felt that I ought to come back, even if there's nothing I can do. Still, of course, if I can be of help here—"

Elsie's eyes were soft as she looked at him.

"Yes, I know; you're a good friend, Andrew, but I was alarmed when I wrote. After what the army doctors told him, Dick went to see a specialist in Harley Street, and he must have got a plain warning, for he was depressed and quiet for some time. Things are serious when Dick's cast down."

"Do you know what the doctor said?"

"No; Dick wouldn't tell me. I'm not sure that he told Uncle Arnold much."

"Ah!"

Andrew was silent for a moment.

"Has he been indulging in any rashness since then?"

"No, nothing fresh; but I'm afraid he's heavily in debt. His allowance is very large, but he tried to borrow money a few days after he got it." Elsie's color grew deeper as she continued: "I've seen him quite unsteady at luncheon; and the worst is that it's telling on his health."

"Looks bad; I must see what I can do. But it's awkward, because Staffer's really responsible for him. Has he tried to pull Dick up?"

"Yes, in a way," Elsie answered with a thoughtful air. "Still, I don't think it disturbs him as it ought to when he sees that he hasn't done much good. He's witty when he should be firm—and I've sometimes imagined that Dick feels rather flattered than ashamed after the talk."

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"I understand. What Dick really needs is a good kicking for being fool enough to try to copy Staffer."

"Couldn't you take him away for a time in the boat?"

"I'll try, but he's not fond of sailing. Then it's a delicate matter. If one could make Staffer understand—"

Elsie gave him a steady look.

"No; I think you'd better not. Uncle Arnold's very kind; mother and I owe him a good deal, and he likes Dick. For all that, he doesn't seem to feel it's his duty to take much trouble—"

Andrew knew she was not saying all that she thought; but he did not press her.

"I will try to find a way," he said. "And now tell me how things have been going since I left."

While they were talking, Dick came up; and not long afterward the two men found themselves alone in the smoking-room.

Andrew put his hands on Dick's shoulders and held him off at arm's length.

"You strike me as not being quite up to the mark," he said.

"Do I?" Dick grinned. "You've been talking to Elsie!"

"I have; and I'm sorry to hear the doctors didn't think you very well. Hadn't you better tell me about it?"

"I suppose I must. You're a persistent fellow, but you don't often take the superior moral tone. Well, as I'd been in the officers' training corps, I applied for a commission, and they sent me up to a medical board. One doctor asked me some catchy questions, and, being quite inexperienced, I fell into the trap. The consequence was I didn't pass."

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"You didn't learn much about yourself from him?"

"Not much! It was he who got the information. But when he'd finished he offered me a scrap of advice—I'd better see a private doctor at once."

"Did you?"

Dick chuckled.

"Instead, I went up to London and tried to join one of the special battalions. I was wiser this time, and told their medical examiner nothing I could help. I thought I'd made a good impression; but

at last he looked at me pretty hard. 'I admire your keenness, but you won't do,' he said. I told him I was a bit off color, but I'd play golf all day and drink nothing but soda-water, and then come back to him in a month. 'It would be of no use; I'd go to Harley Street now,' he said."

"I hope you did," Andrew remarked with a frown.

Dick lighted a cigarette.

"Yes; I went. I'll spare you technicalities; for that matter, I've forgotten them; but, after all, I didn't get much of a shock. It seems my heart's gone a bit rocky."

"Go on," said Andrew.

"Well, if I give up everything I like and live like an ascetic, I may get over the trouble, though I think the fellow doubted it. On the other hand, I may get worse and drop off suddenly."

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"Unless you steady down."

"Yes; he hinted something of the kind."

Andrew said nothing for a few moments. He was fond of his cousin; and, besides, he had promised Dick's father to look after the boy. He felt that he had been neglectful; and he wished now that he had more tact. He had a duty ahead of him, and he did not know how to discharge it.

"The proper course is obvious," he began somewhat awkwardly. "Suppose you come down the Galloway coast with Whitney and me? It's early for the black geese, but there are ducks about."

Dick smiled.

"Unfortunately, I'm not keen on sailing; and I must say that living on board a small, damp boat gets monotonous. Now, if you would land me where one could get a game of cards in the evening, or—"

"Where they had a bar?"

"Precisely. A bar with a fetching girl in it."

"It wouldn't work," said Andrew firmly. "I remember what happened when I landed you at Douglas—and a poaching escapade with some Creetown quarrymen on the same cruise. You have a talent for getting into trouble. Well, if you won't come with me, I'll have to make Appleyard my headquarters for a time."

"I hope you will," Dick replied with feeling. "Has it ever struck you that Appleyard might be yours?"

Andrew's face grew stern.

"Appleyard belongs to you and, what's more, you belong to it. It's your duty to pull yourself together and take care of the estate, to marry and bring up your children to be a credit to your name. Instead, you're dragging it in the dirt, making shabby betting men and turf sharpers your friends, and, I'm half afraid, getting into speculative money-lenders' hands."

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Dick winced and Andrew saw that his random shot had scored.

"If you're in difficulties, I might raise a hundred pounds or so," he went on. "If, as I suspect, that isn't half enough, we'll go and see Mackellar before you get in too deep."

Mackellar was the acting executor of Dick's father's will.

"I'll think over it," Dick answered; and there was something that puzzled Andrew in his expression.

"Very well. Did you tell Staffer what the doctor said?"

"I wasn't quite as frank with him as I've been with you; one isn't proud of being a lame duck. Still, I imagine he has a pretty accurate notion of how things are with me."

"Then he ought to pull you up; he has the power."

"That's doubtful. I don't think you're quite fair to Staffer. I might have got a stepfather of a very different kind."

"It might have been better if you had," Andrew dryly rejoined.

Dick flushed.

"I wish you'd leave Staffer alone; I won't have him run down."

"I didn't mean to run him down," Andrew said.

"Well, perhaps you didn't consciously. You'd try to conquer your prejudices, but you're antagonistic."

Andrew gave Dick a shrewd glance.

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"I wonder how Staffer feels about me?" he ventured.

"You're not likely to find out," Dick answered with a laugh. "I suppose he has his failings, but he never gives himself away."

When Andrew went to his room that night he sat beside his window for a long time, with a thoughtful frown. The task he had undertaken would not be an easy one.

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CHAPTER V SWEETHEART ABBEY

Soon after their arrival Whitney and Andrew drove back to the boat, which was moored in the mouth of a stream at some distance from Appleyard. It was a bright morning and they sat smoking in the cockpit when they had shaken some of the canvas and laid their sea clothes and blankets out to dry.

Behind the white beach, a strip of marish heath led back to the broad belt of cultivated land, with neat farmsteads scattered about; in front, the narrow channel, in which the shallow-bodied boat lay nearly upright, wound seaward through a great stretch of sand. The open sea was not visible, but three or four miles away a glistening streak that seemed to be in motion caught the light. In the middle distance a green lagoon and two ribands of water were rapidly widening. Flocks of black and white oyster-catchers fluttered about the banks of the channels, and long rows of salmon nets ran back along the shore.

"This is a curious place to navigate," Whitney remarked. "You were right in insisting on shallow draught and a centerboard."

"The shoals are not the worst," Andrew replied. "The tide runs up these gutters very fast, and, as a rule, you can't take out an anchor if you get aground."

"But that's the first thing one generally does."

"It's dangerous here. If the anchor held until she floated on the flood tide, the strain on the cable would probably pull her down. If it didn't hold, which is much more likely, it would check her while she drove across the bank, sheering athwart the stream, in danger of rolling over. The safest plan is to keep all sail set and try to make for deep water as soon as she floats."

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Whitney glanced at the nearest channel. A small white ridge, perhaps six inches high, stretched from bank to bank, moving forward about as fast as one could walk, and as the wave passed on the riband of water changed into a lake. He thought it would not be pleasant to meet the advancing tide at some distance from the land.

On looking round, Whitney saw a man walking toward them across the bank. The fellow was old and his brown face was deeply lined. He wore a yellow oilskin cap, an old blue jersey, and rubber waders that reached to his thighs. Clambering on board, he nodded to Andrew.

"Weel," he said, "I'm glad to see ye back, an' it's a bonny wee boat ye have got."

"She's not bad for work among the shoals, but she's not the best type for the long seas you get in open water," Andrew replied, and turned to Whitney. "You might bring up the bottle in the port locker, Jim, and the soda."

"Ye can let the sodda bide; I've nae use for't." When Whitney returned the fisherman filled his glass. "Here's til ye an' her! Ye have given her a right name," he said.

"Why's the name good? What does *Rowan* mean?" asked Whitney.

"The mountain-ash. The old mosstroopers sometimes wore a spray in their steel caps as a protection against witchcraft and bad luck. We're descendants of the Norse pirates, and the ash was the Scandinavians' sacred Ysdragil, the tree of life."

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"You're a curious lot," Whitney remarked. "I guess our beachcombers don't know much about archæology: they don't have superstitions a thousand years old."

"Were ye thinking o' making a trip to the deep water doon wast?" the Scotsman inquired.

"I don't know yet. We might do some shooting here. Is there much fowl about?"

"Ye'll get shellduck noo, an' a few teal; whaups, too, if ye're wanting them, but the lag-geese an' the bernicle are no' here yet." He paused and added: "I wouldna' say but it might be better if ye bide until they come."

Andrew looked hard at him.

"Why?"

"I'm thinking ye're wanted here. It would be an ill thing to see Appleyard gang doon, and it might be yours some day."

"It's my cousin's and he's younger than I am," Andrew answered with a frown.

"Just that! Ye're leal, we ken. Weel, as ye're fond o' the young laird, it might be wiser to keep an eye on him. He's overmuch under yon foreigner's thumb."

"How's the fishing?" Andrew asked pointedly.

The old fellow broke into a slow chuckle.

"It might be better an' it might be waur; there's ower many o' the Board's watchers here awa' for my liking. An' noo, I'll need to win ashore before the tide's on the bank."

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He went off across the sands and Whitney turned to Andrew with a smile.

"You people leave a good deal to the imagination, but, so far as I could understand him, he gave you a hint or two. What's his business?"

"Salmon-fishing with a drift net. I've known Jock Marshall since I was a boy, and I believe he takes a well-meaning interest in me."

"Why did he call Staffer a foreigner?"

"In a sense, he is a foreigner, although he's been a naturalized British subject for some time. We knew nothing about him until he married Dick's mother, but there's reason to believe his name used to be Von Stauffer, or something like it. Mrs. Woodhouse was born in Austria, but she came over young, and her husband was all right."

Whitney was not much interested.

"What about to-morrow?" he asked.

"If the breeze holds, we'll have no trouble in crossing the sands to New Abbey. Elsie and Dick will come, and I expect you'll enjoy the trip. It's an interesting place."

As they stowed the sails the boat suddenly rose upright, drifted a few yards, and then brought up with a jar of tightening cable while the tide splashed against her planks. Launching the light dinghy, they paddled shoreward with the stream.

At high-water the next day they went back on board and the *Rowan* stood out across the sands. Elsie sat at the tiller, while Andrew sounded with a long boat-hook, and Dick lounged in the cockpit, smoking a cigarette. He laughed and told humorous stories, but Whitney noticed that Elsie was intent upon her steering. He had expected this, for he thought that whatever the girl undertook would be well done; but she did not obtrude her earnestness. Now and then she glanced at Andrew as he dipped the pole and a nod or a gesture was exchanged. He was feeling his way across the shoals with half-instinctive skill and the girl understood what he wished her to do. Their task was not an easy one: there was only a foot or two of water under the boat and she forged ahead fast through the short seas the tide made as it raced across the banks.

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The seas began to curl as the ebb met the freshening wind, and little showers of spray splashed into the straining canvas. The deck got wet; the water was filled with sand and streaked with foam. There was no mark in all the glittering stretch, but Andrew knew when he reached the main channel, and told Whitney to let the centerboard down. Then they went to windward faster, the sea hurrying westward with them in confused eddies while small white combers foamed about the boat. She plunged through them, scooping their broken crests on board, and by and by the water ahead grew yellow and marked by frothy lines.

Elsie looked at Andrew, and he took out his watch.

"We ought to get a fathom most of the way across," he said, and turned to Whitney. "You might stand by below to pull up the board."

Whitney crept into the low-roofed cabin, where he sat on a locker, holding the tackle that lifted the heavy iron centerplate. He knew that it would be desirable to heave it up as soon as possible after he got the order. From where he sat he could see nothing outside the boat, but as he looked aft through the hatch he was offered a fascinating picture.

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A strip of the tanned mainsail, shining ruby-red, cut against a patch of clear blue sky, and Elsie sat beneath it, her gracefully lined figure swaying easily as the boat rose and fell. She leaned on the long tiller, and a lock of loosened hair that shone like the sail fluttered across her forehead. Her eyes were bright, and there was a fine color in her face; but it was not so much her beauty as her decision and confidence that Whitney liked. The girl was capable of keen enjoyment, but it must be in something that was worth doing. He was already conscious of a curious respect for Elsie Woodhouse.

Andrew called to him to lift the board and come up; and when he reached the deck he saw close ahead of them a long, hump-backed mountain that rose abruptly from a narrow strip of rolling pasture. A row of very small white houses bordered a green common behind the beach, and the tide swept, froth-streaked, down the channel in front.

"Where do we bring up?" he asked.

"In the Carsethorn gut," said Andrew. "Do you think you can find it, Elsie?"

"I'll try. Give her a foot or two of sheet."

The boat swung round a little, edging in toward the beach, and Whitney saw by the ripples that they were in shallow water. Andrew let the staysail run down, but when he stood ready with the boathook, Elsie smiled.

"Sound if you like, but you won't find bottom here," she said.

"A good shot. You have hit the mouth of the gut."

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"You'll touch now," said Elsie a few minutes later; and Andrew dipped the pole, then threw it down and lowered the jib. The boat came round head to wind, and the anchor went down with a rattle of running chain.

Landing from the dinghy, they struck across the fields, and although it was autumn, Whitney wondered at the lush greenness of the grass. Close on their left hand, Criffell's lonely ridge ran up against the sky, colored purple-red, though the hollows in its curving side were filled with dark-blue shadows. The ash-trees in the hedgerows that crossed the rolling pasture obscured their view ahead, and they were crossing the last rise when Whitney stopped.

"This is worth coming a very long way to see!" he exclaimed.

A deep glen, where the light was subdued and the colors dim, cleft the mountain's northern flank, and at its mouth a cluster of white houses stood among the trees; then, on a narrow green level, bright in the sun, the old abbey shone rosy red. Ancient ash-trees and crumbling granite walls straggled about it, but the molding of the high, east window, buttress and tower, still rose in lines of beauty, worked in warm-colored stone.

Elsie gave him a quick look and he knew that she was pleased with his frank admiration. When they entered the cool, shadowy interior she acted as his guide, for Dick and Andrew stayed outside in the sun. Presently she stopped near the east end of the building, and Whitney looked back down the long rows of plinths, from which the pillars had fallen, and up into the hollow of the great ruined tower.

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"It must have been a wonderful place in the old days; a jewel in the shape of a church. And I dare say if they'd searched Scotland they couldn't have found a finer setting than these rich meadows at the mountain's foot."

Elsie led him a few yards along a wall, over which a low, groined roof still hung.

"Its building was a labor of love, and perhaps that's why it never leaves one cold," she said. "I suppose you know its history?"

"I only know it's called Sweetheart Abbey."

"The Countess Devorgilla built it as a shrine for her husband's heart, which was embalmed and buried on her breast. It's a moving story, when one thinks of what she undertook. Galloway was then, for the most part, a savage waste; skilled workmen must be brought from somewhere else, perhaps from Italy or France. Then there is only granite, which could not be cut and molded, on these hills, and the soft red stone had to be carried down the Firth and across the sands. They had no mechanical transport, and you can see the size of the blocks. In spite of all this, the abbey rose and still stands, marked, I often think, by a tender, elusive beauty that's peculiar to the North."

Elsie moved back to where the sun shone down into the roofless nave, and Whitney thought he understood why she did so. Her imagination was fastidiously refined: she would not loiter talking by Devorgilla's tomb. Standing silent beside her, he waited, with a faint smile. He was not a sentimentalist trying to play up to a pretty girl; somehow, she had stirred him. He felt that she had the gift of seizing what was true in romance and missing what was false. Then, she had the strange elusive beauty of the North which she had spoken of: an ethereal tenderness that flashed out and vanished, leaving the hard rock of a character steadfast as the granite upon the Solway shore.

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Elsie turned and looked east with grave, steady eyes.

"One reaches out for something that's on the other side," she said; "but perhaps when one knocks and the gate is opened, one goes through unawares—"

"You mean, that when one's eyes are opened, there may not be much difference between the land of enchantment and ours?"

"Something like that."

During the short silence that followed, Whitney looked round the great church that was still majestic in its decay.

"Well," he said, "there can't be many of us, nowadays, who'd deserve the love and labor this place must have cost."

"But there must be some," she insisted.

"It seems a big thing to claim, but I have met two or three who, so far as my judgment goes, were good enough for the kind of woman your Countess seems to have been; not clever men and in no

way remarkable, until you knew them well, but you felt that, whatever happened, they'd do the square thing. One could trust them. Somehow, one man in particular stands out from the rest."

Elsie turned toward him and he saw the strange, elusive tenderness shining in her eyes. Momentary as it was, it transformed her face, and he wondered whether she approved his sentiment or knew whom he meant.

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"I imagine you are a good friend," she said softly. "It must be nice to have somebody who believes in you like that."

"If the man I'm thinking of knew how he stood with me and others, it would make him embarrassed." Whitney laughed. "But that's natural. It's a hard thing to feel that you must live up to your reputation."

"I like you best when you're serious," Elsie rebuked him, though she smiled.

She took the lead he gave her and they went back to the others, engaged in careless talk. When they reached an arch that opened on a sweep of sunny grass, Andrew looked up from the stone on which he sat.

"You haven't hurried," he remarked.

"No," said Whitney. "I've been learning some more of your traditions, and they're inspiring. The people round here seem to have been great lovers as well as pretty hard fighters."

"A happy thought has struck me," Dick broke in. "It would be hot work dragging the dinghy down across a quarter of a mile of sand, and I don't feel up to carrying a heavy lunch basket. There's a hotel in the village where they'd give us something to eat, and we could stroll up the burnside afterward. It's a pretty walk."

Whitney noticed that Andrew's glance rested for a second on Elsie's face and then passed on. She made no sign, but it seemed that Andrew understood without it.

"I think not," he said; "the place would probably be full of Dumfries excursionists. It would be pleasanter on the beach."

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"And I want to see the view you talked about," Whitney followed him up.

Dick broke into a resigned grin.

"Very well; but you'll drag the dinghy down yourselves."

They had to carry the boat some distance, and afterward they rowed lazily along the edge of the sand until they landed at the foot of a little glen. Here they lunched and lounged in the sun until the flood tide came softly lapping across the flats.

The breeze had fallen very light when the stream swept the *Rowan* east across the shoals, and Whitney, sitting on the cabin-top, watched the Galloway shore recede. The western sky was a pale saffron, against which Criffell rose, steeped in a wonderful blue. The shadows were gathering fast about the rolling ground below, but the hollow where the old red abbey stood still could be distinguished.

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CHAPTER VI ON CRIFFELL HILL

The sun burned down on the heather. Below, in the curving glen where the heath gave place to white bent-grass, a burn flashed like a silver riband among the stones; above, the long ridge of Criffell ran up against the clear blue sky. Grouse were calling as they skimmed the steep downward slope, and a curlew's wild cry fell sharply from the summit of the hill. These were sounds that delighted Andrew, for he loved the fellside almost as he loved the sea; but his lips were set and his brows knitted as he stood waist-deep in the heather.

Whitney was toiling up the hill beside Elsie a short distance farther on, and Dick was behind them; but, seeing Andrew stop, they waited until he came up.

"It's rather steep," said Elsie, giving Andrew a sympathetic glance. "Here's a nice flat stone; we'll rest for a few minutes."

She sat down on a slab of lichened granite, and Dick found a place beside her.

"I wonder why Andrew loaded himself up with that heavy ruck-sack on a day like this?" he said. "I suppose there's a pair of marine glasses and a chart, and a parallel rule and compass, inside of it. Andrew thinks he'd get lost if he didn't carry the lot about when he risks himself ashore."

"They're all there," Andrew replied somewhat grimly. "Still, it wasn't the bag that stopped me."

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"I'm sorry we forced the pace," Elsie said. "You were going well at the bottom."

"I felt all right; but that's just when my weakness finds me out. Sometimes it's the damp that brings it on and sometimes the heat; but one oughtn't to grumble about not being able to climb a hill as fast as usual." He broke off and resumed after a twinge of pain: "It's thinking of our boys being rolled back on Cambrai while I loaf about the Solway shore, that worries me."

When they had rested a while they climbed up the steep face of a pointed knoll, and then followed a long ridge to the massive cairn on the top of the hill, where shallow pools gleamed among the green moss of a bog. Andrew sat down on a stone, but Whitney stood on the highest hillock, his eyes wandering across the wide landscape that rolled away beneath him.

To the south the sea glittered like silver, and a bright arm wound inland up a valley. To the west and north a few lemon-yellow harvest fields and strips of green pasture checkered the red heath, and the smoke of a little town hung about a hollow; but the picture's dominant tone was wild solitude. The plain rose in step-like ridges, the hillsides that bordered it were washed with shades of delicate gray, and in the distance lofty rounded summits cut against the sky.

"It looks as lonely as our Western deserts," Whitney remarked.

Andrew was busy with his chart. He had spread it on a flat stone; then, putting a compass on the middle of it, he moved a notched brass ring round the instrument. The tide was about half ebb and broad belts of sand rose among the glistening channels in the firth. Andrew took sights across them, then penciled notes on the margin of the chart, but at times he lay still for a minute or two with the marine glasses at his eyes. The others left him alone until he rolled up the chart and lighted his pipe.

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"I've learned something useful," he said. "These channels change so fast that a chart's of no use unless you keep it up to date."

"What's the country to the east like?" Whitney asked. "It looks high and rough, but I seem to make out a deep valley beyond your Annandale."

"Now you have set him off!" Dick exclaimed. "Andrew's one hobby is that western road to England!"

Andrew laughed.

"The road is interesting. I will take you over it some day. For one thing, nature has provided a good route through a rugged country. For most of the way, the valleys are shut in by high moors, and that made Eskdale a natural sallyport for the old Border clans."

Elsie and Dick were walking about, picking their way among the shallow pools; but Whitney sat down beside Andrew and listened with interest to the history of the old Eskdale road.

"I shall buy a motorcycle," he declared, when Andrew had concluded; "one of those with a side-car, so that we can travel around these roads."

Elsie and Dick joined them and for a time they sat talking and looking about. There was very little wind and the murmur of the Solway tide came up to them faintly across the purple slopes where the grouse were calling.

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Suddenly, as if he had sprung from the earth, a young man in khaki uniform appeared, picking his way across the bog. He was hot and breathless, and seemed surprised when he saw the party, but he came toward them with a smile.

"So you're back!" he exclaimed to Andrew. "I meant to look you up."

"We'll be glad to see you, Murray," Dick said cordially. "You haven't been round for a long time. What brings you up Criffell in full uniform? I must say it's a better fit than some they've been serving out lately."

Murray laughed.

"We are giving the Terriers a run; but business first. I suppose you haven't seen any turf that might have been dug over recently, or stones that seemed to have been pulled up?"

"No. Did you expect to find anything of the sort?"

"To tell the truth, I don't know what I did expect to find. We're ostensibly practising scouting, but there's a batch of Dumfries cyclists scouring the Galloway roads, and I imagine the authorities have some reason for sending us out."

"I suppose if you met a foreigner or anybody with an electric battery, he'd go into the bag," Dick suggested. "After reading the newspapers, one must admit that the Terriers are remarkably good shots. In fact, it's not safe to meet them in the dark."

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"You imagine this turnout isn't merely part of the men's training?" Andrew asked.

Murray looked thoughtful.

"No; I believe there is something going on round here. We've got orders to search the country as far as Screel of Bengairn—though of course that can't be done in a day. I heard they mean to organize scouting parties in the Castle Douglas neighborhood."

"Well, perhaps a wireless installation could be made small enough to carry about and hide; but a good deal of Galloway's a wilderness of granite and heath."

"That's why it might prove a suitable place."

"Yes, in a way. There are glens where a man could lurk for a long time without being seen; but they're hard to reach, and nothing that the enemy would wish to learn is likely to happen here. Then the sands protect this shore. The east coast's our vulnerable point: any important news could best be picked up about Rosyth. If there are wireless installations working, one would naturally look for them on the eastern slope of the Lammermuirs and along the seaboard between Berwick and the Forth."

"Of course," agreed Murray. "And no doubt they've had that district searched. But you must remember we're dealing with remarkably clever people, who wouldn't go to work in the obvious way. Now, suppose some news was gathered about Rosyth, how long would it take a powerful car to bring it here?"

"Four hours and a half, provided that none of your fellows or the police interfered."

"That's by the Eskdale road. I'd go the other way—a rough country, but there's nobody to bother about the speed limit." [Pg 58]

"Well," said Andrew, thoughtfully, "I'd prefer the Eskdale. The obvious way's sometimes safest; it's the unusual thing that excites suspicion."

"There's only one road for Andrew," Dick laughed.

Murray got up.

"I must be off," he said. "My Terriers are scattered about the mosses, and khaki has its disadvantages when you're looking for your men."

He turned away and when he went, springing down the western slope of the hill, Elsie looked at the others.

"It was so serene up here," she said; "and he has broken the charm. The war cloud looked a long way off, but it seems closer now." She glanced across the ranges of sunny hills as she added: "What a beautiful world this might be if men were sensible and just!"

"True," replied Dick; "but then we'd miss some excitement and get fat and slack. A certain amount of trouble's good for us, and that's why we make it."

"We didn't make this horrible war."

"No; I suppose we didn't. As a future landowner, I've naturally no admiration for the Lloyd George gang, but one must admit that they were forced into the fray. To do them justice, they're not the lot to fight when they can help it, and they're certainly getting on better than I expected."

"You were bound by the 'Scrap of paper,'" Whitney remarked.

Dick chuckled.

"Our politicians have left us nothing to say about that; but I'll admit there's something convenient in the other fellows' theory. I happen to know a little about scraps of paper and there are one or two I'd be glad to disown." [Pg 59]

"So I thought!" Andrew interposed dryly.

"Oh," Dick laughed; "my frankness is always getting me into trouble."

Soon afterward they went down the hill, talking carelessly, but Elsie's eyes were grave when she saw in the distance small scattered figures moving across the heath. There was something ominous about the soldiers' presence on the quiet moors where the black-faced sheep had long fed undisturbed.

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CHAPTER VII

THE GRAY CAR

It was one o'clock in the morning, but Andrew could not sleep. He sat by an open window, looking at the tops of the firs, which stood out in black silhouette. It annoyed him to be so wakeful, as he and Whitney were to make an early start for Edinburgh; but Andrew had something to think about, for he realized that his friendship with Elsie could not be resumed where it had broken off. She had grown up while he was away, and his feeling toward her had changed. To be regarded as an elder brother no longer satisfied him, and if he were not very careful, he would find himself in love with her. This was unthinkable: first of all, because he was lame and poor, and then because it was obvious that Elsie ought to marry Dick. She had no money; Dick had plenty and, besides, Dick needed her. Elsie would keep him straight, and his

weak heart would cease to trouble him when he steadied down. Andrew had long cherished an affection for both of them, and he knew that Dick trusted him.

Then he reflected that Elsie's attitude toward Dick was to a large extent protective and motherly, which was not the feeling one would expect a girl to show for the man she meant to marry; and while Dick was obviously fond of her, his attachment, so far as one could judge, was not passionate. Besides, when one came to think of it, the suggestion that their marriage must be taken for granted had come from Staffer. He had, so to speak, delicately warned Andrew off.

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Andrew firmly pulled himself up. He was being led away by specious arguments. It was easy to find excuses for indulging oneself and he had promised to look after Dick. If he tried to supplant his cousin in Elsie's affection, he would be doing a dishonorable thing. There was no getting around this; but it cost him an effort to face the truth.

A soft rattle of gravel down the drive attracted Andrew's attention. Rabbits sometimes got through the netting and one might have disturbed the stones as it sprang across; but he rejected this explanation. The sound was too loud, although he imagined that there was something stealthy in it. Anybody coming toward the house across the smoothly paved bridge, would have to walk on the gravel, as there was a flower border between the drive and the shrubbery. This had a narrow grass edging, but hoops were placed along it to keep people off.

Andrew leaned forward cautiously and looked about him. It was a calm night and not very dark, although there was no moon. He could see the firs near the house cutting black against the sky, and the blurred outline of a shrubbery beside the drive to the bridge. Thin white mist rose from the ravine, and beyond it a beechwood rolled down the hill. The air was warm, and the smell of flowers and wet soil drifted into the room. There seemed to be nothing moving, however, and the sound was not repeated. For a few moments Andrew waited, expecting to hear the intruder fall over one of the hoops that edged the drive. When this did not happen, he fixed his eyes intently upon the end of the shrubbery, and then he made out a very indistinct figure moving slowly through the gloom beneath the firs.

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This was strange. He had never heard of any house-breaking in the dale, and there was nothing at Appleyard to attract a burglar from the distant towns. It was too late for a villager to keep tryst with one of the maids; and a poacher would not cross the well-fenced grounds. Andrew decided that he would not give the alarm, but he slipped across the room and opened his door quietly so that he could hear if anybody entered the house. Though he stood beside it, listening closely, he heard nothing. Then he returned to the window, and saw a dark form move back into the gloom of the trees. Presently there was another soft rattle of gravel near the bridge, and after that deep silence except for the splash of water in the ravine. Andrew imagined that about five minutes had elapsed since he heard the first sound, but the prowler had gone and he must try to solve the puzzle in the morning.

He got up early and went down to the drive before anybody was about. A fresh footprint showed plainly in the flower border near the bridge, close to an opening in the shrubbery by which one could reach the lawn, as if the man had meant to jump across and had fallen a few inches short. That he had not gone along the grass edging showed that he knew the hoops were there.

Andrew examined the footprint. It was deep and clearly defined, and he thought it looked more like the impress of a well-made shooting boot than of the heavy boots the country people wore. For one thing, he could see no marks of the tackets the Scottish peasant uses. Acting on a half-understood impulse, he covered the footprint up and strolled toward the gardener, who was just coming out with his rake.

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"You have a big place to take care of, Fergus, but you keep it very neat," Andrew said.

"Aye," replied the gardener. "I'm thinking it's big enough."

"Have you help?"

"Willie Grant comes over whiles, when I've mair than ordinar' to do. He has a club foot, ye'll mind, an' is no' verra active, but there's jobs he saves me."

Andrew knew the man, and knew that he could not have sprung across the flower border.

"I see Tom is still at the stables, but the man who drives the car is new. How long have they had him?"

"A year, maybe. Watson's a quiet man, an' makes no unnecessar' mess, like some o' them. He leeves in the hoose."

"Then he doesn't get up very early."

"He's at Dumfries wi' the car. There was something to be sortit an' he took her there yestreen. Mr. Staffer's for Glasgow, the morn."

After a few remarks about the garden, Andrew strolled away. He had learned that the night prowler could not have been one of the men employed at Appleyard. The fellow had apparently not entered the house, and although he had stayed long enough to deliver a message to somebody inside, Andrew had not heard a door or window open. The matter puzzled him, but he determined to say nothing about it, although he was conscious of no particular reason for his reserve.

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An hour later, Whitney and he started for Edinburgh, with Dick on the carrier of the motorcycle. The machine was powerful and they meant to travel by short stages and stop at points of interest for a walk across the hills. Andrew was glad to have Dick with them, particularly as he was dubious about the visits the boy was in the habit of making to Dumfries and Lockerbie. Dick generally returned late at night and did not look his best the next morning.

Whitney enjoyed the journey. He had understood that southern Scotland was the home of scientific agriculture, and in this respect the valleys came up to his expectations; but when they left them on foot, as they did now and then, they crossed barren, wind-swept spaces clothed with bent-grass and heather. In places, lonely hills rolled from horizon to horizon without sign of life except for the black-faced sheep and the grouse that skimmed the heath.

Andrew knew every incident in the history of this rugged country, and with a little encouragement he told tales of English invasions and fierce reprisals, of stern Covenanting martyrs and their followers' fanatical cruelties. Looking down from the heights of the Lammermuirs, they saw where Cromwell crushed his Scottish pursuers; they climbed the battlements of old square towers that had defied English raids, and traced the line of Prince Charlie's march.

Whitney found it rather bewildering. There was so much romantic incident packed into two or three centuries; but he felt that he understood the insular Briton better than he had done, and this understanding improved his conception of the native-born American. It was here that some of the leading principles of American democracy were first proclaimed and fought for. Another thing was plain—if the spirit of this virile people had not greatly changed, deeds worthy of new ballads would be done in France and Flanders.

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On the return journey they reached Hawick one evening and stopped for an hour or two. Dick suggested that they stay the night; but there was nothing to keep them in the smoky, wool-spinning town, and Andrew preferred to push on.

"The night air's bracing among the moors and I like to hear the whaups crying round the house," he said to Whitney. "There's a small hotel, built right on the fellside, and we should get there in an hour."

They set off, with Andrew on the carrier, and the powerful machine rolled smoothly out of the town. The street lamps were beginning to twinkle as they left it and low mist crept across the fields past which they sped. The cry of geese, feeding among the stubble, came out of the haze, which lay breast-high between the hedgerows, clogging the dust, but it thinned and rolled behind them as the road began to rise. Then the stubble fields became less frequent, fewer dark squares of turnips checkered the sweep of grass, and the murmur of Teviot, running among the willows, crept out of the gathering dusk.

Cothouses marked by glimmering lights went by; they sped through a dim, white village; and Whitney opened out his engine as they went rocking past a line of stunted trees. They were the last and highest, for after them the rough ling and bent-grass rolled across the haunts of the sheep and grouse. Whitney changed his gear as the grade got steeper, the hedges gave place to stone walls until they ran out on an open moor, round which the hills lifted their black summits against the fading sky. The three men made a heavy load on the long incline, but the machine brought them up, and the last of the light had gone when they stopped in front of a lonely hotel. It looked like a Swiss chalet on the breast of the fell, and a dark glen dropped steeply away from it, but it glowed with electric light.

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"They seem to have some shooting people here," Dick said. "I'll run across and see if they can take us in, while you look at the carbureter. We may have to go on to Langholm and she wasn't firing very well."

He went up the drive and Whitney opened his tool bag. The top of the pass was about half a mile behind them, and the road ran straight down from it, widening in front of the hotel. There was a patch of loose stones on the other side, and the motorcycle stood a yard or two from the gate. Everything was very still except for the sound of running water, and it was rather dark, because the hills rose steeply above the glen.

"Dick's a long time coming back," Andrew said with a frown.

"Perhaps you'd better go for him," Whitney suggested.

Andrew went off, but met Dick in the drive.

"It's all right; there's nobody stopping here," he reported. "They keep the lights blazing to draw motoring people."

He spoke clearly, but with an evident effort, and Andrew frowned again.

"There's a nut I can't get hold of," Whitney called to them from under the motorcycle. "Do you think I could borrow a smaller spanner here, Dick?"

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"I'll get it for you," Dick volunteered jovially, and started back toward the house.

Andrew put a firm hand on his arm.

"You will not!" he said shortly.

Dick turned upon him in a moment's rage; and then laughed.

"Oh, all right. You're a tyrant, Andrew, but you mean well."

When Whitney went for the spanner Dick knelt down in the road to inspect the machine.

"Lend me your knife," he requested. "It will be all right if I put something in the jaws."

"I'm inclined to think you'd better leave it alone," Andrew replied meaningly.

Dick laughed.

"You're a suspicious beggar. I wasn't away five minutes. Anyhow, there's a fascination in tampering with other people's machines. Where's the knife?"

Andrew let him have it, and soon afterward Dick uttered an expletive as he tore the skin from one of his knuckles.

"The beastly thing will slip; but I'm not going to be beaten by a common American nut," he declared. "If I can't screw it up, I'll twist the bolt-head off."

"Leave it alone!" said Andrew.

"It's going!" Dick panted, and threw the spanner down. "Another knuckle skinned," he added grimly.

As he stopped to wipe his hand, a loud humming came across the summit. Then four lights leaped up and their united beam rushed down the pass.

"That fellow's driving very fast, but he has plenty of room," Dick remarked, and Andrew, stepping back, saw that the tail-lamp of the motorcycle was burning well. [Pg 68]

Dick got up, and Andrew moved out a yard or two across the road with the headlamp, half dazzled by the blaze of light that filled the glen. Suddenly the stream of radiance wavered, and Andrew wondered whether the driver had lost his nerve on seeing the patch of stones, which perhaps looked larger than they were. Then he heard the wheels skid and loose metal fly as the car lurched across the road.

"Jump!" he shouted, violently hurling Dick back before he sprang out of the way.

He struck the motorcycle with his lame leg, staggered, and fell on the gravel close to the gate. For a moment or two he had not the courage to look up, and then, with keen relief, he saw Dick standing safe.

"The clumsy brute!" Dick cried, in a voice that sounded hoarse with rage.

Running to the bicycle, he started it and jumped into the saddle. The red tail-light streamed away through the dark like a rocket, and when it grew dim, Andrew, standing shakily, saw Whitney beside him.

"He's gone mad!" Whitney exclaimed.

Andrew did not speak, and above the dying roar the big car made in the narrow hollow they heard a shrill buzzing that sounded strangely venomous.

"Forty miles an hour, anyway," Whitney estimated. "It would take a good car to get away from her. Is he fool enough to run into the back of it?"

"I don't know," said Andrew. "Dick's capable of anything when he's worked up. The curious thing is that his head is steadier than usual then." [Pg 69]

They waited until the sound grew fainter and then died away.

"I am going down the glen," Andrew said.

They had not gone far when they heard a motor panting up hill to meet them, and a minute later Dick's car ran past and he waved his hand.

"Hotel gate!" he shouted. "Don't want to stop!"

When they reached the gate, Dick was waiting. Andrew turned the light on him, and started at the sight which met him. Dick's face was white and strained and smeared with blood, and he was evidently laboring under an emotion not wholly due to anger and excitement.

Even in the sudden flash past them of the automobile Andrew thought he had recognized the car as one belonging to Appleyard—a low, gray car which Staffer always used. He had believed that the lurch which nearly cost them their lives was due to reckless driving; but there was a tenseness in Dick's expression which he could not quite understand.

"Did you overtake the car?" he asked.

"No," said Dick, with a forced grin; "I took the bank and I'm afraid the machine is something the worse for it. I was gaining and close to the car when we got down to the bottom of the glen. You know it's very narrow there."

Whitney nodded. There was a sharp bend where road and stream ran out side by side through the

sharply contracted gap in the hills. The slope on both sides was very steep and there was only a strip of grass between the road and the water, seven or eight feet below.

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"Yes; it's not the place I'd care to negotiate at full speed."

"I meant to catch the car and ran on to the grass to get a wider sweep; but she wouldn't take the curve. Went straight up the hillside for a dozen yards and then threw me off. Luckily I fell into some fern and when I'd pulled myself together, I somehow got her down."

"But the car?"

"Got off," Dick replied in a strained tone.

Andrew spoke quickly.

"You'd better come and let us see if your face is badly cut."

They entered the hotel, but Dick stopped as they were passing the bar.

"We've all had a shock," he said; "and if you feel you'd like a drink, don't mind me. You needn't be afraid of setting me a bad example—I don't want anything."

Andrew smiled.

"Nor do I. Sometimes you're a very thoughtful fellow, Dick."

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CHAPTER VIII

THE *ROWAN'S* LIGHT

Dick's cuts were not deep and he joined his companions at supper. One of the windows was open and the smell of peat smoke came in, while the noise of Ewes water running down the glen mingled pleasantly with the bleating of sheep. The room, however, was illuminated by electric light and a row of sepia drawings hung on the wall.

"There's something distinctive about the Border," Whitney remarked; "but there's one thing that strikes me. In old English cities—Chester, for example—there are streets that look as they did in Queen Elizabeth's reign; but the Scottish towns you've shown me might have been built forty years ago."

Andrew smiled.

"The reason lies in our national character. We're utilitarian and don't allow sentiment to interfere with progress. As soon as a building gets out of date, we pull it down. Our past lives in the race's memory and we don't need to keep it embodied in stone."

He turned to Dick, who had been unusually quiet.

"It's lucky you didn't get worse hurt. Did you see the car's number?"

Dick hesitated a moment.

"No-o. The plate was covered with mud."

"But there has been no rain," Whitney objected. "I was near the gate when the driver swerved, and I couldn't see any reason for his doing so."

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"He may not have noticed the loose stones until he was close to them, and then lost control of the steering because he was startled; or perhaps the wheels skidded on the loose metal," Andrew suggested.

"It's curious," Whitney persisted, "because if the fellow's nerve had given way he would have gone over the motorcycle and into the gate. Anyhow, he didn't lose control, because he straightened her up the moment Andrew threw you back."

"His nerve did not give way," said Dick.

Andrew looked hard at him.

"You know something. What is it, Dick?"

"I know the car," Dick said grimly; "but it isn't nice to think your own friends came near killing you."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. I thought I recognized the hum she makes on the top gear, and when I was close behind them at the bottom of the glen, I saw the tail-lamp had a cracked glass and a dinge in the top. It isn't a coincidence that our lamp's like that. I remember when Watson dropped it."

"Staffer certainly wouldn't lose control of his steering."

"No," said Dick; "he's as steady as a rock. So's Watson. You don't often find a lowland Scot of his type jumpy."

Whitney lighted a cigarette and leaned back, watching the others.

"Staffer was going to Glasgow," Andrew argued.

"Yes; the hydraulic ram that pumps our water had broken down and he meant to see the makers. He told me he might not be back for a few days." [Pg 73]

"But would he return by Edinburgh? Had he any business there?"

"None that I know of; we deal with Glasgow. I wanted him to come up to Edinburgh not long ago, but he wouldn't. Said he didn't know anybody in the place and there was nothing to do."

"After all, you may have been mistaken about the car."

"Oh, no," said Dick; "but we'll talk about something else. I don't like to think that Staffer nearly finished me—and he wouldn't feel happy about it. Of course he didn't recognize us; and, on the whole, I think we'd better not mention it to him."

"I agree with you," Whitney said; and they planned to ship the damaged machine to Hawick and to walk back across the hills.

On their return to Appleyard, Whitney watched Staffer closely when Dick explained that they had been delayed by an accident in the glen at Teviot-head. He showed only a polite interest in the matter, and when Whitney talked about Edinburgh, he remarked that he found the city disappointing and seldom visited it.

A few days later, they all sat on the terrace one calm evening when Watson came back with the car and gave Dick and Staffer some letters.

"From Murray," Dick announced when he had opened his. "They're going to search the Colvend country next Thursday, and he suggests that we might like to join, though he hints that he's not allowed to give us much information."

"What does he expect to find?" Staffer asked. His tone expressed indifference, but Whitney suspected that it covered a keen interest. [Pg 74]

"He doesn't say. Somebody working a wireless installation, I imagine."

"And is Thursday particularly suitable for that kind of thing?"

"It's Dumfries' early-closing day. They can get a lot of motorcyclists then. Murray states that the coast and moss-roads will be watched."

"You ought to go," Elsie interposed. "Mr. Whitney would enjoy a day upon the heather."

"An opportunity for combining a pleasant excursion with a patriotic duty!" Staffer remarked.

"Well, the high ground from Bengairn to Susie Hill will need some searching. No doubt, they'll push across the moors toward Black Beast?"

"Murray doesn't say, but it's probable. I don't know whether the military authorities have the spy mania; but if there is any ground for suspicion, it can do no harm to draw the Galloway moors. What do you think, Andrew?"

"I'd try the hills farther east."

"About Eskdale, of course?" Staffer said with ironical humor.

"Well," Andrew replied, "I don't claim much strategical knowledge, but if we take it for granted that a hostile force could be landed on our east coast—"

"Rosyth's being a naval station would make that difficult. But go on."

Beginning rather awkwardly, Andrew worked out a supposititious plan of campaign, and to Whitney, who had just been over the ground, it seemed a very good one. The scheme he outlined certainly appeared practical; and Whitney saw that Staffer was more interested than he pretended, and that his objections were designed to draw Andrew on. Both showed a knowledge of military needs and history; and when Staffer mentioned Cromwell's retreat on Dunbar, Whitney thought Andrew's defense of his favorite route across, instead of around, the Lammermuirs was good. He noted that Staffer did not claim as much local knowledge; indeed, he thought he was careful not to do so. [Pg 75]

"I'm not convinced that we have much to fear, but you have worked the thing out very well," he said at last. "Have you thought that the War Office might find something to interest them in your views?"

Andrew flushed.

"They're probably bothered enough by amateur strategists," he replied. "Of course, I may be all wrong; but if there really did seem any need for it, I'd try to get somebody with influence to put my ideas before them."

Staffer folded a letter he had been reading, and looked at his watch.

"I must send off a telegram," he said, and left them.

"Well, Andrew, are we going on this spy hunt?" Whitney asked. It sounded promising to him.

"I could take the boat to Rough Firth. Then we might go on to Wigtown Bay, where you could see your people. Will you come, Dick?"

"Yes—as far as Rough Firth; but I don't know about the rest. Small boat sailing needs an acquired taste. You have to get used to eating half-cooked food and sleeping among wet sails. On my last cruise, drops from a deck-beam fell on my face all night when it rained. Andrew's hardier than I am, and no doubt truer to the old strain; but while the Annandale Johnstones did many reckless things, they had generally sense enough to stick to dry land."

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They made the necessary arrangements, and a few days later the *Rowan* went down the Solway with the strong ebb-tide. The shoals were beginning to show above the sand-filled water when she drifted past a point fringed by low reefs and boulders, at Criffel's southern foot. Whitney guessed its distance as about three miles, and took a compass bearing at Andrew's order. The coast turned sharply west at the point, and the mountain, sloping to meet it, broke down into a wall of cliffs that rose, grim and forbidding, from the beach. At one place, a gap in the wall suggested a river mouth. There was not much wind, the sky was hazy, and on the port hand a stretch of gray water ran back to the horizon. It looked like open sea; but the strong rippling in the foreground indicated that the tide was running across thinly-covered banks.

"I should have liked a breeze," Andrew said. "If we bring her around, the ebb will sweep us past the mouth of the Firth. There's not much water on the sands ahead, but we ought to get a fathom, if I can find the Barnhourie gut. Keep her as she's going, Dick, with the knoll ashore on the bowsprit-end, while I look at the chart."

Andrew went below and Whitney turned to Dick.

"Do you know this gut?" he asked.

"I remember something about it, but they keep changing. See what depth there is."

Whitney found six feet, and looked around as he heard the topsail flap. The *Rowan* was sailing upright, but going very fast, with the current eddying about her. Wreaths of sand came up to the surface and went down again.

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"Keep her full," he said. "She's luffing off her course."

"It's possible. The tide's strong and she's not steering well. I dare say there's enough water everywhere, but Andrew must find the gut: he feels he has to do the proper thing. He's made like that."

"We'll take no chances," Whitney answered; and ran to the scuttle. "Pull up the board and come on deck!" he shouted to Andrew.

In a few moments Andrew's head appeared; and after a glance round, he swung himself up and jumping aft took the helm from Dick.

"Ready with the head-sheets!" he ordered. "We'll come round."

She began to turn and then suddenly stopped, with a rush of sandy water boiling about her stern. Andrew seized an oar, but could not push her off, and she sank on one side until the water flowed along the lower deck-planks.

"She's fast," Whitney said. "Where are we?"

"On the Barnhourie tongue of the Mersehead bank," replied Andrew, throwing down the oar. "I meant to run through the gut between them." He turned to Dick. "You're a hundred yards off your course."

"That's the tide's fault. Shall we take the sail off her?"

Andrew thought for a moment.

"Yes. I don't know about laying out an anchor. The flood runs pretty fast here; but we'll see when the sands are dry."

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They lowered the canvas and then went below to cook a meal. This took them some time, for the floor and lockers slanted awkwardly, as the boat listed over, and when they went on deck again the light had begun to fade. Whitney was astonished at the transformation. What had looked like open water when he went below, was now a waste of sloppy sand that ran back as far as he could see. It was, however, pierced by a broad channel, from which a depression, filled with shallow pools, cut through the bank and ended in a lagoon not far off. This was evidently the gut Andrew had meant to navigate. The cliffs round the bay, to the westward, were losing their sharpness of outline; but two or three blocks of houses and a tower on the rocky point showed black above the level strip behind them.

"That's Southernness; they'll light up, soon," Andrew said. "I know one of the light-keepers and I'll

walk across and ask him about the entrance to Rough Firth. There's a flock of duck up the channel, Jim, and you might get a shot at them from the dinghy when it's a bit darker. Will you stay on board, Dick?"

"Not much! There's nothing more melancholy than sitting alone in a stranded boat. I'll go with Jim."

Andrew went below and trimmed the anchor-light; then fastened it firmly to the forestay, and set off across the sands. Half an hour later, Dick and Whitney carried the small, folding dinghy to the channel and pushed her off. The current was now slack and they made progress until Dick shipped his oars and, kneeling down, took up the small hand paddles; but he let her drift for a few moments while they looked about. It was dark and the shore-line had faded, but some distance up the channel a small black sail was visible across the bank, and a steady bright beam marked the Southerness lighthouse. Half-seen birds were wading about the water's edge, but Dick said these were oyster-catchers and not worth powder and shot. A curlew's wild whistle fell from overhead and the cry of a black-backed gull came out of the obscurity like a hoarse laugh. It was rather dreary; and their clothes and the dinghy were getting damp; so, dipping the paddles, Dick drove the boat ahead.

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After a while they distinguished a cluster of small dark objects some distance in front, and made toward them cautiously. The ducks did not seem to get much plainer, and Whitney thought they were swimming away. Stopping a few minutes to allay suspicion, Dick paddled again; but the ducks vanished as they crept on. Then he turned in toward the bank and pushed the craft along the bottom, hoping the dark background would hide their approach. Presently they saw the ducks again and Whitney raised his gun.

There was a red flash, smoke blew into his face, and the air was filled with the clamor of startled wildfowl. Still, they had heard a splash and Dick got out the oars and rowed ahead. As he picked up a floating mallard, they heard a flutter and knew there was a crippled duck not far off. Rowing out into the stream, they saw it rise awkwardly from the water. Whitney fired, and missed. After this, they spent some time in trying to get into range before he brought down the bird. Then they ran the dinghy ashore and Dick landed with his gun.

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"I'll walk up the bank and try the soft places about the pools," he said. "If I don't turn up soon, it will be because I've gone back to the *Rowan*."

Whitney lighted his pipe while he waited to allow the birds to recover from their alarm, but he had to strike several matches because his hands were wet, and he was annoyed to find that he had not many left. It was very dark, and a cold wind was blowing. Whitney lay down on the floorings, for shelter and to hide the glow of his pipe. The birds were quiet, but a dull, throbbing roar came out of the distance, and he supposed it was the splash of the surf on the seaward edge of the shoals. When his pipe was empty, he got up, intending to step overboard and drag the dinghy down to the receding water; but he found that this was not needful, as the ebb had nearly run out. Paddling up the channel he heard the whistle of curlew, and for a time followed the invisible birds. He could not get a shot, and, deciding that he had had enough, he laid down the paddles. Hitherto, he had been looking ahead, but when he put the oars in the crutches he was facing aft.

Grasping the oars firmly, he looked for the twinkle of the *Rowan's* light. In his surprise he almost dropped an oar. The *Rowan* had disappeared.

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CHAPTER IX IN THE DARK

Whitney frowned as he looked about. He could see nothing except the black line of the bank a few yards away and the beam from the lighthouse on Southerness, though this had grown less distinct. There was no fog, but the air was filled with an obscuring moisture that wet his face and gathered upon the dinghy. Since the *Rowan's* canvas had been lowered she would be hard to see, and she lay at some distance from the water. He could not remember how long it was since he had seen the light, but it must have been some time, and he blamed himself for not keeping an eye on it.

Still, he ought to find the gutter near which she lay, and he knew the bearing of the Southerness light from there. He had guessed its distance, and if he took a new bearing now, the angle between it and the other would give him the length of the line he must follow to reach the neighborhood of the yacht. Taking out a small compass, he struck a match, but it went out. His hands were wet and the box was damp. He tried two or three more with no better success, and when he got the last to burn, the knife-blade he laid across the compass cast a shadow on the card. This prevented his seeing the points; and finding that he had no matches left, he paused to think.

If his friends had returned to the boat, they would certainly not have put out the lamp, and it was disturbing to imagine their wandering about the sands, particularly as Andrew might have to

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cross some hollows up which the tide would shortly flow. Whitney shouted, but got no answer, and after waiting a few minutes he began to row, because it was plain that he must relight the lamp as soon as possible. He kept out in the channel to get the help of the stream, which he thought was running with him, but he did not seem to be making much progress, when he passed a projecting tongue of sand. Stopping to get his breath, he saw that the dinghy began to drift slowly back, and this disturbed him. The tide had turned sooner than he expected.

Heading in toward the bank, he rowed savagely; but the flat-bottomed craft did not pull well. Her main advantage was that she could be folded up and stowed on deck. After a time bits of seaweed and flakes of scum drifted up to meet him, and he could hear the water ripple along the edge of the sand where the channel bent. The flood was beginning to run and he had not covered much distance yet. Sweat dripped from his face, his back ached and his hands blistered; but this did not matter. Dick should be able to follow the channel down; but Andrew was no doubt a long way from land, with his retreat to the beach perhaps cut off. Moreover, Whitney saw that his own position was not fortunate.

He had the dinghy, but her side was only a foot above the water and the tide would presently sweep her up the Firth. He could not row against it long, and the current would capsize or swamp the boat if he struck a shoal. Still, it would be slack for about an hour and he must make good use of the time. His arms got stiff, but he kept up the pace and edged inshore until he touched bottom, when he made a deep stroke. The temptation to turn round and look ahead was strong, but he resisted it. He must not relax his efforts for a moment. He ought to see the mouth of the gutter when he had gone far enough. Unfortunately, however, the edge of the bank began to be indented by shallow bays, and, as he must pull straight across in order not to lose time, their ends were not always visible. It was unthinkable that he should overshoot the gutter, but he imagined it was still some distance off.

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At last he saw a bold ridge of sand that looked like the place where they had launched the dinghy, but on pulling close in, he could not distinguish the mark she must have made as they dragged her down. He rowed on for a hundred yards and stopped. There was no gutter, though he believed he had come far enough. The sound of the surf was ominously loud and a black-backed gull that fluttered overhead seemed to mock him with its hoarse, croaking laugh.

Whitney felt unnerved; but he pulled himself together. His friends' lives, and perhaps his own, depended on his keeping cool. He must have passed the gutter, but he might see the *Rowan* from the top of the bank. Running aground, he pulled the dinghy out. There was no grapnel, but she had a few fathoms of painter and he tied it to an oar, which he drove into the sand. This ought to hold her if she floated before he came back.

For a few minutes he walked rapidly away from the water, then turned and ran along the flat, but could not see the yacht; and when he dared stay no longer he came down to the channel. There was nothing that looked like the mouth of the gutter and the dinghy was afloat. Pushing off, he rowed a short distance and made another unsuccessful search. Whitney was now getting desperate, but he tried to think calmly what he should do. He could fold up the dinghy and carry her toward the Southernness light, shouting as he went; but the others would be in very grave danger if he missed them; besides, they would not both come the same way. The plan would not serve; he must try again to find the *Rowan*. Progress was difficult against the current; but he did his best, and landing again, he dragged the dinghy up. She would not float for some time because the bank was steep, but he dared not go far, lest he should lose his way in coming back.

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Striking shoreward, he plowed breathlessly through soft sand, but saw nothing for some minutes. Then, when he was despairing, a black object emerged from the gloom. It might be only a hummock; but after he had gone a few yards, he knew it was the yacht and felt a thrill of relief that was unnerving in its keenness. Still, he must brace himself and decide between two courses. The dinghy might be needed to take his comrades off, and there was a risk of her going adrift before he got back; he ought not to lose a moment in returning to her. On the other hand, Dick and Andrew must be in danger of being cut off by the advancing tide and the lamp would show them where the boat lay; but it might take some time to light. Hesitation would be fatal: he must do one thing or the other at once.

Running to the yacht, he clambered on board and unfastened the lamp from the stay, and then groped about the cabin for matches. At last he found some and, shaking the lamp, heard the oil splash inside. The wick did not ignite readily and he had to rub the charred edge off, but by and by the flame began to spread and he scrambled on deck, striking his head against the hatch. When he reached the bow, he found himself shaking and scarcely able to tie the lamp to the stay, but he jumped down on the sand and ran with all his speed toward the channel. He could not see the dinghy and feared that she had gone, but he found her safe, afloat and straining at the rope.

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Jumping on board, he pulled along the edge of the bank until an eddy swept him into the mouth of the gutter. This decided a point that he was anxious about. The tide was flowing into the hollow from the channel and not from its seaward end, which meant that there was less danger that the others would be surrounded. The rising water carried him close to the yacht, and when he got on board he sat down, breathing hard and feeling conscious of keen nervous strain. He shouted, but there was no answer; only the crying of wildfowl and the ripple of the tide broke the silence. It was running fast up the gutter, surging noisily over the uneven bottom and lapping the edge of the sand, and Whitney soon heard a splash against the starboard plank.

He must now grapple with a fresh problem. The *Rowan*, drawing little water when her

centerboard was up, would shortly be afloat. Andrew had not laid out an anchor, for it might be dangerous. If the anchor failed to hold, she would sheer across the current before her keel was quite off the bottom, and the leverage of the taut chain might help the rush of water to press her down into the sand or roll her over. One could take no chances with the Solway tide. Still, if left unmoored, she would drive across the flats, away from his comrades.

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Whitney could not determine what to do; and while he waited in tormenting indecision, the boat rose upright and the water swirled furiously round her bilge. Then his heart leaped as a cry came out of the dark, and soon afterward two indistinct figures appeared at the side of the gut.

"Be quick! She'll be off in a moment and the anchor's on board," he shouted, pulling up the dinghy to row across.

"Stay where you are!" Andrew called. "We can wade it. In with you, Dick!"

They were soon knee-deep and Whitney saw the current boil about their legs when they stopped as the water got deeper, but Andrew encouraged Dick, and they went on again and reached the yacht. Dick was panting, but Andrew seemed quite cool.

"I don't know about the anchor yet; we'll wait," he said, and stood watching the tide ripple past.

"It was lucky I met Andrew when I lost the channel," Dick said to Whitney in a resentful tone. "You might have waited for me."

"Hold on, Dick," interrupted Andrew. "Perhaps you'd better go below and change your clothes."

Dick left them; and soon afterward the boat began to move uneasily.

"The stream's getting slack; the water must be coming through from the other end," Andrew said.

In another minute she slowly floated away and he threw the anchor off the bow.

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"She'll ride to it, but as we needn't make sail until the flats are covered, we'll go down and get supper."

He changed his clothes while Whitney lighted the stove.

"How did the lamp go out?" he asked presently.

Whitney related his adventures, and Dick turned to him with a smile.

"Sorry I was huffed, but I dare say you can make allowance for my feelings. They'd got rather harrowed while I wandered about in the dark. You did the right thing, of course, in going back."

Dick made some coffee and when it was on the table Whitney was glad to lean back on a locker and light his pipe. With two candle lamps burning, the narrow cabin looked very snug and cheerful after the desolate sands, and it was something to see Andrew sitting opposite, safe but thoughtful.

"Did you trim the lamp properly?" Dick asked, puzzled.

"Of course," said Andrew, with a touch of dryness. "That's something I don't often neglect. Mixed the oil myself—colza and a dash of paraffin; and the lamp's the best I could get in Glasgow. Suppose you bring it down."

Dick did so, and Andrew took off the oil-container, which was nearly full, and examined the burner. There was nothing wrong, and Whitney noted the good workmanship of the fittings.

"It couldn't go out," he said decidedly.

"That," Andrew replied, frowning, "is my opinion; but as I came down to the gutter I saw only two rows of footsteps, and you made those in coming and going back to the dinghy. I can't say there wasn't another track, because the light was faint so far from the boat; but we might look about the deck and cabin-top to see if anybody has been on board."

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"I'm afraid I mussed that all up with sand," Whitney pointed out.

"But who'd want to come on board?" Dick asked. "Theft could be the only object, and we'll soon find out about that."

They looked round the cabin, but missed nothing.

"A thief wouldn't have put out the light, because he'd know that might bring us back before he got away," Dick elucidated; then turned to Whitney. "What do you think?"

"Well," said Whitney, smiling. "I've only one suggestion and it's rather far-fetched. The thing might have been a plot to make us lose the boat or, perhaps, make an end of us. If that's so, it nearly succeeded."

"Rot!" exclaimed Andrew. "Nobody would be twopence the richer for putting me out of the way."

"And I haven't an enemy in the world—unless it's myself," Dick grinned. "I don't count the Kaiser, because the bad feeling's patriotic; I've nothing personal against him."

Andrew made a sign of impatience, and Whitney, watching him closely, thought he felt disturbed.

"Did you see anybody on the bank?"

"No," Whitney answered. "I saw a small sail; a lugsail, I think, because it was long on the head. It looked very black."

"Tanned with blacklead and oil; one of the Annan whammel boats, most likely. They drag a net for salmon, but wouldn't get any just now, as the water's too smooth." [Pg 89]

"Then why were they out?"

"After flounders, perhaps. But none of the Annan men would meddle with our light. However, we'd better make a start if we mean to reach Rough Firth this tide."

"Now and then I'm glad I'm not much of a seaman," Dick laughed. "As I'd probably pull the wrong string, I'll stay below and smoke."

A cold east wind was blowing when Whitney went on deck, and after hoisting sail they crept away against the tide. Whitney sounded with the pole until he could no longer touch bottom, when Andrew seemed satisfied. It was very dark, but two quivering beams pierced the gloom.

"Get the topsail down," Andrew ordered after a while. "We'll find the stream that fills Rough Firth in a few minutes and it will take us up fast enough."

This proved correct, for shortly afterward the sea broke about them in confused eddies, and the boat splashed and lurched as she crossed the troubled space that divided the tides. Then she forged ahead very fast, and blurred hills and shadowy cliffs soon loomed out. Whitney used the sounding pole again, the cliffs grew plainer, and when the land closed in on them, they dropped anchor. She brought up and, after helping to stow the canvas, Whitney climbed into his folding cot.

For a time he did not sleep but lay thinking about the extinguished light. It seemed impossible that the lamp should have gone out accidentally, and he was not satisfied that the explanation he had humorously offered was altogether absurd. His friends had had another narrow escape not long before, and it might be significant that although they were together on both occasions, Andrew had run the greater risk. Whitney admitted that this might be coincidence and he must not let his imagination run away with him. One must use sense and not wrap up in romantic mystery a matter that might be perfectly simple. For all that, he meant to seize any clue that chance might offer him. [Pg 90]

Next morning they landed and joined Murray at a village among the hills. They spent the day upon the heather, working inland across broad, grassy spaces and red moors where the sheep fled before them, and then climbed a line of rugged hills. These were not high, but Whitney found them romantically interesting as he scrambled among black peat-hags where the wild cotton grew, up marshy ravines, and past great granite boulders. Stopping now and then to get his breath, he watched the line of small figures stretched out across the waste and thought that nobody lurking among the stones and heather could escape. Still, when the different detachments met upon a windy summit, none of them had seen anything suspicious.

"We've drawn blank," Murray remarked, as they ate some sandwiches behind a boulder.

"Yes," said Andrew. "If there is anything to be found out, I'd locate it farther east."

Murray looked at him keenly for a moment and then answered:

"On the whole, I agree with you. It's my business, however, to search where I am told."

They went downhill soon afterward, and the next day the *Rowan* sailed west along the coast, carrying Dick, who had reluctantly consented to go with the others. [Pg 91]

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CHAPTER X THE YOUNG OFFICER

It was a fine afternoon when the train ran down from the granite wilds round Cairnsmuir into a broad green valley. Behind, the red heath, strewn with boulders and scarred by watercourses, rolled upward into gathering clouds; in front, yellow stubble fields and smooth meadows lay shining in the light, with a river flashing through their midst. Whitney, watching the scene from a window, thought the change was typical of southern Scotland, which he had found a land of contrasts.

They had left the *Rowan* where the river mouth opened into a sheltered, hill-girt bay, and walked up a dale that was steeped in quiet pastoral beauty. It led them to a wind-swept tableland, in which lonely, ruffled lakes lay among the stones, and granite outcrops ribbed the desolate heath. There they had caught the train; and now it was running down to well-tilled levels, dotted with trim white houses and marked in the distance by the blue smoke of a town. Andrew had chosen the route to show Whitney the country, and he admitted that it had its charm.

The train slowed down as it approached a station, and when it stopped Dick jumped up.

"I may be able to get a paper here," he said, and leaped down on to the station platform, where shepherds with rough collies, cattle-dealers, and quarrymen stood waiting.

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Dick vanished among the crowd; but a few moments later he returned hurriedly, without his paper.

"I nearly ran into old Mackellar!" he exclaimed with a chuckle. "But I dodged him!"

"Who is Mackellar?" Whitney asked. "One of your creditors?"

"Worse than that. One of my trustees. I thought I'd better not meet him; he might have felt embarrassed after what he said to me not long ago."

Alighting at the next station, they walked downhill to the narrow town beside the Cree, and here they arranged to be driven up the waterside to the shooting lodge where Whitney's mother was staying. After standing on the bridge a while they went to the little inn. It was now getting late in the afternoon, the hillside above the town shut out the light, and the room they entered was rather dim. Dick stopped just inside the door.

"Mackellar!" he exclaimed; and turned to be off.

"Dick! Ye're not going before ye speak to me?"

"I want to show my friend the town," he explained with a laugh, but he came forward and shook hands and presented Whitney.

Mackellar was about fifty years of age, strongly built, and dressed in quiet taste. He had a shrewd, thoughtful face, with a hint of command in it, and there was a touch of formality in his manner, but Whitney liked his faint, twinkling smile.

"Weel," said the Scot, after they had talked a while, "ye may take your friend out to see the town now, Dick; but, with Mr. Whitney's leave, I'll keep your cousin here until ye come back."

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Whitney felt amused as he saw that Dick had failed in his rather obvious intention of preventing the others from enjoying a private talk.

When Whitney and Dick had gone, Mackellar rang a bell that stood on the table. "Ye'll join me with a glass o' wine," he said to Andrew.

The wine was brought, and though Andrew did not hear what Mackellar said to the waitress, he imagined that they would not be disturbed.

"I would say Dick's new friend is to be trusted," Mackellar began when they were alone.

"Of course," said Andrew. "If I grasp what you mean, he'll do the boy no harm; but he's really a friend of mine."

"That should put the thing beyond all doubt," Mackellar replied, and filled the glasses.

Andrew waited. Mackellar was generally deliberate, but people valued his opinion. He had been a lawyer, and in the small Scottish towns lawyers are entrusted with their clients' investments, and, in consequence, are often appointed agents by the banks.

"I think ye see your duty to your cousin," Mackellar resumed.

"Yes," said Andrew simply. "I wish I saw how it ought to be carried out. I'm at a loss there."

Mackellar's nod indicated sympathetic understanding.

"Ye're young and want to see the whole road ahead. It's enough that ye walk cannily, doing what seems needful as ye find it. For a' that, I'm glad to hear ye feel that ye are responsible. It's some help to me."

"Then you take a personal interest in him?" Andrew hesitated and added: "I mean, if you understand, apart from your being a trustee."

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Mackellar smiled.

"I understand. We're dour folk and not given to sentiment, but I think we can be trusted to pay our debts, and Dick's father was a good friend o' mine. It was the Appleyard business first put me on my feet. Then your cousin is a likable lad; though he's given me trouble. But we'll not dwell on that—there are other things to talk about."

"Have you paid off his debts?"

"Some. There are one or two for which the holders would not give up his notes."

"Why?"

"They carry high interest and fall due at a future date. Then I have reasons for thinking the holders are agents for a principal in the background."

"The fellow must take a risk, because Dick's not of age. Hasn't the law something to say about a minor's debts?"

"I'm not sure the risk is as big as it looks. Would ye expect a Johnstone o' Appleyard to repudiate his obligations?"

"No," said Andrew. "When you come to think of it, such a thing's impossible."

"Weel, there's another point; your cousin did not tell us all he owed."

Andrew frowned.

"I must admit that I was afraid Dick hadn't been quite straight with us. What's to be done? Can we take him away from Staffer?"

"Why would ye wish that?" Mackellar asked sharply.

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"It's not easy to explain, and my position's difficult. Dick thinks highly of the fellow, and I can't see anything that's openly wrong with him. Still, one feels he hasn't a good influence on Dick."

"Just that," Mackellar dryly returned. "Dick's mother put the lad into Staffer's hands and I had no power to stop her. If Staffer abused his position, it would give me a handle, but I cannot find fault with anything he does. A careful, well-thought-of man, and exact to a penny in the estate accounts."

"And yet you don't trust him. If you did, you'd tell him about those debts instead of me."

"Weel," chuckled Mackellar, "there's maybe something in that."

Andrew knitted his brows.

"I feel that there's something going on, so to speak, behind the scenes, but I can't tell what it is. Do you know that Dick's heart is weak, and dissipation and excitement are bad for him?"

"I heard something about it." Mackellar gave Andrew a steady, meaning look. "Your cousin will not be in danger until he's twenty-one."

"What danger do you mean?" Andrew asked uneasily.

"I cannot tell—ye have heard that loose living is bad for him. He'll be free from restraint when he comes of age."

Andrew suspected that this was not all that Mackellar meant.

"Suppose his creditors insisted on his insuring his life?" he asked.

"There's a difficulty—insurance companies are not as a rule anxious to take a man with a weak heart. For a' that—" Mackellar broke off and sipped his wine in silence before he resumed: "I'll try to follow up the matter of the notes and ye'll keep an eye on Dick. If ye remark anything suspicious, ye will let me know. Now, I think there's no more to be said."

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Andrew agreed, and lighted his pipe. He was troubled by vague suspicions that Mackellar seemed to share. On the surface, the suspicions looked somewhat ridiculous; but Andrew was not satisfied, and Mackellar had admitted the need for vigilance. Well, he must keep the best watch he could.

Whitney came in while they sat there.

"Dick's not back?" he said. "I thought I'd find him here."

"Ye might try the bar," Mackellar replied, with a twinkle. "Mr. Johnstone's not anxious to talk to me. How did ye lose him?"

"I rather think he lost me," Whitney laughed; "but he knows we've ordered tea and he'll be along soon."

When the trap they had hired was waiting, Dick came in. His face was flushed, and his eyes gleamed with amusement as he glanced at Mackellar.

"I shan't have to leave without a word or two, after all."

"Well," said Mackellar, "ye cut it very fine. Where have ye been?"

"In the other hotel. I found a number of people there. They'd been to the Creetown sheep sales and were in a convivial mood. In fact, they wouldn't let me go."

"It's no doubt a matter o' taste, but one would not expect to find a Johnstone o' Applegate colloging with drovers in a second-class bar," Mackellar observed.

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Dick laughed.

"I don't know that it makes much difference, but I was playing cards," he said.

"Losing money ye could not afford!"

They drove away in a high-wheeled trap that is locally called a machine. Andrew had set off in a serious mood, but it was difficult to continue thoughtful in Dick's society, and he enlivened the way as they followed the winding river. It led them up a long valley, past turnip-fields, smooth pasture, and alder-fringed pools. The soil was well tilled on their bank, but across the stream,

birchwoods turning yellow straggled up the barren hill slopes, and to the north, rugged fells rose dark against the sky. By degrees the landscape changed. There was less cultivation and the woods got thinner. Rough heath ran down to the river, which foamed and brawled among the stones, and white tufts of wild cotton shone among the peat. They were climbing to a desolation of moor and bog that looked strangely wild and lonely in the fading light. Then, as the shadows closed upon the wilderness, lights blinked among the firs in a glen, a lodge gate was opened, and a smooth drive led them to a straggling modern house.

They were hospitably welcomed, and Andrew liked his host, a genial, gray-haired man who had lately retired from business to spend his well-earned leisure in outdoor sports. Whitney's mother and sister also impressed him favorably. Mrs. Whitney was quiet and dignified, and there was a touch of stateliness in Madge's refined beauty. At first, Andrew felt shy of her and left her to Dick, but she soon set him at his ease. Madge rang true, and he found that she could be remarkably frank.

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On the evening after his arrival he strolled along the terrace talking to her. A soft red glow still shone behind the firs that straggled up the western end of the glen and the air was cool and still. They could hear a little burn splashing in the shadow and the river tumbling among the stones.

"How do you like this place?" Andrew asked. "From what I've seen of your country this is a change."

"Yes," Madge said; "it's quiet. When we rusticate in the wilds we take a troop of friends along. The environment we're used to goes with us. Perhaps that's why I don't harmonize with a natural background as some of your people do. Here, for instance, I feel I'm an exotic."

"Exotics are generally beautiful and one likes them for their glow and color. Ours is a land of neutral tints and I dare say it has an effect upon our character."

Madge laughed.

"That's very nice of you, but it's difficult to judge your character. You're not an expansive race, and, for another thing, there are no young men about—though one must admit that's to their credit, just now. It seems there's still an answer when you send round the Fiery Cross."

"Yes," said Andrew with a flush. "They were wanted somewhere else, and they went."

Andrew paused and Madge gave him a sympathetic glance.

"Jim told me why you couldn't go," she said softly. "After all, you have something to do at home, haven't you?"

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Andrew saw that she was well-informed about his affairs, but he did not resent it. When he took his comrade into his confidence he did not do so rashly; and that Whitney had told his sister only proved that she could be trusted. Something in her manner and her frank, level glance made him sure of this.

"Well," he said hesitatingly, "it's nice to feel that one is needed; though of course there's a risk of being officious."

"I don't suppose Elsie thinks you officious for trying to look after her cousin. He's quite charming, but I imagine he'll keep you busy."

"I'm prepared for that," Andrew laughed; "and I don't mind the trouble. Dick's a very likable fellow, and Elsie feels more satisfied when I'm about. I wish you could meet her. Little Elsie's worth knowing."

"Little? Jim told me she was tall; regal, I think he said. In fact, he's enthusiastic about her; and that makes me curious, because Jim's taste is not often bad."

"It isn't. But I always thought of her as little Elsie—she was a girl when I left home. I can understand what struck your brother: I felt it myself when I first saw her, after I came back."

"Elsie had grown up?"

"It wasn't quite that. She had grown up in the way I had expected, but she had somehow grown beyond it. In fact, though I used to be a kind of elder brother, she had caught me up and left me."

He broke off as their host came toward them with Lieutenant Rankine, a brown-faced young man, who had arrived on the previous afternoon.

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"I hear you're cruising about the Galloway coast," Rankine said to Andrew. "If you happen to be between the Isle of Man and the Solway, I dare say we shall meet, and we'll be glad to see you on board the *Tern*."

"The *Tern*?" Andrew looked his surprise. "She's—"

"An antiquated barge!" Rankine laughed. "Well, she makes a handy surveying craft, and the sea lords have lent me to the hydrographic department. Rather a come down just now; but somebody must keep the charts up to date."

Andrew felt puzzled. Rankine had a capable look, and, being young, was no doubt ambitious. It was curious that he should be satisfied with the monotonous task of taking soundings, when the

battleships were watching for the enemy's fleet. He looked at Rankine keenly; but the young lieutenant merely smiled back at him in a quizzical manner and began to speak of shoals and tides.

Madge slipped off to join her brother.

"What do you think of my partner?" Whitney asked her. "Are you still pleased with him?"

"Entirely so; he improves, which doesn't often happen. In fact, he's fine, if you get what I mean."

"Well, I imagine Andrew's unique, but that doesn't quite hit it. Suppose we say rare, in its old English sense. Anyhow, though I don't know that he's very susceptible, I'd rather you didn't turn his head. You are attractive when you exert yourself."

Madge laughed.

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"He's proof against my charms. Andrew's earmarked for somebody else."

"Elsie Woodhouse? Well, that struck me, but I don't know. He says it's very probable that she'll marry Dick."

"Andrew is in love with her himself," Madge said firmly; "though I don't think he knows it yet. Dick's delightful, but the girl would never be satisfied with him."

"So I think; but you don't know her."

"Your partner has told me about her."

Whitney laughed.

"Andrew has his talents, but the delineation of character's not his strong point."

"A precise description isn't always needed," Madge rejoined. "When you have an image clearly stamped upon your mind, it's sometimes possible to make others see it without saying very much. Your partner can do that."

"Perhaps you're right. He has now an idea that his country's somehow threatened from the old main road to the south. On the face of it, the idea's absurd, and yet he makes one feel that he's not quite mistaken."

Madge indicated Rankine, who was still talking to Andrew.

"I wonder why they sent that man to a post where ability doesn't seem to be required?" she questioned.

"It's possible that Rankine's job is more important than he's allowed to admit."

He broke off, for Rankine was coming toward them, and he saw his sister's face flush prettily.

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CHAPTER XI

THE SIGNAL

A light breeze was blowing when the *Rowan* ran into a confused tide eddy in the mouth of Wigtown Bay. There had been more wind and the swell it left was broken by the current into short, splashing seas amid which the yacht lurched uneasily. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and about two hours before high-water, and when the breeze fell very light a stream that ran north from the disturbed patch swept the *Rowan* up the bay.

Andrew frowned as he looked about.

"She's right off her course, but it's too deep to anchor, and the bottom's foul near the beach," he said. "We must let her drift until the ebb sets in and carries her down along the opposite shore. We ought to make Ramsey on the next flood."

"At four or five o'clock in the morning!" Dick grumbled. "Well, I'm glad I'm no use at the helm in the dark, and we may get a few hours' smooth water before we round the Burrow Head. At present I'm wondering why I came."

"There's some water in the bilge, and it's your turn to pump," Whitney remarked.

"If she was half full, I wouldn't pump until this rolling stops," Dick said firmly.

The sea got smoother as they drifted along the coast, and presently ran in faint undulations that gleamed like oil where their surface caught the light. The days, however, were getting short, and soon the long tongue of land across the bay cut low and black against the sunset. The hills to the eastward were gray and dim, a heavy dew began to fall, and a pale half-moon came out. Now and then a puff of wind from the south rippled the glassy water and drove the yacht farther up the bay.

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When an inlet began to open out ahead Dick took up the glasses.

"We ought to find water enough across the sands to Gatehouse," he said. "I'd a good deal rather sleep ashore and we'd get a much better meal at the Murray Arms than Whitney can cook."

"We can't get ashore without a breeze," Andrew replied.

"There's somebody going up. I can see a lugsail boat beyond the point."

Andrew took the glasses from him. The light had nearly gone and mist hung about the shore, but a belt of water shone with a pale gleam, against which a distant boat stood out sharply.

"She looks like one of the Annan whammeliers; they use a sail with a shorter head in the West, but I can't see what an Annan man would be doing here."

Putting up the glasses, he thoughtfully filled his pipe.

"The night our lamp went out on Mersehead sands," Whitney said, "I saw a lugsail boat. What kind of fellows are the whammeliers?"

"Unusually good seamen. The boats are small, but they turn out in very wild weather when the salmon are about."

"That was not what I meant."

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"Oh, they're a sturdy, honest lot; but you don't often find a set of men that doesn't include a wastrel."

Soon a white light and a green one twinkled some distance behind the yacht, and Dick called attention to it.

"That steamer's moving slowly," he said.

"A trawler, I expect. She's probably waiting until it's dark, when she'll put her lights out and drop her net. I understand the Fishery Board forbid trawling here."

They said nothing further, and the *Rowan* drifted shoreward with an eddy of the tide, which had begun to turn. The moon was half obscured by haze, but they could see a wall of cliff to starboard with a narrow line of surf at its foot. Part of the wall seemed detached from the rest and Andrew explained it to Whitney.

"That's Barennan Island. This strip of coast was a favorite haunt of Dirk Hatteraik's, but tradition locates his cove at Ravenshall, across the inlet yonder. It might have been convenient for running contraband up the Cree and Fleet, but the shore abreast of us has better hiding-places, besides being nearer open sea."

"Dirk's been dead a long time, and has no successors in the business," Dick interposed. "His men probably were more ruffianly than romantic, but they must have given the neighborhood an interest, with their signal fires, their vessels running in at dark, and their pack-horses winding through the moors— The trawler's gone!"

"Impossible," Andrew said quietly. "She hasn't had time to steam farther than we could see her lights."

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"Then she's put them out. Perhaps the net's over."

"What's that light ashore?" Whitney asked.

A twinkling flash appeared on the high, black cliff behind the island and went out, but after a moment or two flickered up again and, growing brighter, burned for a time.

"It looks as if the smugglers weren't quite extinct," Whitney remarked.

Andrew made no comment, but when a cool breeze came off the land he edged the boat closer to the beach. It showed as a gray blur beneath the crag, hardly distinguishable except for the white fringe of surf.

"I'm curious about that light," he admitted. "I'd have said it was somebody baiting a long-line or looking for lobsters, only that the fellow wouldn't have waited for high-water. Then, it was too brilliant for a lantern."

"Let's go ashore, Whitney," suggested Dick, anticipating adventure of some kind.

"All right," Andrew replied. "Scull in instead of rowing: it's quieter. And take the small cask and ask if there's a scrap about if you meet anybody."

Whitney launched the light dinghy and put an oar in the sculling notch when Dick joined him. The swell looked higher than it had appeared from the yacht, and as he heard it tumbling among the stones he wondered how they were to land. Besides, it was difficult to keep the lurching craft on a straight course. He stopped sculling when a weedy ledge of rock with a white wash running over it appeared in the gloom.

"Go on," said Dick. "Keep the reef to starboard. There's a cove. I've been here before."

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Swinging past the ledge as an undulation rolled in, they were met by its broken recoil; but

Whitney drove the craft through this, and a few moments later ran her on to a narrow beach. Quietly lifting the boat beyond the reach of the water, they made for the cliff. After a few yards they came to large, rough stones, and Dick stopped. Everything was quiet except for the splash of the surf, and the wall of rock rose above them, black and mysterious.

"We couldn't see anybody against that background," he said in a low voice; "and it's difficult to move quietly among these stones. I think we'll try the crag."

It took them longer to reach it than Whitney expected, but presently Dick stopped in front of a mass of fallen rock.

"Follow me close; the path isn't good," he said.

They went up carefully, feeling for a foothold among the stones, until they came to a ledge that ran upward across the face of the cliff. Whitney could see nothing below him, but he followed Dick, and after a while they reached a ravine filled with tangled grass and heath, which led them to the summit. Here they lay down behind a whinn bush and then Whitney understood why his companion had chosen the position. The moon was hidden, but the sea reflected an elusive light that distinguished it from the blackness of the land. Anybody moving along the beach would show against the glimmer of the water. Whitney could not see the *Rowan*, but Andrew had, no doubt, steered a course that would bring the island behind her canvas. It was, of course, possible that their landing had been noticed; but the dinghy was very small and the dull roar of the surf would have drowned the noise they made. [Pg 108]

Turning quietly, Whitney looked inland across high, rolling ground. It was all obscure, but in the hollows there were gray patches, which he supposed were belts of mist, and two or three dim lights twinkled in the distance. Now and then a bleating of sheep and the whistle of a curlew came down the cold wind. There was nothing to rouse suspicion, and Whitney began to think of going back. Just then Dick touched him.

A shadowy figure showed against the water a short distance from where they had landed, and then a flickering beam of light fell upon the sea. It was too bright for an ordinary lantern, and Whitney could not see where it came from, but after a moment or two it was abruptly cut off.

"There's another cove behind the point and I think I know a way down," Dick whispered. "Come on as quickly as you can!"

The figure vanished, but as the light was obviously a signal, it was worth an effort to learn something about the men who had made it. When Whitney got on his feet, Dick had already started. They turned down the landward slope of the crag, where they stumbled among prickly whinns and long heather. In a few minutes, Dick was breathing hard, but he kept up the pace, and they presently came to a ravine that seamed the front of the cliff. It looked dangerously steep and there was no evidence of a path, but Dick went down, following a runlet of water, and now and again catching at the grass and stones to check his descent. Whitney, following as closely as he could, hoped that the ravine did not end in a precipice.

They came to one steep drop, and at the bottom of it Whitney stumbled into a hole among the stones. When he got up, Dick was some distance below him, but he could distinguish his figure against the sea. No sound but the growl of the surf reached them; but this was loud enough to drown any footsteps on the beach and cover their rather noisy descent. Whitney reached the edge of the pool where the runlet of water widened, and was looking for a way across it when he saw Dick stagger. He swayed in a curious way, as if trying to recover his balance, and then suddenly disappeared. Whitney splashed through the water and came to the edge of a very steep slope. He could not see the bottom, but he scrambled down, clinging to the stones; and after sliding the last few yards he found himself on the beach. Dick lay motionless on a slab of rock near by. [Pg 109]

"Are you badly hurt?" he asked, breathlessly.

"No," Dick said faintly. "Leave me alone a while."

Whitney sat down beside him, feeling alarmed. The dinghy was some distance off, and he did not know whether it could be reached by the beach. It would be impossible to carry Dick across the rough stones without help; the *Rowan* was too far off for Andrew to hear a call; and he did not want to leave the boy, who might be seriously injured.

"Do you feel better?" Whitney asked presently.

"Don't talk," said Dick. "I'll be all right presently."

Whitney waited anxiously, and five minutes later Dick held out his hand.

"Give me a lift; I'll try to get up."

He got upon his feet with Whitney's help, but leaned on him heavily for a minute. [Pg 110]

"I can move along slowly," he said; "there's a way across the point."

They were some time in crossing the slippery rocks, but at last Whitney helped the lad down to the sand and felt keen satisfaction when they came to the dinghy.

"I'm much better," Dick said as Whitney pushed off. "I must have been half stunned—guess I

knocked my head as I fell down the last bit."

"Is it cut?"

"Don't fuss!" Dick answered irritably. "She'll wash back up the beach if you don't pull."

Whitney occupied himself with the oars; but he felt puzzled. Dick seemed to have turned dizzy before he fell; and although it was possible that he struck his head, his statement that he had done so looked like an afterthought. It was, however, his business now to find the *Rowan*, and he could see by the way the cliff slid past that the tide was running down. He had to pull hard to get near the island, and the wind was rising, but soon he distinguished a patch of dark canvas, and a few minutes later he ran the dinghy alongside the yacht.

"Lash the helm and come below!" he called to Andrew, after helping Dick on board.

Andrew stopped to throw a sail over the skylight when Whitney lighted the lamps, and then went down and looked at Dick, who lay on a locker. His face was very white, his lips had a blue tint, and the veins showed dark on the back of his colorless hands.

"I think you had better have a drink," he said, taking out a whisky bottle.

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Dick drained the glass.

"That's good; I'll soon be all right. I slipped when we were coming down the crag and pitched over the edge of the steep bottom part."

"He thinks he hit his head," Whitney added.

Andrew felt Dick's head in spite of his objections.

"There is a lump, but not large. It doesn't account for the shock you seem to have got."

"If you had fallen down that rock, I don't suppose you'd feel very fit. But give me a cigarette and ask Jim to tell you what we saw."

Andrew gave him the cigarette and then looked out the scuttle. A breeze had got up, blowing off the land, and the yacht was drifting seaward with her loose mainsail flapping and her jib aback. She would need no attention; so he closed the hatch and sat down to listen to Whitney's story.

"Do you think they heard Dick fall?" he asked.

"I can't say. It's possible, though the swell was breaking noisily on the beach."

"It's a curious affair," said Andrew. "I saw the light and was glad I'd kept the boat in the gloom of the island. It certainly looks as if the steamer that put her lights out and the whammel boat that crept in to the land at dusk had some connection with each other. Then I thought I heard oars shortly before you came off."

"Suppose the boatmen had meant to signal the vessel, why should they land when they could have lighted a flare on board?"

"It would have shone all round," said Andrew. "By coming ashore they got the crag for a screen and a high platform. The light could be seen farther off, but only from the sea."

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"But what would they want to signal from a place like this, and whom would they signal to?"

"I don't pretend to know. It's a long distance from a main line, but a fast car would cover a good deal of ground in an hour or two."

Andrew stopped, and, taking a chart from a rack, pointed to the narrow channel between Scotland and Ireland.

"You see how close Fair Head is to Kintyre," he resumed. "Well, all the shipping from the Clyde and a good deal from Liverpool passes through that gap. You can imagine what would happen if it were filled with mines."

"The difficulty is that the mine-sowers would be seen. The lighthouses on Rathlin and Kintyre command the channel."

"It's hard to see a vessel that carries no lights, and a mine-sower wouldn't proclaim his intentions. There's a big fleet of trawlers working in the Irish Sea, and a stranger would excite no remark by slipping in among them. It wouldn't take long to paint on a registered number and copy the funnel of a steam fishing company."

"So Rankine has another duty besides taking soundings! A small survey vessel could cruise about among the shoals without attracting much notice. Her business would be obvious, but that needn't stop her crew from watching out."

"Well," said Andrew, "it isn't difficult to form a theory to fit the few things we know. However—"

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"It would probably be all wrong when you'd made it," Dick broke in.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," Andrew smiled. "I'll go up and look after the boat."

He left the scuttle open and they heard blocks rattle as he hauled the main sheet, and the soft

splashing at the bows as the yacht gathered speed.

"I'm not sure it was the blow on your head that knocked you out, Dick," Whitney said. "You reeled as if you were getting faint before you fell."

"Well, suppose I did? I may have been running harder than was good for me; but can't you understand that one shrinks from making a fuss about one's weaknesses?"

"Of course. This means you want to keep the real explanation from your cousin?"

"I'd very much rather nobody knew. Falling on your head is a good enough reason for feeling faint, and, as a matter of fact, I hit it hard enough."

"Very well," agreed Whitney. "I suppose I must say nothing, since you have taken me into your confidence."

"You might let my cot down and pull out the blankets. I'm not quite right yet, to tell the truth. I think I'll go to sleep."

Whitney arranged the cot for him, and then, going up on deck, sat in the cockpit while the *Rowan* stretched across the bay before a fresh easterly breeze.

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CHAPTER XII

A FALSE ALARM

Heavy rains lashed the windows at Appleyard and a wild west wind buffeted the house. Between the gusts one could hear the wail of storm-tossed trees and the distant roar of the flood tide foaming across the Solway sands. It was, however, warm and bright within the thick granite walls, and Andrew lounged in a corner of the billiard-room after dinner, watching Elsie knit. She was making a soldier's woolen belt, and he noted the precise neatness of the work. Elsie was conscientious in all she did, but he thought this view of the matter did not go far enough. The care with which she linked up the stitches was deepened by love.

"It will be a lucky man who gets the belt," he remarked. "We must hope he isn't by any chance one of our enemies."

Elsie looked up with a smile.

"After all, I wouldn't mind that very much, so long as he needed it. It must be dreadful to lie out, cold and hungry, in the snow."

"It is," said Andrew. "I've done something of the kind. Of course you're right; but ordinary people would rather help their own side, particularly when the other seems to be singularly unchivalrous."

He stopped as he saw a tinge of color creep into her face; but she quietly met his apologetic glance.

"I know you didn't mean to hurt. I do remember sometimes, that, in a sense, I belong to the other side." [Pg 115]

"You can't help that, and you're Scottish to the backbone in all that matters."

Elsie's eyes twinkled.

"You're not making it much better, but perhaps you'd lose something if you were not so frank. One distrusts people who always say the proper thing."

Andrew glanced at a well-dressed, handsome man who was playing billiards with Dick. He came to Appleyard for a day or two now and then, and had been there when Andrew arrived from Canada.

"Does that mean you don't quite trust Williamson? I've sometimes wondered whether it's his right name."

Elsie looked thoughtful and answered with some hesitation:

"I don't think it is. He hasn't a trace of foreign accent and his ways are ours, but I can't help feeling that he does not belong to us. Then I've noticed that he never talks to Mother much. But of course it's only changing his name that matters, not where he was born. Our enemies are not all treacherous and cruel. You have seen the portraits Mother has of her own people, and three or four were soldiers. They have kind, true faces. I think they were men with an unusual sense of duty."

"You see what's best in everybody," Andrew replied. "But if there are good fellows on the other side, why do they behave like savages?"

"Ah!" said Elsie, and was silent for a few moments.

Andrew glanced at his cousin, who had soon recovered from his fall. He was now chalking his cue, and his eyes had an excited glitter. A syphon and a whisky bottle stood on a table near by, and Andrew wondered whether Elsie had noticed that Dick's glass was full again.

"I'll beat you if I can make that cannon," Dick was saying.

"Half a sovereign you don't; but you had better not take me," Williamson replied. "It would need a professional's stroke."

Andrew surmised that they were not playing for mere amusement.

"You can't do it, Dick!" Whitney said; and his tone was restraining, while Andrew imagined that Williamson's was meant to be provocative.

Dick raised his glass and put it down again half empty before he poised his cue.

"Watch me!"

He made the cannon; but something in his hot face suggested that it had been a nervous strain, and he turned to the table at once to refill his glass.

"Now," he said, "I think the game is mine."

His play was clever, but Andrew, watching closely, imagined that Williamson was not doing quite his best. It was difficult to say what gave him the impression, but he was a judge of matters that needed accurate judgment and steadiness of hand. Williamson was cool and skilful, but he missed a cannon he ought to have made, and there was a break he bungled. It looked as if he did not want to win. That was curious, for Andrew did not think he felt any hesitation about taking Dick's money.

Dick reached out for his glass without turning round, and Whitney, standing behind him, neatly struck the bottle with his elbow in stepping back. It rolled across the table, upsetting the glass, and fell upon the floor.

"I'm sorry," he apologized simply.

Dick regarded him with an ironical grin. "I'll have to ring for another," he said.

Andrew wondered how much Elsie understood; and he was not deceived by her unchanged expression. Elsie was quick and did not always show her feelings.

"You made some brilliant strokes, but your play's a bit erratic," Williamson said to Dick. "It might be worth your while to study some of the good professionals. That reminds me, there's an interesting semi-private match next Thursday, and I've friends at the club."

He mentioned two players whom Andrew had heard of, and the door opened while he added something about the match. Andrew was watching his cousin and did not look up, and it was a few moments later when he saw that Staffer had come in.

"I've been suggesting that Dick should come to town to-morrow," Williamson said. "I can show him some good billiards."

"I can't stop him, although I imagine he'd better stay at home," Staffer answered with a smile. "As he has been warned to keep regular hours and that sort of thing, it's possible that the excursion might not be good for him. Dick's rather too keen a sportsman."

Andrew could find no obvious fault with Staffer's reply. On the surface, it was tactful; but something in his manner made it inciting instead of deterrent.

"You arranged to take us snipe-shooting on Wednesday," he reminded his cousin.

"So I did," Dick admitted. "Still, we could fix another day. We might get a woodcock if we waited a bit."

"I'm keen on snipe," Whitney interposed. "Besides, we're going down the coast again at the end of the week."

Staffer gave him a quick glance and Dick seemed to hesitate.

"That makes a difference; but you could go without me. I'm not a crack shot."

"You know all about snipe, and where to find a cock," Andrew insisted. "They ought to be here now and it's a long time since I bagged one."

"Oh, well!" said Dick. "You mustn't be disappointed, and we'll try to show Whitney the best sport we can."

Elsie looked at Andrew and he saw that she was grateful; but Staffer came across to where he sat.

"I met Marshall, the salmon fisher, in Annan, and he mentioned that they had run the Burnfoot boats up this afternoon," he said. "There was a big surf last high-water, and he asked if you had been down to the yacht. It looked as if he thought you ought to go."

Andrew turned to Whitney.

"Is the motorcycle all right, Jim?"

"Take the car," suggested Staffer. "Watson won't have housed her yet."

They started in three or four minutes; but it was not the *Rowan* that Andrew thought about as the big car throbbed at full speed through the dark. He had kept Dick at Appleyard, and Williamson would be gone to-morrow, which was something to the good, because Dick was apt to get out of hand when the man was there. Andrew thought he made rash bets with him, and he certainly drank more than usual. It was his duty to look after Dick; but it was getting harder to do so for Elsie's sake, and at times when he thought of his task in this light he had to master a feeling of bitterness. Dick was not good enough for Elsie. Still, if she really loved him, she would be able to keep him straight. He knew the protective tenderness she felt for him. This might be different from the love she could give a lover; but Andrew would not follow up that line of thought. It might lead to false hopes and to shabby conduct of which he would always be ashamed.

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It was near high-water when they left the car at the end of a miry road and struggled across a common to the beach. The roar of the sea filled the air and driving sand stung their faces, but they carried the dinghy down and, wading out some distance through the surf, got on board. After a few minutes' hard pulling they reached the yacht, and Andrew looked about while he felt the cable.

"The anchor's holding, but perhaps we'd better take the kedge farther out," he said.

It cost them half an hour's hard work; for they had to follow up the heavy warp while angry, broken waves splashed into the dinghy; and then, after tearing the anchor out of the sand, they had to row some distance against the drag of the rope. At last, however, Andrew was satisfied.

"I'm not sure all that was necessary, but it was wiser to make things safe," he said, when they carried the dinghy up on the shore.

Whitney did not answer, and as they passed a sod cabin on the common a man came out.

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"Is that you, Jock?" Andrew asked. "It's a wild night, and when Mr. Staffer told me what you said I thought I'd come down to see how the boat was riding."

"It's wild enough," agreed the fisherman; and Whitney recognized him as the man who had come on board on the morning after their arrival. "What was it Mr. Staffer said?"

"I can't remember exactly, but I understood you thought the boat might drag."

"Weel, I wouldna' say that was impossible, but ye hae good ground tackle."

Whitney looked hard at him, but he could not see the Scot's face well.

"And Mr. Staffer sent ye off in his car to see if she was a' right?" Marshall chuckled.

"I don't know that he sent us. He said we could use the car."

"He's a thoughtful man, but I wouldna' say Watson would be pleased—he'd be wanting to wash her. Onyway, ye needna' fash about the boat. I'll be here until the tide rins doon and if onything needs doing, I'll see til it."

"Thanks," said Andrew. "Do you know if one of the whammel boats has gone west?"

"Yin's gone; I dinna ken where. A shooting man frae Edinbro' bought Tarn Grahame's *Nance*. Him and another took her off soon after ye came."

"How do you know he was an Edinburgh man?"

"There was a Waverley label on his portmanteau and he didna' speak like us. Still, I alloo it might have been Inverness."

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"And the man who was with him?"

"Ye canna' tell where a man comes frae when he keeps his mouth shut, but he was a sailor by the way he handilt the gear."

Andrew asked no more questions, and they went back to the car. When they reached Appleyard Dick met them in the hall.

"I've found a way of letting you have your shooting," he said in an apologetic tone. "Young Ross will go with you. There isn't a snipe in the mosses he doesn't know about. If there's any sport to be had, he'll see you get it."

"I suppose this means you're going with Williamson?"

"I really want to go, if you don't mind very much. I may be back before you leave and you'll only be away a week."

"That's so," said Andrew, "Well, you'd better bear in mind what the doctor told you."

He moved on, frowning, and presently found Elsie in the drawing-room.

"I did my best, but Dick's going with Williamson," he said. "You didn't want him to?"

"No," she answered frankly, but with some embarrassment. "Of course, there's no obvious reason for our interfering."

"That was my difficulty. Dick will soon be master here. I'm only his guest, and Williamson is a friend of Staffer's. Nobody knows anything against the man."

"And yet—" Elsie stopped.

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"I'm vexed? You can take it that I don't like to be beaten, particularly by my youthful cousin," Andrew answered with a smile, wishing to allay her uneasiness.

Staffer and Mrs. Woodhouse came in then; and when the party broke up for the night, Whitney went with Andrew to his room.

"I guess you noticed the coincidences that happened this evening," he said, sitting on the broad window-seat and lighting a cigarette.

"I feel rather annoyed by Dick, if that is what you mean," Andrew replied in a discouraging tone.

Whitney smiled.

"Not altogether that. One,"—enumerating them on his fingers—"you try to stop his going with the fellow and just about put it over. Two, Staffer mentions the boat and rushes us off in his car. Three, Marshall says the boat's all right and hints Staffer may have mistaken his remarks. Four, we return and find that Dick has changed his plans. Five,—"

"Oh, I'll admit that Staffer is a clever fellow," Andrew interrupted. "I've known that for some time."

"I've an idea that Mackellar's on his trail; and—well, if you need me, I'm ready. You're playing a straight game, and I want you to win. It would be a fine thing for you to save Dick; and Elsie expects it of you. Then, Staffer knows he's up against you. Keep it at that; it's quite enough for the present."

"You mean there's something else going on?" Andrew said in a curiously quiet voice.

"Of course! But you want to let Staffer think you're only fighting him for your cousin. He can understand that and won't suspect you of guessing he's engaged in another game. I'll play up to you as much as I can. Staffer doesn't take much stock in me."

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"But what object can he have?"

"Can't say," Whitney answered non-committally. "But he may be forced to show his hand. Well, I'll get along to bed."

Dick started for London with Williamson the next morning; and he let himself go when he got there. With his companion's help, he spent several days and the greater part of several nights in exciting amusements and adventures. It was not often the sparkling cup of pleasure was held out to him full, and he drained it to the dregs. As one result of this, he did not feel quite up to the mark; but Dick was something of a philosopher and knew that one cannot get anything without payment. Besides, if quietness was good for him, it was to be had in abundance at Appleyard.

For all that, when he left Euston at midnight, a reaction had begun, and he wondered whether he had made the pace too hot. On reflection, however, he suspected that it had rather been made for him and he had tactfully been encouraged to fall into his companion's stride. Well, he had had a glorious time; but he wished his head did not ache so badly and he could get rid of the unpleasant, shaky feeling that troubled him, because there was some business he must talk over with Williamson before they reached Rugby.

"We had better get things settled now," he said. "Your friend, Marsden, has my note for thirty pounds, but you paid the other fellows, as well as for that supper, and the hotel bill. How much am I in?"

Williamson took out his notebook, and Dick got a shock.

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"Forty pounds in an evening!" he exclaimed. "I knew I was going it, but this is a bit of a facer. With all the other things, it's a pretty hot pace; especially as I have just half a sovereign left."

"You needn't be disturbed about it. Your promise is good enough; I can wait."

"We can't leave it at that," Dick objected, and added with a forced grin: "Besides, you might have to wait some time."

"Then what do you propose?"

Dick wished his head were clearer, for he was getting dizzy.

"I thought you might see Craven and arrange the thing with him. Of course, he's holding a good lot of my paper, but he gets good interest."

Williamson produced a fountain pen and a sheet of paper.

"Very well. As it happens, I expect to meet him to-morrow."

It struck Dick that the man was suspiciously prompt; indeed he seemed to have been waiting for

the request.

Dick suddenly felt as if he were suffocating; he could not breathe, and his dizziness was turning to blackness. He threw up the window and leaned his head on the sill, gasping once or twice. It was a dark night and the express was traveling fast. Its lights sped smoothly along the black hedgerows beside the line and flashed across water lying on swampy fields. Blurred trees raced past, twinkling points were suddenly pricked in the obscurity a mile away and then rushed back and vanished, and a faint glimmer flickered in the sky ahead. Dick thought this marked Rugby, and sitting back again, he tried to pull himself together.

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"I'll make it enough to cover everything and put us straight," he said as he took the pen.

He found writing difficult, for the bracing effect of the cold wind was wearing off, but the note was written and Williamson carefully put it into his pocket-book before looking at his watch.

"We're due in a few minutes," he said. "Will you get down and have a drink? You don't look very fit."

"No," Dick answered. "If I'd had fewer drinks in town I'd probably feel better now."

The speed began to slacken and Williamson collected his belongings. Dick handed him his coat as the train stopped, but did not shake hands with him. Somehow he felt he would rather not. After a careless good-by, Williamson jumped down, and Dick sat in a corner, struggling against the faintness that was overcoming him. He would feel better when the train started, but he must be alone; he could not have people looking at him while he felt as he did.

Nobody else got in; he heard the guard's whistle and then the engine begin to pant. There was a jerk and the lights on the platform drifted past; but his head was reeling and he could not get his breath. Falling away from the corner, he made a half-conscious effort to keep on the seat, and for some time afterward he remembered nothing.

He was roused by a rattle that swelled into a roar; and, getting up shakily, he saw the lights of a station flash past. There were other lights all around, running back into the distance in rows, while the red glow of fires that streamed above the roofs seemed to indicate a manufacturing town. Dick noted this vacantly, for he felt weak and cold. They must be in Lancashire, and he had lain in a dead faint for a long time. With difficulty he pulled up the window and got back to his corner.

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"If this kind of thing happens often, the fellows who hold my notes will get a painful shock," he thought, with a wry smile, and closed his eyes.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE WRECK

Pale moonlight trembled across the foaming sea and faded again as the *Rowan*, rolling hard, bore up for the Solway. Whitney held the helm, his lips set and his brows knitted, for with the savage wind astern the yacht was hard to steer. The small storm-jib ran water as it swung above the seas, and the black, close-reefed mainsail lurched to and fro, lifting its heavy boom high above Whitney's head, at the risk of carrying away the mast if he let it jibe across. Andrew stood in the cockpit, with the spray rattling like shot on his oilskins, his night glasses steadied on the cabin top as he searched the sea ahead. He saw enough to daunt a stranger to the firth.

The hills along the western shore were indicated by a vague blackness devoid of outline, but Andrew could distinguish a belt of broken water that stretched across his course and faded into the gloom. The backs of the seas were toward him and he noted how their crests were cut off by the wind as they curled against the tide, which was running down the firth. In some places their length and regularity indicated depth of water, but, for the most part, they boiled in frothy confusion across the shoals. A steady beam of light stretched out from the shore, but this was not much guide to the intricate channel through the sands. While he watched, the moon came out, and as its light widened, smooth, bright patches became visible amidst the turmoil. These were the tops of the banks that the tide was leaving.

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Andrew put down the glasses and, stooping under the cabin hatch, lighted his pipe.

"It's rather late to try for Rough Firth, but I'm not sure I could find the Barbara Deep if we let her run. If we missed it and went ashore, she'd soon break up."

"That is not to be thought of," said Whitney.

"Well, I suppose the proper thing would be to set the trysail and try to beat her out; but with the tide knocking up the sea, she'd nearly wash us off when she came on the wind."

"She's wet enough running before it, and I don't feel like pumping hard all night. Can't you think of another plan?"

Andrew occupied himself with the bearing of the light, while Whitney braced his aching arms against the tiller. He was tired; for they had spent several nights pushing the dinghy across the flats at the head of a distant bay, and a couple of bernicle geese and some mallards lay in the forecandle. The last night had been passed rolling violently at anchor on a disturbed swell, and they had been at sea since dawn in weather that made cooking impossible and demanded constant watchfulness.

"I think," Andrew said presently, "I could find the Horseshoe Spit, and we'd get shelter behind it. In fact, the sea shouldn't get in at all after half ebb, and daylight won't be far off when the tide covers the flats again."

He took the helm and Whitney got down out of the wind and spray. Andrew would tell him when he was wanted, and in the meantime the sight of the wet sands that broke out from the welter of surf was not encouraging. It was reassuring to feel that Andrew knew his business; for if he made a mistake now, the *Rowan* would probably be hammered to pieces in the next half hour. [Pg 129]

Fortunately, the moonlight got brighter, and when Andrew called Whitney they were running up a channel with a strip of glistening sand astern and a wild turmoil of foaming water close on their port hand. This, no doubt, marked the Horseshoe Spit, with the tide streaming across it to meet the surf. Whitney could not see how they had avoided the bank astern; but he was not given much time to look about.

"Stand by the big anchor!" Andrew called to him. "Drop it when I tell you and let the kedge go after she sheers!"

The *Rowan* came up head to wind, and Whitney was hard at work for the next few minutes, handling heavy chain that ran out furiously and then stopped until he dragged more up from below, paying out the thick kedge-warp that coiled all about the deck, and lashing the thrashing jib to the bowsprit. Then he and Andrew got the mainsail down and the boat rode to her moorings; though she was not at rest. Sometimes the wind drove her up against the tide and the short waves washed on deck; sometimes the current swept her back, while the tightening cable rang and it looked as if she must drag her anchors and ground upon the surf-swept bank.

After watching her for a few minutes, Andrew seemed satisfied and they went below, where Whitney lighted the stove. [Pg 130]

"I've eaten nothing but a lump of wet bread and a bit of canned beef since morning, and now I want a meal," he said.

"Then, you'll have to hold the frying-pan on, and trim the table cleverly if you want to keep the food off the floor."

"I'll try. There's a charm in small boat sailing, but it's a charm that only gets you by degrees, and one finds it hard to say what it consists of on nights like this. I don't like being wet and hungry, and I hate to feel cold, and yet here I am, in a gale of wind, behind the Horseshoe Spit!"

"It's curious," said Andrew, smiling. "I dare say there are instincts in human nature that neither of us understands. But you'd better watch your job; you're running the ham fat all over the stove."

Whitney dished the ham and made some coffee, cut a loaf that was not very wet, and took out a sticky jar of marmalade. Leaning forward from the lockers, they began to eat; but care was needed in taking things from the table, which swiveled above the centerboard-trunk, for a rash movement would precipitate all it held upon the sloppy floorings.

Whitney got rather knocked about as he put the things away. For a time afterward he contrived to lie on the locker; then he knocked out his pipe and sat listening. The chain cable jarred across the stem, the halyards slapped the mast, and through the shrill scream of wind came in deep undertone the roar of the sea.

"It sounds pretty bad, but I've been banged about for the last twelve hours and nobody could sleep while this racket goes on," he said. "Is that sand hard, and could one get on to it?" [Pg 131]

"I think so, and I'd like to see the channel. We might have some trouble in pulling across, but it will be smoother coming back."

"Very well," said Whitney. "Things will be a bit more comfortable then, and I've had enough."

They went on deck, but he half regretted his suggestion as they launched the dinghy. The moon was covered by driving clouds, and in the darkness the sea raged about the yacht. It was not high, because the tide was falling and the water shoaling fast, but it broke angrily and the air was thick with spray. As soon as the dinghy was overboard they jumped into her and while Whitney got out the oars Andrew pushed her clear of the rolling yacht. The current swept them away, but a furious gust whipped the channel, throwing up a haze of spindrift, and they were blown back past the *Rowan* in spite of Whitney's efforts. It was a minute or two before he could control the craft, but he fought his way to windward until a ridge of wet sand began to shelter them. When this was reached they dragged her up and set off across the bank.

It was hardly possible to see a dozen yards and they struggled on with lowered heads, sinking in oozy patches and splashing into pools. Then the sand got firmer, and although it had been under water an hour before, it drove past them in whistling streams. The surf roared in the darkness

with a rising and falling cadence like the roll of giant drums, but every now and then its deep tone was drowned by the scream of the savage wind. The men wore oilskins, sea-boots and sou'westers, but the spray that swept the bank in a thin mist found out the openings in their clothing, which the gale distended. It was difficult to keep one's feet, and Whitney wondered rather anxiously whether Andrew knew where he was going. Still, there was something that braced and exhilarated one in the struggle.

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They had gone about a mile and a half and were near the other side of the bank when the moon suddenly shone out. The wet sand flashed into brightness and Whitney distinguished a belt of tossing white that was blurred and confused in the foreground but grew into regular, foaming lines farther off. This must be an inlet that pierced the sands; and on looking round a little he saw a dark mass with a pole rising from it some distance away. He touched Andrew and they made for the object.

Whitney imagined it to be a perch, a spar built into a pile of stones for a beacon. He did not expect to find anything of interest there, but the pole had been raised by human hands, and made a landmark in the storm-swept waste. It brought him into touch with his fellow men in a spot where the strife of wind and sea was daunting. As they got nearer, however, he saw that he had been mistaken. The pole was too thick for a perch, and the black mass below did not consist of stones. Jagged timbers stuck out from the sand like the ribs of a skeleton, but in one place they were clothed with planks and supported a mast. It was obviously a wreck they were approaching.

They stopped to lee of the vessel, and Whitney was glad to get his breath as he studied her. She appeared to have been a schooner of about two hundred tons, but her after part and mainmast were gone. The fore end, however, had escaped destruction, and although the foremast slanted ominously and the topmast and yards had fallen, it still defied the storms. Standing beneath the swell of the bows, the men were out of the wind and could make their voices heard.

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"Now I see why I didn't notice a perch on the chart, though I once saw the spar as we came down this side of the Firth," Whitney said. "It's curious they didn't mark the wreck."

"She wasn't here when the last survey was made. A coaster loaded with coal. Somebody tried to get her cargo out, but I understand had to give it up."

Whitney had got his breath, but was silent for a time. He had camped in the silent Canadian forests and by frozen lakes on the vast snowy plains, but he did not think he ever had seen anything so savage and desolate as this strip of surf-beaten sand with the wreck in its midst. Men had hewn her timbers with skilful toil; but the sea had shattered them, and now seemed to challenge all attempts to dispute its power. Whitney was not unduly imaginative, but he felt depressed and somewhat daunted. It was an eerie spot to linger in at midnight in a gale of wind.

"The fo'castle doesn't seem broken up. Can we get on board?" he said.

"We'll try," Andrew replied.

Climbing up by the fragments of planking attached to a rib, they reached a strip of deck. It sloped sharply, but Andrew, grasping the ragged bulwark, looked up.

"The iron forestay's holding the mast, and there's a couple of blocks slung round the top," he said. "If it wasn't blowing quite so hard, I'd go up for them." Then he caught a thin rope that ran down from the blocks. "Good signal-halyard; I'd like to take it back, but I didn't bring my knife."

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Whitney felt amused. Andrew could seldom resist the temptation of picking up anything that might be of use on board his yacht. Indeed, her fore-castle was cumbered with what Whitney called truck.

They moved forward a few paces and stopped by two curved beams that rose above a black hole.

"The remains of the fo'castle hatch. I wonder what it's like below," Andrew said.

Kneeling on the wet deck, he struck a match, which blew out; but the next burned for a moment or two, and Whitney saw the light flicker on dripping planks and bulging beams. It was obvious that the water flowed into the vessel and he wondered at Andrew's curiosity. The dark hole did not look inviting and he was anxious to return to the yacht in good time. Still, it was bitterly cold standing in the wind.

"We'll go and see, but I'll let you drop down first," he said.

Andrew seized the carline-beam and vanished through the gap. There was a splash below, and he called to Whitney to be careful how he came down. As this was impossible, Whitney let go the beam and, touching the vessel's keelson with his foot, fell against her planking. It jarred him, but he got up and Andrew struck another match and stooping down picked something out of the water that lay among the timbers.

"A bit of candle!" he exclaimed. "It's going to burn."

It did so after he had scraped off some smoldering wick and stuck it on a massive oak knee. The wrecked bulwarks broke the wind, for only draughts came down, and the light spread about the fore-castle. There was some sand in the vessel's bottom, and the floor and ceilings had gone. Nothing remained but the heavy timbers and the planks bolted fast to them. A few shrimps sped up and down a pool and a small crab that made a crackling noise crawled into a corner. Andrew

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examined the beams and knees with interest.

"These old vessels were very well built," he said. "They used picked material, cutting out the sapwood and seeing that the grain followed the curve where there was any shape. She broke up aft in pounding with the coal on board, but now that it's gone, this part of her may stand a long time. Good, salted oak will last for many years under water."

"How did they get the coal away?" Whitney asked.

"They didn't get much. I wasn't here when they tried to salve it, but I believe they used carts."

"Then you can reach land at low water?"

"They must have been able to reach it then, though I'm not sure you could do so now, because the channels are continually changing. It's possible they had to drive through water that may have got deeper since; and the tide would not allow them much time for work. I dare say that stopped the undertaking; and haulage would be expensive, because it's two or three miles from the beach."

"How long is it since they let up?"

"About two years; I can't say exactly." Andrew stopped to light his pipe, and then asked with a smile: "Do you think of trying for the coal?"

"I was wondering whether the men who quit the business left that candle. Would a candle burn after rolling about for two years in salt water?"

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"I don't know; it's an interesting point," Andrew replied thoughtfully, and moved toward a timber from which he scraped a patch of grease. "It was stuck on here when it was used and that must have been after she took the sharp list. If she'd been upright, the flame would have scorched the knee and I see no sign of that."

"Would she list over when she struck the bank?"

Andrew knitted his brows as if the question were an important one.

"I'm not sure. She'd have a full cargo, and these vessels are built with flat floors to lie on the ground. It's only westerly breezes that drive much broken water up the Firth, and though she lists to the east, she hasn't gone very far over yet."

"In short, the chances are that she stood nearly upright when they were working at the coal."

"Yes," said Andrew gravely, "I think she did."

Whitney was silent for a moment or two, listening to the turmoil of the sea and the uproar of the gale that filled the shadowy hold with confused sound, through which came the steady trickle of water running out on the sand. He felt that the wreck had a secret.

"You must see what I'm getting after," he said. "It looks as if somebody had been here since the salvers gave her up."

Andrew nodded.

"The blocks on the masthead are not the kind they'd use for heaving cargo out; besides, they'd want a gaff. Then the signal-halyard felt quite sound."

"If you wanted to get on board, would you take a whammel boat?"

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"It depends. A whammeler couldn't get alongside if it was blowing from the west; and since the tide runs out fast she'd have to leave early on the ebb. If she came on the flood, the wreck would soon be covered."

"Then anybody who meant to get on board would, if possible, walk across the sands, which narrows things down. Now we come to another point. Why would anybody wish to board her?"

Andrew said nothing for a minute and then answered thoughtfully:

"Of course, I've seen where you were leading. The signal-halyard would lift the steel triangle they use with a wireless installation, and they'd get some height at the masthead. Besides, messages travel farthest at night; and the operator wouldn't be seen crossing the sands. I don't know whether he could carry the necessary apparatus, but he might hide it in a watertight box. The candle will be out in a minute, so we can't look."

"You don't know yet if he could cross the sands."

"That's true. I'm going to find out. You had better climb up while the light lasts."

Whitney reached the deck with some difficulty, and it was dark below when Andrew joined him.

"We haven't much time to lose if we're to see whether it's possible to get here from the beach."

They dropped over the side and set off across the bank. The wind buffeted them and driving sand rattled on their oilskins. Whitney hoped that Andrew was going straight, because the moon was obscured again, and the Solway tide rises remarkably fast. For a time they saw nothing but shallow pools in winding hollows and balls of foam that seemed half solidified as they blew along

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the ground. Whitney thought it must be past low-water, but Andrew trudged quietly on and he made no protest. At last they came to a broad stream of water, and he noted with mixed feelings that there was no way of getting round. He was not sorry that it threatened to stop their advance; but his comrade was not easily daunted and might try to wade across.

"As there's not likely to be another big gutter between us and the beach, it would be a pity to turn back now," Andrew shouted.

"I'll wait and see how you get on," Whitney replied.

Andrew plunged in and was soon knee-deep. When he had gone a few yards farther, the water splashed about the skirts of his oilskin jacket and he came out.

"We might have crossed, but the bottom's soft, and there's some stream," he said.

"Which way is it running?"

"Up, but not very fast yet."

"Then we're going back at once," Whitney said firmly.

They started, and Whitney did his best as he heard the growl of the surf grow louder. It would be remarkably unpleasant to find themselves cut off from the dinghy, and there were several gutters to be crossed, with the tide steadily running up. Andrew seemed to realize this, for he went on a quick trot, the water pumping into his sea-boots. It was easier to make progress with the gale behind them, and Whitney felt relieved when they passed the wreck at some distance. Andrew was heading straight across the sands, though Whitney could not tell what he was steering by. After a time, they came to a stretch of water that widened as they splashed through, but when they had floundered across the soft sand at its edge and reached a higher level they were comparatively safe. Breathing hard, they made their way across firmer ground, and Whitney was conscious of keen satisfaction when he saw the dinghy lying a few yards from the glistening water.

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When they had launched her, the wind blew them towards the *Rowan*, and they were soon on board. She was riding easier, and would continue to do so for a while.

"Have you decided whether it's possible to wade out to the wreck?" Whitney asked as they took off their wet oilskins.

"I think it is," said Andrew. "There was about three feet of water in the gutter that turned us back; but the tides are low now and don't run out very far. As they get higher, the gutter would dry toward the last of the ebb."

"The last of the ebb on a big tide would be between five and seven o'clock, and it would be dark then, night and morning," Whitney remarked. "This means that, supposing there was a wireless installation, it could be used only at fixed intervals; roughly speaking, it wouldn't be available one week out of two."

"Yes," said Andrew. "It rather upsets the supposition, but we may find out something more."

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CHAPTER XIV

A FAIR ALLY

It was bright afternoon, and Elsie sat beside a tea-table on the lawn at Appleyard, with Williamson standing beside her. The days were getting short, but the screen of stiff silver-firs kept off the light wind, and strong sunshine warmed the air. It was what the Scot calls a pet day; one borrowed from a finer season, and to be made the most of when winter was close at hand. Madge Whitney lay in a canvas lounge nearer the shelter of the trees, talking to Andrew, and several young men and women stood about the tennis net across the lawn. They seemed to be engaged in a good-humored dispute and their laughter followed a remark of Dick's.

Williamson glanced at his companion and saw that her eyes were fixed upon the boy. They were grave, and her expression was preoccupied, but he did not see the softness he had expected. Indeed, her interest in Dick was puzzling, because he did not think it was altogether accounted for by the hints Staffer had given him, and this was a point upon which he wished to be enlightened. Williamson knew something about women, but, for the most part, they were not women of very high character. With these he was not a favorite, although he was a clever talker and his manners were good.

"You do play tennis sometimes," Elsie said after a silence.

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Williamson smiled. Her meaning was obvious.

"Oh, yes, but one feels lazy now and then; and I imagined you let me stay because you wanted to talk to me! Was I wrong?"

"No," answered Elsie; and he noted her unmoved calm.

She was young, but he had not expected shy hesitation or forced boldness from her. He was, however, surprised when she said nothing for the next minute; for he had usually found that an inexperienced antagonist shirks the strain of silence. Then he indicated Dick, who had just returned a difficult ball.

"He plays a good game."

"Dick does a number of things pretty well, although there's none at which he really excels. I don't know which is the more useful—"

"You like a man to have some salient point of skill or character that those who know him can rely upon?"

He noticed her glance wander and did not know that she was half instinctively looking for Andrew, but it rested again on Dick, brooding but calm. Williamson saw that she felt no keen animosity against himself. She knew or suspected that they were, in some respects, opponents, but this did not make her vindictive. She would take the course she had determined on without hating him. This indicated strength of character, but it was too detached an attitude for a young girl fighting for her lover.

"Dick looks better than he did," he remarked to give her an opening.

"Yes," said Elsie, fixing her eyes quietly on his face; "very much better than he did when he came home from town." [Pg 142]

Williamson admired her courage.

"For which you held me to blame!" he said.

"Partly to blame."

"Well, I see you're trying to be fair, though I'm half afraid you failed. But since you meant to raise this point, I must warn you against looking at things out of their right perspective. It makes those in the foreground appear too big."

"You mean one should not exaggerate their relative importance?"

"Exactly. You must, for example, allow for the exhilarating effect a change of air has on a young man fresh from the country who spends a few days in town. Remember that Dick leads a very quiet and monotonous life at Appleyard."

"A sober life is much the best for him."

Williamson wondered whether she spoke with naïve girlish prudery; if not, there was something he ought to know.

"Perhaps it's best for everybody; but we don't all like it, and a change is bracing," he answered with a smile. "I suppose you are looking at the thing from the moral standpoint."

"Not exclusively. Dick will soon be master at Appleyard, and that will bring him duties he ought to be fitting himself for. Then you may not know that he is not very strong."

"I guessed something of the kind, but a few late nights and a little excitement can't do much harm."

Elsie looked at him with thoughtful eyes.

"Possibly not, in most cases, but they are bad for Dick." [Pg 143]

"If you would be quite frank it would help." Williamson was anxious to learn why quietness was necessary for the lad. "We might get on better if we understood each other."

"Have I not been frank? You could hardly have expected me to say as much as I have, even. But I am not Dick's doctor."

Williamson felt baffled, but he would not show it.

"You feel that I ought to have looked after Dick better. I think that's hardly just, because I have, of course, no control over him."

"You are an older man, and he is easily led. A hint would have gone a long way, and he doesn't resent good-humored firmness from those he likes."

"You suggest that he likes me?"

"One can't tell," said Elsie in a quiet voice.

"Well, you must see how awkwardly I'm placed. I can't defend myself without attacking Dick, and you wouldn't like that. Suppose I hinted that he insisted on following his bent although I tried to restrain him?"

"Did you?"

Williamson hesitated, which was an unusual thing. He had no sentimental respect for girlish

inexperience, but he could not make the direct statement that would have cleared him. He reflected with a touch of ironical amusement that Elsie would not be deceived.

"It was really difficult to interfere, but I did try a tactful hint," he said with an indulgent air. "Perhaps the way you regard the thing is natural and deserves some sympathy, but I must say I feel a little hurt. It looks as if you thought I had some object in encouraging Dick to be extravagant and rash."

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"No; I can't see what you would gain," Elsie replied thoughtfully.

"Well, that's some relief; but what do you want now? A promise that, at the risk of offending him, I'll be very firm in future?"

Elsie was silent for a moment and then looked at him calmly.

"I don't think I will ask you for this," she said.

She rose, and Williamson turned away, feeling somewhat annoyed with himself. Elsie had not asked for his promise, because she thought it would not be kept. He had failed to convince her, and her opposition must be reckoned with. Then, what she had said about excitement being bad for Dick had roused his keen curiosity. The girl was inexperienced and had used no artifice, but he did not think she could have played her part better. Staffer apparently believed that she and Andrew Johnstone were not important; but Williamson thought him mistaken. While he crossed the lawn Madge Whitney watched him with a smile.

"That man," she remarked to Andrew, "has just got a set down, but I imagine Elsie has been wasting her time."

"It looks as if you knew what they had been talking about," Andrew replied.

Madge's eyes twinkled.

"Why, of course I do! You must remember that I've been here a week, noticing things. Elsie doesn't like the man, and the only reason she could have for talking to him confidentially is that she wanted to warn him to keep his hands off Dick. But I don't think he will."

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"Ah!" Andrew said sharply. "It's curious that you—"

"Shall I finish what you meant to say? It's curious that although I haven't had much opportunity for seeing what is going on, I should agree with the conclusion you have come to after mature deliberation. Well, if you're afraid of complimenting me on my cleverness, you can account for it by remembering that I'm an American. Of course, this doesn't make me anything the less of an outsider."

"I didn't mean that you were an outsider."

"Perhaps you didn't. It was your Scottish reserve that made you hate to talk about your family affairs; but Jim, who counts you as his partner, has told me something. Then I don't mind telling you that I like you and admire what you are trying to do. However, we'll keep to the point. Williamson is leading your cousin into extravagance with some object."

"I believe that's true," Andrew agreed quietly. "After all, you were right to some extent, about my reserve; but now if you can help me I'll be very glad. It isn't an easy job I have undertaken."

"Very well. I'll begin by telling you something. The evening Williamson arrived, I was coming down to dinner before the rest—I afterward found my watch was fast. When I got to the gallery at the top of the stairs I stopped; it's rather dark where you come out of the passage, you know. Dick was standing by the fire in the hall and his manner indicated that he was waiting for somebody. As I hesitated, Williamson came out of the opposite passage and went downstairs, but his quick glance around showed he wanted to be sure there was nobody but Dick about. I saw Dick's face, and it was eager. Williamson gave him two or three bits of paper that looked like bank-notes."

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"If Dick had given them to Williamson, I could have understood it better," Andrew interrupted.

"Yes; the explanation would then have been obvious; but what I saw suggests something graver. Dick went away, looking relieved; but Williamson moved toward the stairs and then turned back, and a few moments afterward Staffer came in. He said, 'So you have seen him!'"

Andrew made an abrupt movement, but said nothing.

"I suppose you see the significance of this?" Madge said.

It was plain to Andrew that Staffer had known, and no doubt approved, of the transaction between Williamson and Dick.

"Yes; and I feel disturbed about it."

"Well," continued Madge, "I went back quietly and didn't come down for some time; but I watched the three men at dinner. Williamson spoke to Dick as if he had not seen him since he came, and Dick said he was sorry he wasn't able to meet him at the station. In fact, they rather overdid it; and Staffer seemed to think so, because he stopped them. Then, perhaps, because he felt relieved, Dick—"

"Drank more than usual?" Andrew suggested grimly when she hesitated. "I noticed that. Well, since you have seen so much, I'm glad to have you on my side, particularly if you can tell me what I ought to do. I'll admit that I don't know."

"I think you should watch and do what seems plainly needful, but nothing more. Don't try to make clever plans, but take Mackellar into your confidence." [Pg 147]

"You haven't met him," Andrew said in surprise.

"Jim has, and I know what he thinks of him."

Andrew took her advice and soon afterward left Appleyard in the side-car. Whitney let the high-powered bicycle go when they turned into the main western road, which runs, straight and level, along the Solway, and they reached Dumfries in an hour. Mackellar had not left his office and in five minutes Andrew had made the situation plain. Mackellar pondered it silently for a time, and then looked up.

"Weel," he said, "it gets interesting and I must set to work. I'll let ye know when I have anything to report."

Andrew, knowing his man, was satisfied with this. He and Whitney drove home at full speed, and arrived before their absence had been noticed. Williamson left the next morning, and Madge Whitney a few days afterward, and nothing of importance happened during the following week; but Mackellar had, in the meantime, been carrying out a plan that was to have some influence upon Williamson's affairs.

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CHAPTER XV A BARGAIN

There was no Sunday delivery of letters, and one Monday morning Williamson sat rather anxiously watching the road outside a small country house beside the Tweed. One of the tall gateposts at the end of the drive had sunk to a slant and the gravel had not been rolled or raked for some time. The borders round the lawn hinted at economy in bedding out and gardener's hire, and the old house had a dilapidated look. These things were significant and explained why Williamson had been received there as a paying guest, with the privilege of some rough shooting and salmon-fishing.

He could have found cheaper quarters, but the place suited him. For one thing, his residence there gave him a certain standing in the country, and his host, a decayed Scottish gentleman, was getting old and left him alone. He could go and come as he liked without exciting remark, and the people he met were well bred and not imaginative. Since he had been received by his host, they took it for granted that he was a man one could be friendly with.

The postman at last dismounted from his bicycle at the gate. It is customary in that neighborhood to meet the post, but Williamson sat still, as if he did not expect any letters. The man gave him three before he went on to the house, and Williamson put them down and carelessly lighted his pipe. He had learned to exercise caution in such details, though he felt disturbed as he recognized the writing. [Pg 149]

The first curtly reminded him that payment for the hire of a motor car was two months overdue. The second enclosed a statement of a fashionable tailor's account, which included an expensive fur coat; but there was no difference in the hand. Williamson knew it well; indeed, he had two or three similar demands in his pocket. Each ended with an intimation that unless payment were made within a specified time, proceedings would be taken to enforce it.

Williamson put down the notes and vacantly looked about. Not far away, the Tweed, sparkling in the sunshine, ran through a wooded hollow where beeches gleamed ruddy-brown among somber firs. Two men with guns upon their shoulders were crossing the steep stubble that glittered with melting hoar frost on the breast of a neighboring hill, and a keeper with a couple of setters stood at the gate. Williamson was to have gone shooting with his host; but now he must excuse himself, for he had something of importance to think about.

His expenses were heavy, for it was important that he should pass for a sporting man of means, and he was a good shot and skilful with the salmon rod. As a rule, he had money enough for his needs, but his supplies had been irregular since the war began, and as he had luxurious tastes his debts had mounted up. Of late, his creditors had grown impatient, but it was curious they should all have asked the same lawyer to enforce their claims. This could not have happened by coincidence. It looked as if somebody, who must have taken a good deal of trouble to investigate his affairs, meant to put some pressure on him. This was alarming, for several reasons; and as he could not pay his debts in the time allowed, he determined to call upon the lawyer and see what he could find out. [Pg 150]

There was, however, another matter that demanded attention, and as he took up a letter with the Newcastle postmark the Tweed drew his eyes again. It reminded him of a wider river with older

associations; a river where terraced vineyards rose steeply from the waterside, instead of the rounded Scottish hills, and barges slowly floating past ancient towns. His expression changed and grew resolute as he thought of it.

Opening the envelope he found, as he expected, a short note folded round a letter. The note said that he would, no doubt, like to hear how Jack was getting on in Holland, and ended with a few references to mutual acquaintances. The letter was of some length, and narrated in gossiping style its writer's business journey to several Dutch towns. Williamson, however, knew that there was more in it than met the eye, and he went to excuse himself from joining the shooting party. After this, he spent some time studying the letter in his room, and when he had burned it he went at once to the station.

Leaving the train at an old country town, he called at the lawyer's office and was received by a suave elderly gentleman.

"It was my unpleasant duty to send you these notices," the lawyer said with an apologetic air. "I appreciate your prompt response, and expect the little matter will now be put right. You must admit that the creditors have exercised some patience."

"But don't mean to do so any longer, eh? That is really what I came to see about."

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"Of course you understand that the war has made money tight. My clients inform me that they find themselves compelled to press for outstanding accounts and to take a course that in a happier state of things they would not employ."

"Then I am to understand that these notices will be acted upon?"

"I think you can take that for granted," the lawyer answered in a deprecatory tone. "However, there is a way in which you can obviate all trouble to yourself and me—I mean by paying what is due at once."

Williamson looked at him with a grim smile.

"It sounds simple, but there are difficulties. Now, I can pay these bills, but not in the time mentioned. Have you power to extend it?"

"No; but if you will make me an offer I will consult my clients."

"That would cause some delay. As I want the matter settled, I would prefer to call upon the man who has brought it to a head. Will you tell me his name?"

Williamson had hoped to catch the lawyer off his guard, but his amused expression showed him that he had failed.

"There are several names. You know the people."

"Of course; but suppose you admit that I have some intelligence and try to look at the matter from my point of view."

"It would be difficult, for the want of practise," the lawyer answered dryly. "I have no debts."

"Still, if you had several creditors who lived in different places and simultaneously put their claims into the hands of one particular lawyer, what would you think?"

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"It might be accounted for very simply. I believe I am known as a businesslike, trustworthy man."

"I don't doubt it; but I suspect another explanation. There is somebody behind these people who has persuaded them to stop my credit or has bought up the debts. He must have a reason for this, and if I could talk it over privately with him, it would simplify things."

"I'm not so sure that follows," said the lawyer. "All I can tell you is that the bills have been sent to me for collection and unless they are met I shall reluctantly be forced to—"

"Just so," Williamson interrupted. "At present, I cannot say whether they will be met or not. I'm afraid we must leave it at that. And now, good day."

A clerk politely showed him out; and he reached the station in time to catch an Edinburgh train. There was no one else in the compartment he entered, and he sat in a corner, thinking hard. Though he had not learned much he felt that he was right in his surmise. Some one was trying to put pressure on him through his creditors. His first guess at his unknown antagonist's object caused him serious alarm; but after some reflection he dismissed it with relief as improbable and sought for another explanation.

To begin with, he must first discover the identity of his enemy. His suspicions centered on Appleyard. Andrew Johnstone was certainly hostile, on his cousin's account; and it was possible that he had been helped by Mackellar, whom Williamson had met at Appleyard. He determined to see Mackellar; but he could not do so until next day, for a more important matter demanded attention first.

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Getting out at the Waverley station, he took a cable tram, and, leaving it on the outskirts of the city, walked on to Leith. Here at dusk he met a man dressed like a sailor, and spent an hour with him in the back room of a public house. When they came out the sailor disappeared in the darkness and Williamson returned to Edinburgh, where he dined and slept at a fashionable hotel.

The next morning he went to Glasgow, and left it shortly after his arrival by a train which took him to Dumfries. It was not without a reason he had traveled by three different railways. Williamson generally tried to cover his tracks.

After lunch at the station hotel, he walked down the narrow High Street and stopped at a garage, to order a motorcycle to be ready in half an hour. Then, by an indirect route, he went to Mackellar's offices.

As it happened, Mackellar was then talking to Andrew and Whitney in his private room, and he smiled as he showed them Williamson's card.

"Maybe ye had better ask Mr. Davies to let ye out by the back," he said. "If ye call again in half an hour, I may have some news."

"I wonder how Williamson got here?" Andrew said when they reached the street. "There's no train that connects with the North British."

"Came in a car, perhaps," Whitney suggested. "Somehow, I'd like to know. Let's try our garage; everybody puts up there."

They went to the garage and Whitney began to make an unnecessary adjustment to the engine of his side-car.

"I suppose Mr. Williamson comes here when he's in town?" he said to a man at work near by. [Pg 154]

"Yes," the man answered. "He's in town the noo."

"Did Mr. Staffer bring him in his car?"

"She's no' in the yard, and Mr. Williamson's for Castle Douglas." The man indicated the motorcycle on which he was working. "I'm tightening her up for the run; no' that she needs it much. Mr. Williamson kens a good machine and always asks for her."

"Is there anything doing at Castle Douglas to-day?"

"No' that I've heard of. He's for the moors, I'm thinking. There's a gun-case to be strapped on the carrier; but if ye're wanting to see him ye must leave word at the office. I'll be away at another job before he comes in."

"It doesn't matter; we may meet him," Whitney answered carelessly; and he and Andrew strolled away.

"Well," he said, "we have learned something! It seems Williamson's in the habit of hiring a motorcycle here. Has he any friends in Galloway who might give him some shooting?"

"None that I know of," Andrew replied with a puzzled look.

"I guess you noted that he makes a curious choice of a machine. She's good—I know that make—but I can't see why he picks a single-cylinder lightweight when they've several full-powered machines on the stand. Looks as if he expected he'd have to wheel her. What's the Castle Douglas road like?"

"It's the highway to the west, and we keep our main roads in good order."

"You certainly do," Whitney agreed. "But I stick to my opinion that he has some particular reason for choosing a light machine." He hesitated a moment. "I don't want to butt in, and as the fellow's a family friend, it's delicate ground; but if you feel you'd like a run through Galloway—" [Pg 155]

"Perhaps we'd better go; but we'll see first what Mackellar has to say."

They walked down to the bridge foot, to pass the time; and in the meanwhile Mackellar received Williamson.

"You wished to see me?" he said.

Williamson took out the bills and the lawyer's letters and put them on Mackellar's desk.

"I wonder whether you know anything about these?"

"I know the gentleman who seems to have charge of the matter. Why do you ask?"

"Because I prefer to deal with the principal instead of an agent. It saves time, and one arrives at an understanding easier."

"In this case there's no great difficulty. Ye have only to pay the bills."

"Precisely," agreed Williamson. "They can be paid—that's worth noting—but not just yet."

Mackellar understood this as a hint that the power Williamson's debts gave his antagonist was only temporary.

"In the meantime, ye might be put to some inconvenience," he replied. "One cannot proceed against a man for debt without publicity, which is apt to be damaging, and unpleasant to his friends."

"Exactly. That is what I want to avoid."

"And yet ye cannot pay the bills! Weel, ye are doubtless aware that one gets nothing for nothing, and since ye must ask for some delay, what could ye offer by way of consideration?"

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"To begin with, I should like to hear what the principal, the man who stands behind my creditors, wants." Williamson paused and added meaningly: "I think you know."

Mackellar was silent for a few moments.

"I'll no' deny it," he then said. "Would ye be willing to produce the notes of hand and the long-date bills Dick Johnstone has given ye and cancel them on payment of the money lent with current interest up to date? If ye insist, we might allow a little more interest, because ye took some risk."

"I'd be willing to give up one or two," Williamson answered with some hesitation.

"But no' the rest, which are no' in your hands?"

"I suppose I must admit that. But what did you mean by saying I took a risk?"

"We'll talk of that again. Are ye willing to give your word that ye'll lend Mr. Johnstone no more money, make no fresh bet with him, and no' help him to negotiate a loan?"

"Is that all?" Williamson asked with a touch of sarcasm.

"I think the matter could be arranged on the terms I have laid down."

On the whole Williamson was conscious of relief. To do as Mackellar asked would place him in an embarrassing position, but he had been afraid of something much worse.

"It needs thought," he said.

"Then I will give ye five minutes; but it may help ye to decide if I explain why ye took a risk. Ye're maybe aware that there's legislation about a minor's debts."

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"Dick Johnstone would not make that excuse for disowning his obligations."

"I'm no' sure ye would have to deal with him," said Mackellar meaningly. "Dick has no doubt been borrowing money on promises to pay when Appleyard is his. Weel, it's no' certain that he'll live until he gets possession."

"Nor may the lenders, for that matter!"

"Verra true," Mackellar agreed. "For a' that, the chances against Dick's reaching twenty-one are greater than usual. It seems ye do not know that two doctors would not pass him for the army."

"On what grounds?" Williamson asked with some sharpness.

"A weak heart that might stop the first time he was over-excited or over-exerted himself."

Williamson was silent for some moments. He knew Dick was not strong; but Staffer, who must have known the truth, had not told him how grave the danger was.

"Still, suppose the worst happened. The new owner would not repudiate his kinsman's debts."

"Who do ye take the heir to be?"

"Staffer."

Mackellar looked at him with dry amusement.

"Did he tell ye so?"

"No," Williamson said thoughtfully. "I can't remember that he ever did say that exactly, but I was led to understand from the beginning that—"

"Appleyard would be his? Weel, perhaps I may tell ye something about the family's affairs. Dick's father left the house and land to the lad, with a reversion to the next o' kin, in case he died before inheriting. Mistress Johnstone got a separate portion and power to manage the estate for her son's benefit until he came of age, subject to the approval of the executors. She could appoint a guardian for the lad, to superintend his education, but she could not alienate a yard of land. It was not a will that I approved of, but Mr. Johnstone was very ill when he made it and did not listen to my objections. Maybe he hardly expected his widow to marry again. Mr. Staffer, who acted as steward for his wife, now acts for Dick; but there his interest ends."

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"Then, in the event of Dick's death, who gets the estate?"

"Andrew Johnstone."

Williamson got a double shock. Staffer, whom he had regarded as the next heir, had not been straight with him; and he knew that Andrew would be difficult to deal with. Besides, if Dick did reach twenty-one Staffer's influence would cease. Mackellar was right: a serious risk attended the discounting of bills by which Dick raised money for gambling and similar extravagances. Since Staffer had played him a shabby trick in leaving him in ignorance, Williamson need not consider him and could look after his own interests.

"Very well," he said, "I'm ready to give you the promise you want if we can come to terms."

"Then I'll pay off any notes of Dick's that ye may bring me, with interest at two per cent. above the bank rate. If this will not enable ye to satisfy your creditors, I'll engage that they will give ye another six months."

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"It's enough," said Williamson. "But of course you see that when I have satisfied them your hold on me has gone."

Mackellar smiled.

"Verra true; but I believe I've shown ye that it would be wiser to leave Dick alone. I'm thinking ye have sense enough to take a hint and keep your word."

"You'll find that I mean to do so," Williamson replied.

Soon after he went out, Andrew and Whitney returned. Mackellar told them what Williamson had promised, and added:

"The man might have been dangerous, but we need not fear any further trouble from him. There are two points worth noting, though I cannot tell whether they concern us or not. He's anxious to avoid anything that might damage his credit and make him leave this part of the country; and he expects some money before long. Can ye account for this?"

They discussed the matter for a few minutes; and then Andrew and Whitney hurried back to the garage.

"Our man must be some distance ahead," Whitney said. "We may even lose him."

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CHAPTER XVI

TRAILING THE MOTORCYCLE

For a few minutes Whitney's machine turned in and out of narrow streets between rows of tall, old houses, and then went cautiously down the dip to the Nith. There was some traffic on the bridge, and when they had crossed, carts encumbered the road on the Galloway side. Whitney fumed at the delay; but he opened out his engine as they entered a stretch of open road, and the wind began to fan Andrew's face.

For a mile in front of them the river-plain ran level, the stubble shining yellow among squares of pasture and the dark green of turnip-fields; then a ridge of hills rose steeply across their way. The sun that flooded the valley with mellow light was getting low, and while the trees upon the summit of the ridge stood out sharply distinct, the wooded slopes were steeped in soft blue shadow.

"Looks like a climb," Whitney remarked. "I suppose we go right up there?"

"Maxwellton braes," said Andrew. "I expect you have heard of then. It's an easy gradient up a long glen."

"Then sit tight, and we'll rush her up on the top gear."

The dust whirled behind them, and the cropped hedgerows spun past; they swung giddily round a curve at a bridge, and the throb of the engine grew louder as they breasted the hill. Dark firs streamed down to meet them; here and there a leafless birch and an oak that gleamed like burnished copper swept by. There was a tinkle of running water in the wood; and, now that they were out of the sunshine, the air felt keen. Ahead, the ascending road unrolled like a white riband through faint, shifting lights and lilac shadow.

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Soon the glen ran out into a wide hollow that led westward across a tableland. Low, green hills with gently rounded tops shut off the rugged moors beyond; the shallow vale was cultivated and tame, but the road was good, and Andrew felt the thrill of speed. Long fields and stone dykes swept behind into the trail of dust. The sun sank toward a bank of slate-colored cloud; its rays raked the valley, throwing the black shadows of the scattered ash-trees far across the fields.

Andrew kept his eyes fixed steadily upon the road. This ran, for the most part, straight and level; but, though they were traveling very fast, there was no speeding streak of dust ahead.

After a time a long white village rose from the rolling pasture; and when they ran in among the low houses Whitney pulled up. There was a smith's shop by the roadside, and a man stood outside, holding a cartwheel, while another moved a glowing iron hoop amid the flame of a circular fire.

"You have been watching that tire heat for a while, I guess," said Whitney.

"Lang enough," the other answered. "She's no' stretching weel."

"Then have you seen a small, black motorcycle pass?"

"No; there was a big gray yin, an' anither with a side-car."

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"How long have you been outside?"

"Maybe twenty minutes; maybe a few mair."

"Thanks," said Whitney; and started the motorcycle.

"It's curious. He's traveling light, but I don't think a single-cylinder engine could beat the machine I'm driving by a quarter of an hour. Anyhow, I'll try to speed her up."

The sunlight faded off the grass as they raced away; the slaty clouds rolled higher up the sky; and the wind that whipped their faces bit keen. Andrew was swung to and fro in the rocking car, and sometimes felt uneasy when his comrade dashed furiously round the bends; but for most of the way the road ran straight, and they could see nothing on the long, white streak ahead. After a time they came to a narrow loch, ruffled by the wind, that lay in a lonely, grassy waste, and as they ran past the thin wood on its edge Andrew asked Whitney to stop.

"A motor scout," he said, indicating a man in uniform who rode leisurely toward them on a bicycle.

The scout dismounted when they called to him, and said he had left Castle Douglas an hour before and had kept to the main road, but had not seen a single-cylinder motorcycle. They let him go and Whitney lighted a cigarette.

"Now," he said, "we have to think. Our man pulled out for Castle Douglas, but hasn't gone there; my notion is that he didn't mean to. Where's he likely to have headed?"

"It's hard to tell. A road runs northwest to New Galloway, but I can't see what would take him there. It's a small place on the edge of the moors."

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"And right away from the Eskdale road!" Whitney ejaculated, looking hard at him.

"Well," said Andrew quietly, "I'll admit I thought of that."

"As a matter of fact, you've been thinking of something like it for quite a time."

Andrew was silent for a moment or two.

"There was a chance of my being mistaken," he said slowly. "However, I now feel that it's my duty to get upon the fellow's track, if I can."

"Would you rather I dropped out?"

Andrew knew that the suggestion was prompted by delicacy, but he made a negative sign.

"After all, you know something, and may as well know the rest—if there is anything more to learn. Besides, you're quicker than I am in several ways, and I might want you."

"When you do, you'll find me ready," Whitney answered. "But we'll get back to business. Which way do you suppose he's gone?"

"On the whole, I think south toward Dalbeattie; it's nearer the Solway. As it might be better to follow the road he'd take, we'll have to run back nearly to Dumfries."

"That's all right," said Whitney. "Get in. She seems to be feeling particularly good to-day, and I'm going to let her hum."

They raced back eastward while the distant hills turned gray in front of them. Then they turned sharply to the south, and soon the road skirted a railway line. Whitney got down when they reached a station.

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"Have you seen a small, black motorcycle?" he asked a lounging porter.

"Yes; I mind her because I thought she was running verra hard for a wee machine. If yon man's a friend o' yours, ye'll no' catch him easy."

"When did he pass?"

"It would be about five minutes after the Stranraer goods cam' through, and that's an hour ago."

Whitney ran back to his machine and jumped into the saddle.

"We're on his trail, but he must have come straight and fast from Dumfries. Well, we'll get after him."

The car leaped forward as the clutch took hold; dykes and trees swept down the road; and Criffell's bold ridge rose higher against the eastern sky. Here and there a loch gleamed palely in the desolate tableland, and in the distance a river caught the fading light, but the cloud-bank was spreading fast and the west getting dim. At last they saw from the top of a rise a gray haze stretched across a hollow, and Andrew told his comrade that it was the smoke of Dalbeattie. Then a man with a spade and barrow came into view on the slope of another hill, and Andrew asked Whitney to stop. The man was cutting back the grass edges on the roadside; he had not seen a bicycle of the kind they described.

"How long have you been here?" Andrew asked.

"Since seven o'clock this morning."

Whitney started the car slowly, and pulled up when the roadmender was hidden behind the hill.

"We want to talk this over," he said. "Williamson left the road between the station and where we met the man. We know he hasn't gone west or farther south. What about the east?" [Pg 165]

Andrew glanced at Criffell, which rose between them and the sea. Its summit cut sharply against the sky, but its slopes were blurred and gray and the stone dykes that ran toward its foot had lost their continuity of outline. Two or three miles away, to the southeast, the mountain ran down in a long ridge.

"It's obvious that he hasn't gone over the top. He could cross the shoulder yonder, but he'd have some trouble."

"He'd have to leave the motorcycle."

"That's so," said Andrew thoughtfully. "There's an old road between here and the station and he might reach the moors by what we call a loaning—a green track that sometimes leads to a farm or cothouse and sometimes ends in a bog. Of course, if he found one and crossed the hill on foot, he'd cut the main road from Dumfries round the coast before he reached the Solway beach."

"You're taking it for granted that he'd try to make the beach—which means the wreck."

"Yes," said Andrew quietly; "I believe it's what he'd do."

"Well, there are two things to note. He could have gone straight from Dumfries by a good road on the other side of the mountain, but he preferred this way and a rough climb across. Then he started for Castle Douglas, when he might as well have told the garage people he was going to Dalbeattie. This implies that he'd a pretty good reason for covering his trail." Whitney paused and looked hard at Andrew. "Before we go any farther, you have to decide whether you really want to find out that reason. You can quit the business now, but you may not be able to do so afterward." [Pg 166]

"I'd rather stop, but I must go on," said Andrew grimly.

"Very well; we'll try to follow him."

They drove back, passing the roadmender, who leaned upon his spade looking after them; and a little while later Whitney pulled up at a broken gate that hung open. A rough track, grown with grass, led away from it between loose stone walls.

"Not intended for automobiles!" Whitney remarked, as he cautiously steered between the ruts. "Williamson must have found it easier than we do."

Andrew nodded. His comrade's eyes were keen, for only a crushed tuft of grass here and there suggested the track of a bicycle tire. Farther along they stopped at a gate where the loaning forked. One branch ran on; the other turned off, and in the distance a lonely white house showed amidst a clump of bare, wind-bent trees.

"He would not have gone to the farm," said Whitney. "Jump down and open the gate."

They went on again carefully, but after a time the loaning got very rough and rushes grew across it where the ground was soft. After narrowly escaping an upset into the ditch on one side, Whitney stopped.

"I guess this is as far as she'll take us, and I see a peat-stack where we could leave her."

Lifting down a small fir that closed a gap in the wall, they pushed the motorcycle across a strip of heath and against a pile of turf; and then they stopped to look about. [Pg 167]

The light was rapidly going and the wind was falling. In front lay a stretch of moor, seamed by black peat-hags, in some of which water glistened; beyond the moor rough heather-covered slopes ran up to the black hillcrest. A curlew whistled overhead, and the sharp cry of a grouse rose from the darkening heath. Except for this, it was very still and the landscape looked strangely desolate. Not far ahead a patch of roof showed faintly among some stunted ash-trees.

"A cothouse," said Andrew in surprise.

"We'll look at it," Whitney answered, and started for the building.

One end had fallen down, but half the thatch remained upon the bending rafters. The rest had gone, and it was plain that the cot had been abandoned for a long time. Crossing a ditch by a rotten plank, they stood knee-deep among withered nettles at the door, and the ruined walls struck a mournful note in the gathering dark.

"There's a track here," said Whitney. "I guess the sheep go in."

He struck a match as they entered, and, avoiding stones and fallen beams, they made for the door of an inner room. When they reached it, Whitney struck another match, and smiled as he held it up, for the light fell upon a single-cylinder motorcycle with a gun-case strapped to the carrier.

"Well," he said, "I expected this. If we cross the end of the hill going southeast, we would strike the sands somewhere abreast of the wreck?"

"Yes."

"How's the tide?"

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"High-water's about one o'clock. That means it's a big tide and, of course, runs out a long way on the ebb."

"Then the sands will be dry and there'll be no gutters to cross. Well, I guess it's a long walk, but we've got to make it. Take your overalls off."

Three or four minutes later they left the cothouse and struck across the heath. There was no track, but Andrew headed for a knoll on the mountain's sloping shoulder. After they left the level, the heather grew tall and strong, brushing about their knees and entangling their feet. Then there were awkward rabbit-holes and granite boulders scattered about, and they bruised their shins as they laboriously plodded upward. The light had almost gone, and there was nothing visible but the stretch of shadowy hillside in front.

Whitney heard Andrew breathing hard, and imagined that his injured leg was giving him trouble.

"Are we rushing it too much?" he asked.

"I can hold out until we get to the top, and I'll be all right then. It's gripping the brae with the side of my foot that bothers me."

He went on without slackening speed, and the slope grew easier and the light breeze keener. Then the stretch of heather which had shut off their view suddenly fell away, and they looked down through the soft darkness on to a vast, black plain. There was nothing to distinguish land from sea; but a faint cluster of lights that pricked the gloom like pin-points marked the English-shore, and farther off the flickering glare of blast-furnaces was reflected in the sky. In the middle distance, a twinkle showed where the Solway lightship guarded the fairway through the shoals; but there was no light near them, nor any sound except the distant murmur of the sea. They stood remote from the homes of men in the mountain solitude.

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Andrew, stooping behind a mass of granite, struck a match and took out his watch.

"We haven't much time to spare. I wish I knew if the lightship yonder was still riding to the ebb," he said. "There's a burn somewhere below us and running water is generally a good guide down."

They went on, floundering through tangled heather and falling into rabbit-burrows, until the tinkle of water reached them softly. After that they wound downhill beside the growing burn, past brakes of thorn and hazel and over banks of stones, until a long wood led them to the road. Following the wood for a time they went down again through smooth pasture and turnip-fields and came to a wall that ran along the beach. The empty space beyond it looked black and lonely, and the mournful crying of wildfowl came out of the gloom, but at some distance a beam from a lighthouse cast its reflection upon the sloppy sand.

"Can you hit the wreck from here?" Whitney asked.

"I'll try," said Andrew. "It's a long way, and the tide must be on the turn."

They took off their boots, and as they launched out across the dark level the sand felt sharply cold. Here and there they splashed through pools, but for the most part the bank was ribbed with hard ridges. The shore soon vanished; Criffell's black bulk grew blurred and shapeless against the sky; and they had only the misty beam from the lighthouse for guide. Whitney, however, imagined that Andrew was going straight, which was comforting, when they came to a wide depression where water glimmered. He thought this was the channel that had stopped them before, and he felt somewhat uneasy as he waded in. There was now no boat they could retreat to on the other side of the wreck.

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The water, however, hardly covered their ankles; and some time afterward Andrew touched Whitney's arm as a dim, formless mass rose from the sand. It got plainer as they cautiously approached it, their bare feet falling noiselessly, and in a minute or two they stopped and listened beside the wreck. There was no sound but the drip of water, and Andrew, grasping a broken beam, swung himself up. Whitney followed, his nerves tense, his muscles braced; and he held his breath when he dropped into the forecastle. The next moment a pale light sprang up, and he saw Andrew holding out a match. The feeble glow spread along the wet planks and filled the forecastle before the match went out, and Whitney was more relieved than disappointed to see that nobody else was there.

"We have missed him," he said. "Take my box; they're wax and burn better than the wooden kind."

Andrew struck another light, and it burned clearer. The candle they had used and replaced on the last visit had gone, but two or three matches floated in a pool. He picked them up and Whitney examined them closely.

"These are quite fresh," he said. "Looks as if they'd just been struck, though we can't be sure of that. Extra thick wax, same make as mine; I got the best I could, because I wanted them to light the bicycle lamp."

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Then the match burned low, and Andrew threw it down.

"It proves nothing except that the man who used them wanted a good article. The make is well known, but in this part of the country you couldn't find it except at a tobacconist's."

"That's a point. Anything is good enough for a fisherman or a sailor to get a light with. The fellow who came here must have meant to have the best."

"After all, the matches don't tell us who he is," Andrew said slowly.

"They don't, but they may help us later. And now we'll hustle for the beach. It would be awkward if we found the tide running up the gutter."

They set off across the sands and waded through the channel without trouble. Reaching land, they put on their boots and laboriously struggled up the dark hill. Both were tired when they floundered down through the heather on the other side, but they found the boggy heath, and came at last to the cothouse. As they expected, the motorcycle was no longer there. They trudged on to the peat-stack, and shortly afterward Whitney started his machine, and with some difficulty kept out of the ruts and ditches until he turned into the highroad.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE MATCHBOX

The dead leaves were driving round Appleyard before a boisterous wind that lashed the granite walls with bitter rain. A fire had been lighted in the drawing-room, and Staffer sat talking to his sister. Mrs. Woodhouse was a quiet woman, generally content to remain in the background; and the influence she exercised at Appleyard was, as a rule, negative. She rarely claimed authority, even over her daughter, or openly interfered, but the things she disapproved of were seldom done. Now her usually placid face was firm.

The drawing-room door was open, and she watched Williamson, who stood near Elsie in the hall. His pose was gracefully easy as he smiled at a remark of the girl's. He looked suave and well-bred, but Mrs. Woodhouse's expression hardened.

"Will that man be here long?" she asked, when Williamson and Elsie moved away.

Staffer gave her a quick glance. It was desirable that his relations with Williamson should be cordial, but of late his guest had shown some reserve. It was so slight that Staffer, knowing of no cause for their disagreement, felt it instinctively rather than noticed it by any particular sign. For all that, something had come between them, and he wondered whether his sister was to blame for this.

"It looks as if you didn't wish him to stay," he said.

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"I don't. His society is not good for Dick."

Staffer smiled, though he was puzzled. On his last visit Williamson had rather avoided Dick.

"He can't do him much harm; and, after all, it does not look as if Dick would marry Elsie, as we once thought was possible."

"No; Elsie will not marry him, and I would not wish it, if she were willing."

Staffer was somewhat surprised.

"Then why need you bother about him?" he said. "If he indulges in foolish extravagances, it's his affair."

She looked at Staffer with a listless expression.

"I don't think you would understand; but I do not want him to come to harm."

"Well, there's something else to talk about. It won't be long before Dick is his own master, and we must leave Appleyard. This will make a big difference, because our means are small and Elsie has been taught no profession. What will she do then, unless she marries somebody?"

"I do not know," Mrs. Woodhouse answered in a placid tone.

Staffer mastered his impatience, for his sister sometimes baffled him, and there was a matter of importance about which he wished to sound her.

"I'm sorry you seem to have a prejudice against Williamson. Is it only on Dick's account?"

"No; I feel that he may bring trouble to us all. We were happier before his visits began. There is a difference now at Appleyard, and I don't like mystery. Why does he call himself Williamson?"

"Ah! You imagine it is not his name?"

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"I have known for some time that it is not."

Staffer felt disturbed. His sister had been shrewder than he expected, and he wondered whether anybody else shared her suspicions; but her statement gave him the lead he wanted.

"Well," he said, "I dare say you can see that to use his proper name just now might make things unpleasant for him."

"He did not use it when he first came here, and nobody would have minded it then."

"I'm not certain; these Scots are prejudiced against foreigners; but it's hard to see why you should dislike the man because he is one of us." He paused and looked at her reproachfully. "Have you forgotten the people you belong to, Gretchen, and where you were born?"

Mrs. Woodhouse's face was troubled, but there was a hint of firmness in her voice as she answered.

"I have not forgotten. But when I married I knew I must choose between my country and my husband's; one could not belong to both. I chose his; his people became mine. He was a good man—I think there are not many like him—and I was happy. When he died, I tried to bring up his daughter as he would have her."

"You succeeded. Elsie is a Scot," Staffer remarked with a sneer.

Something in her face warned him that his sister was not to be moved. It was seldom she had shown him her deeper feelings, but she had a mother's heart, against which he could not prevail. She might have made him a useful if not altogether conscious ally, but that idea must be dropped. He had been beaten by a fundamental quality in human nature; and he was half afraid he had said too much.

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"Well," he added, "I'll be content if you treat Williamson as you would any other guest. You needn't go beyond this, if you'd rather not."

She turned and gave him a steady glance.

"I wish you had nothing to do with him, Arnold—I feel he's dangerous. But I will be polite to him, so long as he does not harm Dick."

"That's all I want," said Staffer, turning away.

He entered the billiard-room where the others had gathered. Elsie was knitting, Dick and Andrew were playing, and Williamson stood looking on. Staffer thought this strange, because Andrew did not play well, and Williamson had generally engaged Dick in a game for a stake.

"Making stockings now!" Staffer said to Elsie. "Whom is this lot for?"

"The Border regiment."

"The men who're lucky enough to get them ought to feel flattered," Williamson interposed.

"The brave soldiers are entitled to the best we can send them," Elsie said staunchly.

Williamson carelessly examined the work.

"This is very neat. Knitting's an essentially Scottish accomplishment. It's useful, which no doubt appeals to a race of utilitarian character."

"That's why I like it," Elsie declared. "I am Scottish in all my habits and feelings, you know."

Whitney thought there was something defiant in her voice, but he could not tell whether Williamson noticed it.

When the game was finished, Whitney took out a cigarette and walked to a match-holder, which he knew was empty.

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"Will you give me a light?" he asked Williamson.

"Certainly," said Williamson, producing a well-made gun-metal case, which he immediately returned to his pocket. "I think I used the last there, but I have a box somewhere."

He handed Whitney an ordinary card box containing pine matches.

"Thank you."

As Whitney returned the box he noticed that Andrew was watching them. Then he glanced quickly at Elsie, but she was quietly knitting, with her eyes on the stitches.

A few minutes afterward a servant brought in the afternoon edition of a Glasgow newspaper. Staffer glanced at the front page and then sat down near one of the lamps. There was a certain deliberation in his movements that Whitney noticed, though he admitted that he might not have done so had not the matchbox incident roused him to suspicious vigilance. He thought Staffer was waiting for something, and in a moment or two Williamson left Dick and turned toward him.

Then Staffer folded back the newspaper.

"The A. & P. liner *Centaur* has gone down in the North Channel," he announced calmly.

Whitney started, Dick abruptly put down his cue, and Andrew's face grew hard.

"Do you mean that she was blown up?" Elsie asked with a note of horror in her voice.

"It looks so; but there's not much news yet."

Staffer began to read:

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"The captain of the Clyde coaster *Gannet* reports that when he was off the Skerries near dark one of the big A. & P. liners passed him at some distance to the north. It was blowing fresh, and hazy, but when the vessel was almost out of sight he noticed a dense cloud of smoke. He ran to the box on the bridge-rail, where he kept his glasses, but when he got them out the liner had disappeared. He steered for the spot where he had last seen her, but it was dark when he reached it, and after steaming about for some time, and seeing nothing but a quantity of wreckage, he made for Rathlin and megaphoned the lighthouse-keepers before proceeding. An unconfirmed report from Larne states that a fishing craft passed a steamer's lifeboat, but lost her in the dark. The *Centaur*, a large and nearly new steamer, left Montreal with wheat and a number of passengers eight days ago."

Nobody spoke for a minute after he put down the newspaper, and Whitney lighted a cigarette to cover his excitement. The news was startling, but he thought it did not take Staffer or Williamson by surprise. There was something curious in their expression. Andrew's face, however, had grown very stern; and Elsie's was angrily flushed.

"This is not war, but murder!" she exclaimed. "The men who blow up unarmed vessels ought to be severely punished."

"When you catch them," Staffer answered. "I expect that it will prove difficult; and I'm afraid we must be prepared for some nasty knocks."

"It's rather exasperating to be hit hard where you flatter yourself you're secure against attack," Williamson remarked. "The Admiralty must have thought the North Channel safe."

"It *is* except against treachery," Elsie declared. "Don't you think so, Andrew?"

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"I do," said Andrew quietly. "It's narrow and commanded by lighthouses and coastguard stations; though perhaps, in a way, its narrowness is a danger. But we must see that this kind of thing doesn't happen again."

"How would you try to prevent it?" Staffer asked, with a calmness that was somewhat overdone.

Whitney gave Andrew a careless glance, and was relieved to note that his grim look had vanished. Andrew's views on this subject would be worth having, but it was obvious that he did not mean to state them.

"I'm not a navy officer," he answered and turned to Elsie. "One feels that it won't bear talking about."

"Yes," she agreed, with a flash in her eyes. "There's no use in giving way to rage when one is hurt. The best one can do after a treacherous blow is to keep very quiet and wait until the time comes to strike back."

"There's a true Scot!" laughed Staffer. "You're a stubborn, unemotional race. I wouldn't like to fall into your hands if I'd wronged your friends."

"The Scots are just: they repay both injuries and favors."

Then, by general consent, they talked about something else; and after a time the others went out, and Whitney and Elsie were left alone. He suspected that she had meant this to happen, but he was surprised by her first question.

"Have you a bad memory?"

"I like to think that it's as good as my neighbor's."

"Then it's strange you lighted a cigarette with a match from your own box after asking Mr. Williamson for his."

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"Well, by jove!" Whitney exclaimed. "Do you think he noticed it?"

Elsie's eyes twinkled.

"No; he had his back toward you when you began the next cigarette. But why did you ask for a match when you had some?"

Whitney looked at her frankly.

"I'd rather you didn't press me for an answer," he said.

"Why? Do you mean you wouldn't tell me?"

"Yes. And I shouldn't like to refuse."

Elsie smiled.

"You're not a good plotter. It was easy to catch you out."

"So it seems. But if I'm not as smart as I ought to be, I mean well."

"I don't doubt it, and I have some reason for trusting you. I think you're a good friend of Dick's and Andrew's; and their friends are mine."

"Thank you! But Williamson's by way of being a friend of Dick's."

"Oh, no; he only pretends he is. You must know this."

"Suppose we admit it. Don't you think Andrew's able to take care of his cousin?"

"I'm glad he has your help."

"Perhaps it's more important that he has yours. We're three to one, and that ought to be enough."

Elsie's face was calm, but she was silent for a moment, and Whitney thought she was trying to hide some embarrassment.

"Tell me," she said, "was it on Dick's account you asked Williamson for a match?"

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"No; that is, not directly. I can't tell you anything more; but since we are friends, can you arrange that there are no matches put beside the bedroom candles?"

"The man is our guest," Elsie said with some hesitation. "Still perhaps one mustn't be fastidious when—"

"When there's a good deal at stake—Dick's welfare, for one thing."

"Very well," Elsie promised.

An hour later the party broke up. They used oil-lamps at Appleyard, and at night a row of candles in old-fashioned brass holders were placed upon a table on the bedroom landing. As a rule, a few matchboxes were put beside them; but sometimes this was overlooked.

Williamson went upstairs first, and stopped on reaching the table.

"Matches run out here, too!" he said to Whitney, who was close behind him. "Shall I light your candle?"

Whitney's hand moved toward his pocket, but he remembered in time.

"Thanks!" he answered carelessly. "Perhaps you had better light the lot."

Williamson took out the gun-metal box and struck a small pine match.

"I filled it up again," he remarked. "I always like to have matches handy in an old-fashioned house."

"It's a good plan," Whitney agreed, and went away with his candle.

Five minutes later he opened Andrew's door and found him standing by the window.

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"Come in! I'm thinking about that Canadian boat."

"So I expected," Whitney answered meaningly. "But we'll take the other matter first. Seems to me they're connected."

"The matchbox matter? I don't know whether it was a clever trick or not, but I'd like to hear your views."

"Well," Whitney laughed, "I'm not so smart as I thought. Elsie soon tripped me up."

Andrew frowned.

"Then she saw you? She understands?"

"Something. I don't know how much, but I'm free to admit that she's cleverer than either of us. However, one thing's obvious: Williamson took care to have a box that would hold a good many matches and keep them dry. It's curious that he didn't shake it before he said it was empty. Anyhow, he overdid the thing. If he had given me a thick wax match like those we found on board the wreck, it wouldn't have proved much; while his anxiety to show he used the small pine kind strikes me as significant."

"Elsie must be kept out of all this," Andrew said firmly.

"Then I guess you'll have to keep her out; I'm not up to Miss Woodhouse's mark. Did you notice Staffer's attempt to learn if you knew much about the North Channel?"

"Yes; but we'll let that go for the present. The A. & P. boat was mined or torpedoed. What are we to do?"

Whitney hesitated.

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"To begin with," he said, "you must make up your mind right now how far you are willing to go. You're proud of being a Johnstone, and put the good name of the family pretty high."

"Yes," answered Andrew slowly; "that is true. These, however, are personal reasons, and don't

come first. You can take it for granted that I'm ready to go as far as is needful for the good of my country, regardless of—of any one at Appleyard."

"Then we must try to find Rankine and tell him what we suspect."

"Very well," said Andrew. "We'll sail on the ebb in the morning."

Whitney made a sign of agreement and went away. Andrew had not hesitated about his decision, but Whitney knew it had cost him something.

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CHAPTER XVIII A CONFERENCE AT SEA

North Barrule's blunt cone and the range of Manx hills beyond it cut, harshly blue, against an angry blaze of saffron that had broken out when the rain stopped and was now beginning to fade. The sun had sunk behind the island, and the sky to the northwest was black as ink, but the tall cliffs of the Mull of Galloway were traced across the storm-cloud in a neutral-tinted smear. Between them and the *Rowan* stretched a belt of lead-colored sea, which, in the foreground, rose in hollow-fronted walls with livid white summits that overweighted them until they curled and broke in cataracts of foam.

It was blowing hard, and threatened to blow harder soon, but Andrew's wet face was tranquil as he sat on the weather coaming, braced against the strain of the helm. Whitney was in the cockpit, where he could avoid the worst of the spray, but he was cold and sore from twenty-four hours of savage lurching. Clouds of spray drove across the boat, striking the canvas and blowing out to lee under the boom, but some fell short and splashed upon Whitney's lowered head. The *Rowan*, beating to windward, progressed in jerks and plunges, nearly stopping with a shock now and then as her bows sank into a comber. Whitney thought she could not carry her shortened canvas long; but their port was to windward, and they could not ease her much if they wished to reach it.

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"She's ramming them pretty badly," he remarked, as a white sea boiled across the deck. "I suppose you'd find her hard to steer if I lowered the staysail?"

"Yes; she makes my arms ache now. Still, if it doesn't blow much worse in the next two hours, we'll find smoother water to lee of the island." Something on the horizon caught Andrew's eye. "Get me the glasses," he added.

Whitney went below to look for them, and lighted the cabin lamp. The floor and beams were steeply inclined, and he had to brace his feet against the centerboard trunk. The narrow cabin throbbed with a muffled uproar, and water trickled in. There was a pool that splashed about where the floor boards met the locker. The leather case of the glasses had swollen, and he spent a minute or two in opening it, though he made the best speed he could. They had been searching for Rankine's vessel in weather that had tried their nerve and skill. Once or twice it had looked as if they must run for shelter, but the breeze had moderated a trifle, and Andrew had held on. Now, however, he was making for Ramsey, to Whitney's keen satisfaction.

Andrew wound the tiller-line round one hand as he put the glasses to his eyes. He saw what he had expected: two slender spars and a funnel, both sharply slanted, that rose above the back of a distant sea. Then a patch of dark hull swung into sight, and vanished again.

"The survey boat," he said, giving Whitney the glasses. "She must be near the edge of King William's Bank, and we'll find an ugly sea running there. You'd better start the pump."

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It was hard work, for when Whitney unscrewed the plug on deck the sea poured down the pipe to meet the water he forced out, and the boat's wild plunges threw him against the coaming; but he persevered. As they were likely to find the sea worse, she must be cleared of water before more came on board. It was some time before the pump sucked and only froth came up; then Whitney precariously balanced himself on the cabin-top with his hand upon the boom while he looked about.

Every now and then the straining storm-jib plunged into a sea that curled in foam across the bows, throwing showers of spray into the hollow of the staysail. Then the bowsprit swung high above the turmoil and the water blew away in streams from the canvas while a frothy cataract poured aft down the uplifted deck. When he glanced to windward the spray lashed his face, but he distinguished a rolling steamer some distance off. There was no smoke about her funnel, and after watching her for a few moments he did not think she moved.

"Lying head to sea," he said to Andrew. "Rankine might as well run into the harbor: he won't do much sounding to-night."

"That's plain. It doesn't look as if he thought sounding his most important job. Haul down the staysail."

Whitney scrambled forward, and when he let go the halyard he dropped on hands and knees. The straining sail would not run down the wire to which it was fastened, and he must cross the

narrow deck to free it. He did not want to go; for the *Rowan* buried her bows as she plunged, and the foam boiled over them a foot in depth; but the whitening of the sea to windward showed that a savage squall was on its way. He reached the inboard end of the bowsprit and held fast while a comber washed across the rail, and then, rising half upright, he seized the line that hung from the head of the sail. The loosened canvas thrashed him; he was swung to and fro, in danger of going overboard; but he held on until the sail came down with a run and fell on to his knees.

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The plunges were not quite so vicious when he got back to the cockpit, but the alteration in the sail-spread made steering difficult, and Andrew strained against the pull of the tiller-line as he drove her through the squall.

In the meantime, the *Rowan* had drawn nearer to the steamer, which now lay close ahead, rolling until her deck sloped like a roof, and then lurching back with her streaming side lifted high above the sea. Andrew went about and then ran close to leeward, where they checked the *Rowan* by hauling her jib aback. A man in oilskins leaned out from the steamer's bridge, and the fading light touched his wet face.

"It's Rankine," said Andrew. "We must try to make him hear."

The next moment a shout came down across the broken seas that rolled between the vessels.

"Yacht, ahoy! What d'you want?"

"To see you!" Andrew answered, throwing his voice to windward with all his force. "Important!"

Rankine steadied himself against the rail, with his glasses at his eyes.

"The *Rowan*; Mr. Johnstone! Could you jump on board our gig?"

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"Can't leave the boat!" shouted Andrew, letting her forge ahead a few yards nearer.

Rankine made a sign of comprehension.

"Very well. Follow us into shelter!"

Andrew waved his arm, and, trimming the jib over, drove the *Rowan* ahead. As he did so, the steamer's screw splashed round half out of water, and she slowly turned toward the north.

"That's not the way to Ramsey," Whitney grumbled.

"No," said Andrew. "I guess he has some reason for not going there. He means to run in behind the Mull, though it's farther off."

Whitney frowned as he glanced across the wild stretch of foaming water toward a twinkling stream of light. He was numbed and wet; it was now getting dark and the bitter wind seemed freshening to a gale; but Andrew meant to follow the steamer, and there was nothing to be said. The only comfort was that their change of course brought the wind farther aft and the *Rowan* would sail fast.

Rankine's crew hung out a stern light as their vessel left the yacht, and Whitney, getting down in the cockpit, tried to dodge the spray while she rolled and tumbled across the high beam-sea. He was sorry for Andrew, who must sit on the coaming amid the spray; though he imagined that his comrade would be sufficiently occupied to make him careless of the wet and cold.

As a matter of fact, Andrew mechanically avoided the rush of the foaming combers, for he was thinking hard. He shrank from the meeting he had sought, because he knew he was badly equipped for the difficult part he must play. He suspected Williamson of practises which must, at any cost, be stopped, since it was unthinkable that a traitor should make use of Appleyard. This was bad; but it was worse to know that Staffer was acting as Williamson's confederate.

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The trouble was that if Andrew exposed the men, the innocent would suffer. Staffer was Mrs. Woodhouse's brother, and Andrew pitied the quiet woman. Then there was Elsie, whom Staffer had certainly treated well. She would be crushed by shame if she learned his share in the plot. Andrew knew her well enough to feel sure of this. Elsie was true as steel; if he told her his suspicions, she would urge him to do his duty. Still, she would suffer; and part of Staffer's punishment would fall on her. It would not be forgotten that she was the niece of a foreign spy; and her mother might be suspected of complicity.

It was a painful situation; for Andrew gladly would have made any personal sacrifice that might save the girl a pang. He must try to find a way of doing his duty without involving her; in some way he must warn Rankine and yet keep back part of what he knew. This was a repugnant course, and he frowned as he drove the dripping boat across the foaming sea.

At times the steamer's stern light almost faded out, but it grew brighter again, and Andrew knew that Rankine was waiting for him. It was now blowing hard, and the combers looked very steep and angry, though he could no longer distinguish them until they broke close to the yacht. He imagined that they were stirred up by a strong tide, and several pinnacles of rock rose from deep water in the neighborhood. He hoped Rankine knew their position as he followed the steamer's light.

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At last the sea got smoother and, instead of breaking, ran in a long, disturbed swell. The wind no longer hove the boat down with a steady pressure, but lightened until she swung nearly upright

and then fell upon her in furious squalls that sent her staggering along with her lee deck deep in the foam. A lofty black ridge towered above her port side, and Andrew knew they were behind the Mull of Galloway. The water, however, was too deep, and the tide too strong for them to bring up there, and he supposed Rankine knew of a safe anchorage.

After a time he heard a whistle, and the light ahead stopped; then there was a roar of running chain, and as he luffed up a shout reached him.

"Let go and give her plenty scope!"

The chain was nearly all out before Andrew thought she had enough, and while she rolled and tumbled on the swell a splash of oars came out of the dark. Then a white gig loomed up alongside, and he and Whitney jumped on board as the crew backed away. They had to wait a minute or two close to the steamer's side, until a smooth undulation lapped the lurching hull, when they seized the ladder and scrambled up.

Rankine took them into a small, teak-paneled room with a brass stove in a corner. It was remarkably neat, though a cushioned locker, a small table, and two camp-chairs comprised the furniture. Nautical instruments occupied a rack, and a large chart of the Irish Sea was spread upon the table. Rankine put a bottle of wine and some cigarettes on the chart, and then hung up his wet oilskins.

"We're safe here so long as the wind keeps to the west; and I can give you a berth if your cabin's wet," he said. [Pg 190]

"No, thanks," replied Andrew. "It's an exposed coast."

He tasted the wine Rankine poured out and lighted a cigarette. Whitney said nothing, and there was silence for a time. Rankine waited, with a polite smile.

"What are you doing near King William's Bank?" Andrew asked presently; and the others knew that his question was more to the purpose than appeared.

"Taking bearings and sounding, until the sea got up. I've made one or two interesting discoveries about that shoal."

Although he sympathized with Andrew, Whitney felt amused, for he saw that Rankine would do nothing to help him.

"You gave us a long run," Andrew said. "We would have got better shelter in Ramsey Bay."

"That's true. I preferred this place."

Andrew frowned at the chart, as if he did not know how to go on; and Whitney came to his rescue.

"I guess it suits you better to keep away from port; you don't want to be seen and talked about."

Rankine smiled.

"Am I mistaken in suggesting that we don't make much progress. Now, after meeting you at Craigwhinnie and inviting you to come on board, it's a satisfaction to find you have taken me at my word; but if you have any other reason for the visit, I'm at your command. I understood this was so."

"The matter is important, and we want to feel we're justified in talking about it," Whitney replied. [Pg 191]
"In fact, if your work's confined to surveying, we'd rather you regarded us as casual guests."

"Then I think you can take it that my job doesn't end there. I'm still a navy officer, though I'm now assisting the Trinity House."

Whitney laughed.

"Well, I guess that's as much as one could expect you to admit. British official caution is a remarkable thing." He turned to Andrew. "You'd better tell him what we've seen."

Andrew began with their adventures on the sands when the lamp went out, and then mentioned the signal lights on Barenan Crag and what they had discovered on board the wreck. He told the story well, adding particulars that had escaped Whitney's observation, and Rankine followed him closely on the chart.

He looked up with frank appreciation when Andrew had finished.

"I don't think I've ever heard as clear and concise a report before. May I suggest that you're rather wasting your talents? You ought to be in the navy."

"I had to leave the army," Andrew replied, coloring. "But that's not what we have to talk about."

"No," agreed Rankine, and was silent for a while.

Whitney watched him with tranquil interest. The teak-paneled room was warm and bright, and after long exposure to numbing cold it was soothing to feel himself getting warm and drowsy; though the men still held his attention. The navy officer was, no doubt, the cleverer of the two, but Whitney thought he recognized a strong similarity in their characters. They were resolute,

quiet, and capable, and he felt sure of their honesty. Rankine's face was now gravely thoughtful, but Andrew's wore a troubled frown, and Whitney imagined he recognized that the difficult part of the interview had not yet been reached.

"What you have discovered seems to have one of two meanings," Rankine said. "It may indicate a signaling of military and political news, which, strictly speaking, is not my business; or it may have some bearing on the loss of the A. & P. liner, and perhaps lead to similar attacks."

"Which *would* be your business," Whitney drawled.

"I can't talk about that; but Mr. Johnstone did right in telling me," Rankine answered, and turned to Andrew. "Have you told any one else?"

"No." There was a curious quietness in Andrew's voice which showed Whitney that he had decided on his course.

"Why not? If my first surmise is correct, it's a matter for the military authorities."

"It seems to me the thing's not ripe. I have nothing but vague suspicions to go upon."

"Then you suspect somebody?"

"Yes."

Rankine looked at him in silence for a few moments.

"I suppose you mean to follow up the clue you've got?" he then asked.

"You may take that for granted," Andrew answered.

"And if you find your suspicions right?"

"When I'm certain of that, I'll act; but not before."

"Well, you no doubt recognize the responsibility you're taking. There are people appointed to investigate these things who could act with greater skill and force."

"I see that," Andrew replied quietly. "And when I think the time has come, I'll go to them, or you." [Pg 193]

"But you mean to decide for yourself whether it has come or not?"

"Exactly; I must decide."

Rankine looked hard at him, knitting his brows.

"I cannot tell you what my orders are," he said; "but you put me in an awkward position. I may do wrong in not reporting our conversation."

"Even if you did report it, I should stick to the line I've taken. If it led to my arrest, that would, of course, prevent my watching the coast—and I can do that as well as you."

"Better; for you wouldn't be suspected. Well, as I see you must be indulged, I'll tell you how to find me when you have something more to say. You must be careful to follow my instructions."

"Then write them down."

"I think not; I'm rather straining my authority in giving them to you at all, and secrecy is important."

Whitney got up.

"Perhaps I ought to remind you that I'm not a British subject," he said.

Rankine smiled.

"Since you are in Mr. Johnstone's confidence, you may remain. He won't mind my saying that, so far as strictly nautical matters go, he's well qualified to deal with them, but there are touches about what he told me that seem to show he has had your help. Now you must exactly follow these directions—"

He told them how they could learn his movements and send him word.

"That is all," he concluded. "If you think the weather permits it, I'll be glad to keep you on board over night." [Pg 194]

Andrew opened the door, and the bitter draught that swept in lifted the chart on the table and swirled about the room. They heard the surf beat upon a rocky beach and the wind scream in the shrouds.

"No, thanks," he said. "It's not a night to leave the boat."

Rankine went out with them and gave an order. Half-seen men ran aft and dropped into the dark from the vessel's rail, and presently the gig lay tossing abreast of the gangway. Whitney looked at the warm, well-lighted deckhouse with regret, and then, buttoning his oilskins, followed Andrew down into the boat.

CHAPTER XIX

A WARNING

Staffer and Williamson sat in the library at Appleyard. It was getting late, and the rest of the household were in bed. Williamson had gone to his room with the others, but afterward had crept down again quietly. He had arrived that evening, but had found it difficult to get any private conversation with his host without making his wish to do so rather marked; for he imagined that Miss Woodhouse was watching him; and Whitney was constantly about. Now, however, he had said all he thought needful, and he wondered why Staffer did not let him go.

The library was spacious and was lighted only by a shaded lamp on a table near them. The polished floor gleamed like ice in the illuminated circle, but everything outside this was dim, and Staffer's face was in the shadow. The fire in the big hearth had sunk, and a pale-blue flame that gave no light played about the embers of the hardwood logs. The room was very quiet and getting cold.

"You'll be in town next week," Staffer said. "Can you find a good excuse for taking Dick? A boxing or billiard match, for example."

"I don't know of anything of the kind."

"Then you surprise me. You belong to one or two smart sporting clubs."

"Sporting events are not popular just now."

"There's always something going on; and if it's semi-private, so much the better. When one is as young as Dick, a little mystery is inciting, and it's flattering to feel oneself a privileged person."

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"No doubt. For all that, I haven't heard of any attractive fixture; and if I invented one that didn't come off, it would make the game obvious, even to Dick."

"I suppose this means you don't want to take him," Staffer suggested. "Let's be frank."

"Then you are anxious that he should go?"

"For one thing, it looks as if you had rather held Dick off lately. This is against our plans. Then, if Dick's away, Andrew and his American friend will leave. It would be safer not to have them about."

"Your last reason's good; in fact, it's better than the other," Williamson said dryly. "I'm going to take no further part in exploiting Dick."

Staffer frowned.

"That resolve will cost you something. What has led you to make it?"

"The thing is getting dangerous. We can't afford to run an unnecessary risk, you know."

"That's true, but I don't see where the danger lies."

Williamson pondered. He had acted as Staffer's tool in leading Dick into extravagance; but Staffer had not been straight with him. Besides, if he now explained that Mackellar was suspicious, it would look as if he had turned against his confederate and tried to make terms with the bank agent.

"Dick has friends who would carefully investigate matters if he had to admit his debts, and they might find out enough to cause us trouble. Then, we're engaged in another business of first importance that can't be neglected while we make plans for our private benefit. If we fail, the consequences would be unpleasant—to say the least."

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Staffer laughed. Williamson wished he could see his face, for his amusement had a hint of a threat.

"Remarkably unpleasant! As it happens, you haven't met with much success of late. Another man whom I needn't mention brought off the last big stroke."

"It was not my fault; things have been dead against me, as you know."

"So it seems! But our employers expect results, not excuses." Staffer paused and resumed: "As you have been unlucky, I thought you might find some advantage in helping me with Dick."

Williamson saw that Staffer's remarks were connected. He was being warned, and asked to think over his refusal; but he stood his ground.

"The advantage doesn't counterbalance the danger," he said.

"Well, I suppose that is for you to decide. Perhaps you are wise in concentrating on your particular business. Our employers are liberal when they're served well, but not as a rule indulgent when a post is unsatisfactorily filled."

Williamson was silent for a moment. Staffer was, in a sense, his superior officer; but for all that, he was expected to use his judgment, and he foresaw danger for both if he meddled with Dick. Still, Staffer was powerful and had given him a significant hint.

"I don't think our employers have much to complain of," Williamson said; "and we must try to work together as far as possible."

"Just so," Staffer answered, getting up.

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They separated apparently on good terms; but they were conscious of mutual distrust.

The next morning Whitney, after trying to get into range of a flock of curlew feeding among the sands, threw his gun upon his shoulder and set out for the *Rowan*. The sun was bright and the breeze fresh, and after opening the skylights to ventilate the boat, he went below to see if their blankets were damp. While he was busy he heard a foot on deck, and Marshall, the fisherman, came down the ladder. He visited the yacht now and then; and Whitney at once got out the whisky bottle.

"Help yourself, but you'll excuse my not joining you," he said. "It's rather early in the morning, and I reckon my nerves aren't as good as yours."

Marshall poured out a liberal portion and regarded him with a twinkle.

"I'm thinking they canna' be bad since ye're shipmate with Mr. Andrew. He's no' the man I'd sail with if I was fleyt o' the sea."

"Well, he *is* pretty daring; but he's cautious, too, and knows exactly what he's doing. That makes a difference."

"Ay," agreed Marshall; "Andrew Johnstone's a by-ordinar' good seaman; but ye may run a risk ye canna' see. Tide-rips and sudden blows are bad, but they're no' the only dangers."

Whitney lighted a cigarette. It was plain that the old fellow had a warm liking for Andrew, and Whitney imagined he meant to give him a hint of some kind.

"I wish you'd tell me what you mean," he said. "You want to remember that I'm an American and not used to dark remarks. In fact, it's more or less my habit to say what I think."

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"Ye'll find it expensive whiles," Marshall rejoined with a chuckle. "Onyway, ye're a friend o' Mr. Johnstone's?"

"I believe so. It's a sure thing that I like him."

"Then he'll maybe need ye. It's no' an easy job he has. Yon two at Appleyard are kittle-cattle, and would be better for watching."

"Why don't you tell me what they're after?"

"For yea thing, I dinna ken, but I'm certain it's naething good."

Whitney made a gesture of resignation.

"This is a pretty hard country for a stranger to get along in. You're such a blamed cautious people that nobody can guess what you think. Why don't you give my partner or Dick a hint, if you believe there's something wrong?"

"There's aye a rizzon," Marshall replied with a grin. "Mr. Andrew mightna' believe me, and Mr. Dick would let it oot to Staffer. It's no' wise to offend the gentry, mair particularly your landlord, when a salmon noo and then comes by accident into your flounder net or ye chance upon a hare sitting ower close in her form."

"But Dick would not be hard on you, and he'll be your landlord soon."

"That's no' what Mr. Staffer's thinking," said Marshall meaningly.

Whitney gave him a steady glance, knitting his brows.

"My partner will get Appleyard if Dick dies."

"Ay, that's supposed to be the way o' it; but Mr. Dick has debts that would have to be paid. Then Mr. Staffer's acting baillie for the estate, and it wouldna' suit him weel to see Mr. Andrew get it."

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"You mean he's a dangerous man?"

"Ye should ken. I'm thinking ye're intelligent, and ye're Mr. Andrew's friend."

"I suppose that's a compliment, and I must try to deserve it," Whitney smiled.

Marshall poured out another drink and then went away, leaving Whitney in a thoughtful mood.

The old fellow's remarks were not clear, but two points appeared: he thought Andrew was running some personal risk, and that Staffer might put an obstacle in the way of his inheriting Appleyard. It was difficult to see how Staffer could do so, even if he could take advantage of Dick's extravagance in such a way as to give him a claim on the estate; but suppose Andrew did not live to demand his rights? Whitney remembered that his comrade had been in grave danger when the gray car swerved in the glen, and again when the light went out on Mersehead sands. That Dick shared the danger on both occasions might, of course, be coincidence; but it might have a very sinister meaning. Whitney felt disturbed about it; but he decided that as his suspicions might be unfounded and the matter was delicate, he would not warn his friends, and

must be satisfied with keeping a keen watch on Staffer.

One morning shortly after this Williamson picked his way across the moss at the foot of Criffell as day was breaking. He was tired and hungry, but, even at the risk of missing his breakfast, he did not want to arrive at Dumfries too soon. Dawn was late now and he must not give the hotel people cause to wonder why he had set out long before it was light.

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The black mass of the mountain rose between him and the east with a flush of pink above its sloping shoulder; the rolling country to the west was shadowy, and dry tufts of wild cotton glimmered a ghostly white among the dark-peat-hags. There had been light frost for a few days, but it had gone, and a raw wind blew in Williamson's face. The ground was getting soft, the rushes he brushed through were beaded with moisture, and now and then half-thawed ice crackled beneath his wet boots. Still, as he did not wish to loiter about Dumfries, he went on leisurely.

When he got over the fence, he found the loaning softer than he expected, and on reaching the cothouse he decided that it would not be safe to ride the motorcycle. The machine, however, was light, and he was glad of a chance to warm himself by pushing it to the main road. There was nobody in the wet fields, but the light was getting clear, and a thin streak of smoke rose from the farm among the trees. Everything looked gray and cold and desolate, but as Williamson splashed into a pool a jolt of the bicycle warned him that he had better fix his attention on the ruts.

While he did so, he noticed a sinuous line running to meet him. At first he supposed it was the track he had made in going down the lane; then he thought it looked rather deep, and with sudden suspicion he placed the back wheel of his bicycle beside it. The pattern the tire left in the mud was different, and now he saw another line run out from the grass. This seemed to indicate the track of a side-car, and Williamson, leaning his wheel against the wall, followed the marks back over the ground he had traversed.

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They led him to a gap in the dyke, and after taking down the pole that closed it, he traced them to a peat-stack. They were lighter here, which showed that the men had dismounted. He knew that it would take some trouble to push a heavy motorcycle with a car attached over the soft ground; but this had been done, and the machine dragged close behind the stack. After examining the ground carefully, Williamson returned to the loaning and made his way to the highroad as fast as possible. It was now important that nobody should see him coming from the moss.

Reaching the road, where he would excite no curiosity, he sat down in the shelter of a bank and lighted a cigarette, for he had received a decided shock. Some one had driven a motorcycle down the loaning, but had not gone to the farm. This was strange; and it was significant that the man had taken a good deal of trouble to hide the machine, which suggested that he must have meant to leave it for some time, and wished to prevent its being seen. There was nothing on the moss to repay a visit, and the owner of a motorcycle would have no reason for taking a short cut across the mountain on foot, when he could drive round as soon by road. That there was probably another man in the side-car made the puzzle worse; and Williamson's face hardened as he admitted the possibility of their having tried to follow him.

Looking back at the rugged fellside anxiously, he saw that as he crossed its summit he would have been visible against the sky, though any one coming up could not be seen against the dark heath. It was unfortunate that he had not looked back as he went down the other side, or hidden behind a boulder and waited; but he had no ground for believing that anybody knew of his journeys across the hill.

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He was engaged in a dangerous business, and the consequences would be serious if the military authorities found him out; but this was not the worst he feared. They might be baffled; but Staffer had hinted that his employers were not satisfied, and it was a dangerous thing to disappoint them. Their rewards were liberal, but their servants must perform their task. Williamson shivered as he remembered what he had heard about the fate of one or two who had not succeeded in this.

Cowering behind the bank, while the cold wind whistled past, he carefully thought out the situation. He saw that he had to face one of two dangers. Either he had by some carelessness excited suspicion, and was being watched, or he was distrusted by his friends. In the latter case, flight to America was the only means of escape, because he knew enough to make his employers uneasy, and if they failed in one plan to put him out of the way, they would try another. He would certainly not be left free to save himself by telling what he knew. But if he had only the British authorities to fear, there was less cause for alarm. They could be thrown off the track; indeed, this must be done, for he dare not now abandon the work he had undertaken.

Williamson was getting very cold, and a searching drizzle had begun to fall; but he scarcely noticed it as he sat weighing the arguments for and against each supposition. Eventually, he decided that he must blame some incautiousness of his own, and he began to wonder whose suspicions he had aroused. Whitney had a motorcycle, and its tires would leave just such a mark as he had noticed; but this did not prove much, because the make was in common use. The American was shrewd and was a friend of Andrew's; but while both were antagonistic Williamson thought they opposed him only on Dick's account. Well, he had promised to leave Dick alone. That ought to satisfy them; and if he were very careful he would be able to elude any other enemies.

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Feeling that his scare had been needless, he set off for Dumfries; although he had not yet

CHAPTER XX

THE WHAMMEL BOAT

Thin fog drifted down the Firth when, with Whitney's help, Andrew pulled the dinghy up the bank and then stopped to look about. It was nine o'clock in the evening when they left the *Rowan* at anchor in the channel a hundred yards away, and he knew the tide was beginning to flow, which meant that he had an hour and a half in which to reach and return from the wreck. Everything was obscured to the east, but to the west the sky was clear, and a thin, bright moon shone in a patch of dusky blue. The sand felt harder than usual, for the night air was frosty, but the melancholy calling of the wild fowl told that the salt ooze in the gutters was still unfrozen. There was no other sound except the ripple of the current across the shoals.

"I suppose we'll let up for a bit if we see nobody to-night," Whitney suggested.

"Yes," said Andrew; "the tide's getting late."

Whitney nodded agreement. They had sailed from the burnfoot three days before, and after standing out to sea on the ebb, had returned to the outer end of the channel in the dark as soon as they could stem the slackening stream. Then, landing in the dinghy, they hung about the wreck until the advancing tide drove them back. They had done this for two nights, without seeing anything suspicious, and they could now abandon the search, because as the time of high-water approached six o'clock the tides did not run out far enough to enable anybody to reach the wreck from land.

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Striking across the flats, they stopped on the edge of a hollow running through the highest part. The mist was driving nearer before a cold wind, and the moon was dim, but they could see for some distance toward the west across the level stretch of sand. Nothing broke its smooth expanse, but the sound of the sea had grown louder and the wild fowl noisier.

After a few moments, Andrew struck into the hollow and began to follow it up. The sand was softer here, though there were spears of ice on the muddy pools; but the men's figures no longer cut against the sky, and Whitney knew the need for caution. The gutter got deeper as they went on, until they could not see beyond its banks, and soon it began to wind off to one side. When Andrew stopped at the turning, a wild cry that was like a hoarse laugh came out of the dark.

"What's that?" Whitney asked.

"A black-backed gull," said Andrew thoughtfully. "They're suspicious brutes and a nuisance when you're trying to crawl up to a flock of duck. In fact, it often looks as if they laughed because you'd lost your shot."

"Do you think something has disturbed the bird?"

"We'll know in a minute."

A mournful wail that ended in a quavering tremolo fell from the air as the harsh laughter died away.

"That's a curlew going over," Andrew said.

Then a shrill screaming broke out; and Andrew turned toward the bank and began to climb out of the hollow.

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"Oyster-catchers now; they're all off," he said.

When they reached the level, Whitney looked round quickly. The haze was crawling close up in long, low-lying belts, but it had not reached them yet, and as his eyes turned seaward he saw a black triangle projecting above the edge of the flats.

"A lugsail, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes; a whammel boat."

Andrew seized Whitney's arm and, moving back a few steps, dropped upon his knees and dragged his companion down. Whitney understood the reason when he saw a faint, dark figure on the bank some distance off.

"After all, it may be a fisherman," he said.

"It's possible, but I don't know what he's doing here, and we'll follow up the gutter until we're abreast of the wreck. The fog will come down thick before we reach her."

"I don't know that I'm fond of fog," Whitney replied. "However, if you think you can find the dinghy—"

Moving back into the bed of the channel, they went on as fast as possible. They were out of sight, but the winding hollow lengthened the distance. It got darker as they splashed among the pools; and when at last Andrew thought they had gone far enough and they climbed the bank, everything was hidden by drifting fog. Whitney was frankly uneasy. Andrew knew the sands well, but, for all that, it would not be difficult to lose their way, and they had purposely left no light on board the yacht. Still, it was unthinkable that they should turn back when the man they had been trying to mark down seemed almost in their hands. Banishing his misgivings, he plunged into the clammy mist, following closely behind Andrew.

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The birds had gone; nothing broke the silence, and there was nothing to be seen. Whitney imagined that Andrew was going straight, but this was not certain, and he recognized that the man they hoped to surprise might have turned back. Andrew went a few yards in front, a dim, ghostly figure in the fog, but it was a relief to see that he showed no hesitation. Though they tried to move quietly, they made some noise. Where the bank was hard their footsteps rang through the haze, now and then shells crunched beneath their boots, and there were spots where they splashed through half-frozen mud.

At last they saw the blurred outline of the wreck.

"Go straight on and then wait until I creep up on the other side," Andrew whispered.

They separated, and Whitney braced himself for a struggle as he moved softly forward. The man would no doubt be armed, but he must not get away until they learned who he was. Whitney set his lips as he neared the wreck. Andrew's footsteps had died away, and there was something that daunted him in the look of the dark mass of timber; but he went on, and presently stopped at the edge of a pool beside the vessel. He did not think anybody had left her as he approached. The man must be on board; but he must wait until Andrew came up. There was no sound but the drip of water and the wail of the cold wind; it was eerie and depressing to stand there in the fog; but at last he heard a cautious step and knew that his comrade had reached the opposite side of the hulk.

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"Go ahead," he said softly; and scrambled up with a feeling of relief that the waiting was over.

He heard Andrew's heavy boots rasp upon the planks; but he reached the forecabin hatch first, and his nerves tingled as he dropped through it in the dark. He came down safely; but he did not hear the clatter of feet among the timbers he had expected. While he felt about, for fear an unseen enemy might seize him at a disadvantage, Andrew sprang down and the light of an electric torch flashed round the hold. It showed broken timbers, sand, and glistening pools; but that was all. They had wasted their efforts; nobody was there. Andrew moved about, holding up the torch, and then extinguished it as he came back to the spot beneath the hatch.

"Well," he said, "we're no farther forward."

"Could the fellow have seen us and slipped away?"

"Not on my side. The fog wasn't very thick, and I could see the wreck. I suppose you kept a good lookout?"

"Of course. Perhaps he saw us when we noticed him on the bank."

"It's possible, but not likely. We had only just left the gutter, and he was going the other way."

Andrew was silent for a minute.

"It would help us," he said "if we knew whether he could carry a wireless apparatus across the sands. I don't think it could be hidden on board."

"It might be buried outside in a watertight box. Shall we go dig?"

"No; we'd be seen from the shore, and a good glass would show what we were doing. In the dark we would have to use a lantern."

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"That's so," Whitney agreed. "Well, as there's nothing doing here, let's get back."

They reached the dinghy before the tide flowed round her, and shortly afterward got on board the *Rowan*. The fog was thick and the wind blowing against them down the Firth, but Andrew decided to hoist no sail when they hove the anchor.

"It's early yet to find deep water, and I can steer her with an oar," he said. "We'll let the tide take her up."

He sounded now and then as the current carried her away, and Whitney wondered whether it would strand them on a thinly covered bank. Andrew had no guide except the depth and the hoarse murmur the stream made as it rippled across the shoals.

Suddenly Andrew began to scull vigorously.

"Not much water; I think we're too near the middle sand," he said.

The next minute the boat stopped with a jar and listed down on her side while the ripples splashed angrily against her planks. Whitney seized the boat-hook to push her off, but Andrew stopped him.

"She'll soon float, and the tide's not running very fast."

They sat in the cockpit to wait, and the noise the current made as it swirled round her died away. She was not quite afloat, however, and Whitney was picking up the boathook when a flicker of light shone through the fog. He raised his hand in warning to Andrew, and both saw the faint gleam go out.

Then a splashing sound grew louder, and a dim gray object drove toward them. Whitney knew it was a lugsail boat beating up the Firth, and he saw that she would pass at a few yards' distance if she stood on. So far, he did not think they had been seen, for the *Rowan's* hull was low, and she had no sail set. While he waited in suspense he heard the splash of an oar as somebody sounded.

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"No' quite a fathom. Doon helm, Jock," said a hoarse voice.

There was a flutter of canvas, and the boat, swinging round, vanished on the other tack.

"What are we going to do?" Whitney asked.

"Anchor as soon as they're far enough off not to hear our chain."

Andrew sculled the *Rowan* into the channel, and presently dropped the anchor. When she brought up, he went below and lighted the lamp.

"They didn't see us, but I won't want to follow them up the Firth," he explained. "Their boat can cross the flats before we can, and when we landed they'd all have gone. Besides, it might look suspicious if we came up soon afterward. I think we'll wait for daylight."

Whitney put the kettle on the stove and lighted his pipe.

"Well," he said, "I guess it's puzzling, but there's certainly something going on, and it may be something that will mean the loss of another big liner. I expect you see that it ought to be stopped at once."

"Yes," said Andrew firmly. "I mean to stop it."

Whitney nodded and thought for a few moments.

"So far," he contended, "we haven't scored much; it looks as if the opposition were pretty smart. The point you have to answer is this—suppose they do some serious damage before we can stop them?"

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"You mean that in trying to keep the thing in my own hands I take a dangerous risk?"

"Yes; but I can't tell you what you ought to do. You're awkwardly fixed."

Andrew leaned back on the locker and grappled with a problem that had troubled him much of late. He was quietly proud of the Johnstones' traditions; and the honor of the family, which had long stood high, was threatened. It was painful to admit that a traitor was making use of Appleyard; but, had there been no other obstacle, Andrew would not have hesitated about denouncing him. The trouble was that if he did so, Elsie must suffer with her guilty relative. To keep silent might enable the plotter to carry out designs which Andrew with his limited powers could not thwart, and his duty to the State was obvious.

He did not want to shirk that duty; he was willing to bear any personal loss, and even bring discredit upon Appleyard, but it did not seem his duty to involve the girl he loved. Elsie had done no wrong, but she was Staffer's niece, and that would be enough to condemn her. Besides, he might be mistaken, and it was unthinkable that he should bring suspicion upon Appleyard until his last doubts had vanished. If Staffer were proved guilty, nobody would believe that Mrs. Woodhouse and Dick were free from blame. And yet Andrew saw that his country must not be left unprotected from the plots of its enemies.

He set his lips as he tried to balance contending claims, using arguments on both sides that had led him into a maze before; and each time he was forced back upon the decision he had already made. Something must be risked, and in the meanwhile he would follow up his clues alone; it would be time enough to warn the authorities when he had found out what was to be feared.

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His face was tense as he turned to Whitney.

"I think we'll have to work out this thing in our own way; but as the tides won't suit for the next few days, we'll take a run north along the Eskdale road."

"Very well, if you think that's somehow in the plot," Whitney agreed. "It's possible you're right about the other matter. You'd put the load on the proper shoulders if you warned your authorities, but if they didn't get to work very quietly, they'd scare the fellows off before they found out much. The trail's certainly not plain, but I guess we can follow it without showing what we're after."

"See if the anchor's holding," said Andrew. "I'm going to lie down."

He lowered his folding cot, but the flood tide had covered the flats, and the yacht was rolling gently on the swell it brought in before he went to sleep.

Farther up the narrowing Firth the wind was faint, and Elsie, lying awake toward high-water,

heard the murmur of the sea. It throbbed in a deep monotone through the stillness that brooded over the fog-wrapped countryside. Elsie listened to it for a time, wondering what Andrew was doing as she glanced at the obscurity outside her window, for the Firth was dangerous to navigate in thick weather. He had promised to return the next day, and she wanted him back at Appleyard. She felt safer when Andrew was about. He was not clever, but he was practical, and one could trust him to do the right thing in a difficulty.

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Elsie was glad to remember this, because she had difficulties to contend with. Dick had been restless and depressed, and his occasional efforts at rather boisterous gaiety had emphasized his general moodiness. He was obviously not well; but Elsie thought this did not account for everything. Then her mother had been quieter than usual, and her manner seemed to indicate secret anxiety.

Elsie felt that things were going very wrong at Appleyard. Something mysterious and sinister threatened the household, but she could not combat the danger, because she did not know what it was. Even now, when every one was probably asleep, she had an instinctive feeling that there was mischief on foot. She told herself that she was highly strung and imaginative, but her uneasiness would not be banished. Anyway, she could not sleep. Seeing that the fire had not quite gone out, she got up, finally, and, putting on her slippers and kimono, lighted a small reading lamp. She drew a thick curtain across the window, and then opened a book; but she found that her thoughts would dwell on Andrew, somewhere out in the fog.

With a gesture of impatience, Elsie closed the book and threw it down. It had not made her sleepy, and the room was getting cold, but she did not want to go back to bed and lie awake. Sitting still, she mused and listened. The wind always moaned round Appleyard, and when the nights were still one could hear the hoarse murmur of the Solway tide. Then there were the mysterious sounds that occur in old houses: creaking floors, boards cracking, and now and then the rattle of a door. Elsie was used to these noises, but for no obvious reason her senses were alert.

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Suddenly she sat upright. Somewhere downstairs a door was being opened cautiously. Her clock showed that it was just half-past two.

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CHAPTER XXI

THE LOST PAPER

The sound of the opening door did not startle Elsie, because of her curious feeling that something unusual was going to happen. With a quick glance at the window she decided not to put out the light. The thick curtain would probably hide it, and, if not, to darken the window suddenly would show that some one was watching. Then it struck her that she had not heard a key being turned or a bolt drawn; but the door fastenings were carefully oiled. Staffer had had this seen to, after having had difficulty with his latchkey one night.

Elsie was curious and highly strung, but not alarmed, for there were no burglars in Annandale. Prompted by the suspicions that had filled her mind lately, she determined to find out who had come in; so, slipping quietly out of her room, she pulled her door to softly and walked to the top of the stairs. The cold draught that came up from the hall showed that the door was open, and she stopped when she had gone down a few steps. So far, she had not paused to reflect, but she recognized now that she had not acted altogether on an unreasoning impulse. Dick and Staffer were at home; but she did not wish to warn Staffer, and she felt it might be better if Dick did not go down.

Leaning over the banister, she heard a low voice in the darkness and it gave her a strange, disturbing thrill. She could catch no words, but the accent reminded her of Munich. Then a ray of light flickered about the hall, and Elsie shrank back, her heart beating fast, as the beam ran up the wall. Some one was using an electric torch. She began to feel that she was in danger; but the light stopped and streamed back again, leaving her in the shadow. After that it flashed round and fell upon two men near the door. They had made no noise, and there was something startling in the way their figures sprang out of the gloom. Both were dressed in oilskins and rubber sea-boots.

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One was Williamson; the other a stranger, who in spite of his dress, did not look like a fisherman. He had blue eyes and a stiff, red mustache; but he vanished as the light traveled past him to rest on the door of the library, which opened out of the hall. Then, though Elsie heard no sound, she knew the men had gone in. What was more, she knew that Staffer carried the torch. This was the most disturbing thing; and she leaned upon the banister while she tried to think.

She had frankly distrusted Williamson, feeling that he threatened Dick, and she knew now that she had never really trusted Staffer. He had treated her well; but she imagined this was for her mother's sake; and instead of affection she felt a curious, half-instinctive antagonism for him. After all, she had really not been his guest, but Dick's; Appleyard, which she had come to love, belonged to the Johnstones and not to her uncle. She felt that its peace was threatened; and she

determined to find out what the men were doing.

Moving noiselessly, she crept down to the hall, and as she reached it a faint but steady light streamed out of the library door. This was not the torch; Staffer had lighted one of the lamps. For a few moments she stopped and hesitated, trying to master her fears. She knew that she must not be discovered; though it was not Williamson but her uncle she dreaded most. This, however, was not all of her trouble: the stranger's accent had awakened a flood of disturbing memories. She had been kindly treated in Munich, where she had learned her mother's native tongue, and the sound of it had stirred strong, deep-rooted feelings. The man with the red mustache had a look of command, in spite of his rough clothes. She knew the stamp, for she had seen it on officers whose wives had, for a time, been her friends. Some were men she had admired; but now they were her country's enemies.

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That was the trouble: one could not belong to two nations, and she was Scotch. Appleyard was her home, and Dick and Andrew, although not her kin, were dearer than any one except her mother; yet her mother's blood was in her veins, and she felt it stirring now. But this must not be allowed. She was her father's daughter, too, and belonged by adoption to the Johnstones. She had accepted their traditions, and now she must side with the men she loved; she felt that they were hers.

Having reached this decision, she realized that she must find a hiding-place from which she could see into the library. She crept across the hall, feeling her way to a tall, old clock that stood against the wall. Its oak case did not project far, but by standing straight behind it she would be in the gloom, and the half-opened hall-door would help to conceal her.

Leaning forward from the corner, she found her view commanded the end of the library table, where Staffer sat beside a shaded lamp, with some documents spread out in front of him. The men bent over the table, examining the papers with eager attention.

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For a few moments no one spoke, and then the stranger with the red mustache said something which Elsie did not catch.

"Yes," Staffer returned gruffly, "Rankine is an obstacle, but he doesn't interfere with my part of the business."

Elsie could not hear what followed; but Williamson and the stranger spoke in quiet, earnest tones that suggested that what they had to say was important. Being accustomed to Staffer's voice, she could more easily catch his remarks. Presently he stopped the stranger with an impatient movement of his hand.

"No; you must get into the habit of calling him Sanders!"

The man's face was hidden, but Elsie thought his pose stiffened as if he resented Staffer's tone. This seemed to indicate that he was a man of rank, which something in his bearing had already hinted.

"Well," he said in English, speaking a trifle louder, "if he is watched, as he suspects, you may have some trouble in getting his instructions. To visit him in Edinburgh might lead—"

Elsie could not hear the rest, but she could see Staffer's smile as he answered:

"We have a suitable messenger." He turned to Williamson. "Nobody would suspect Dick, and he'd be safe, because he'd have no idea of what he was doing. He's going up with me in the car tomorrow."

"I'm not sure—" Williamson began; but they had gradually ceased to lower their voices, and Staffer stopped him with a warning sign.

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Elsie caught her breath as Staffer suddenly turned in his chair; but he was only looking for a map which was buried beneath the other papers. When he opened it, he spoke quietly, and the others listened with close attention. At first Elsie could not catch a word; but as their caution lessened with their intense interest, an occasional word or phrase reached her.

". . . submarine . . . coast of . . . this line marks . . ."

Staffer's voice dropped to a murmur again; until finally he folded the papers and handed them to the stranger.

"Now it's up to you," he said, quite distinctly. "You know what will happen to you if you fail!"

Elsie crouched back as the men straightened up. She knew the interview was over, but she did not dare risk crossing the hall to the staircase. A clink of glass reached her; and then she stood straight against the wall, pressed close against the old clock, for she knew the men were coming out.

Williamson entered the hall first, and as he pushed the door back the light touched the clock. Its tall case was shallow, and when Williamson turned partly round Elsie's heart beat fast. He went on, however, and the stranger followed, putting the papers Staffer had given him into a pocket under his oilskin coat. He wore thick woolen gloves, but perhaps his hands were cold, for an envelope dropped out at the bottom of the oilskin. It fell a foot or two from where Elsie stood, and she thought she could not escape discovery if he stooped to pick it up; but the next moment the library went suddenly dark. The man passed on, and Staffer flashed on the electric torch as he

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came out, but its light did not fall near the corner. He extinguished it when the men reached the house door, and Elsie stood very still with tingling nerves.

She had escaped, but the envelope lay on the floor, and she felt that Appleyard was threatened by some plot in which Dick was to be involved. Both must be protected; she must get the paper. Its loss would no doubt embarrass the conspirators, and would probably not be discovered for some time, but she must be quick. Their footsteps were almost noiseless, but she heard them go down the steps. Stooping swiftly, she drew her hand across the floor, found the envelope and thrust it inside her kimono. Then she darted across to the stairs, and when she reached the landing she stopped to listen. It was possible that the stranger might feel if he had all the papers before he left.

No sound reached her, and she breathed a sigh of relief; but she forgot that the others had moved silently, and a flash of light swept up the stairs and struck her face. She was dazzled and alarmed; but with an effort she kept her self-control. It would be dangerous to be seen trying to steal away, but if she remained, looking down over the banisters, her presence might be accounted for.

"Who's there?" she asked in a sharp voice.

For a moment or two the light rested on her face, and she was glad to remember that she would not be expected to look composed.

Staffer laughed as he turned the beam on Williamson.

"Our friend and I," he answered. "I'm sorry we startled you. Perhaps I'd better get a candle." [Pg 222]

He looked cool. That was comforting, for it suggested that he did not know she had been in the hall; but she thought it wiser to wait a minute. Staffer struck a match; then he put out the torch and gave the lighted candle to Williamson.

"If you don't want supper, we may as well go upstairs. The room you generally use is ready."

Elsie imagined that Williamson had not meant to stay, but he came up in front of Staffer, carrying the candle. She noted that he wore rubber knee-boots and that Staffer had only his stockings on his feet. When they reached the landing, Williamson looked rather keenly at her, but his face was inscrutable. She could not be sure that he had not seen her behind the clock; and Staffer's attitude might be intended to hide some plan for her embarrassment. But she must keep cool.

"I think we could find Mr. Williamson some cold meat if he is hungry," she said.

"He'd rather have sleep," Staffer answered. "He meant to stay at Langholm, so as to get home early to-morrow; but you can never rely on a motorcycle." He turned to Williamson. "How far did you have to walk when it broke down?"

"Four or five miles, after I'd spent some time trying to put it right," Williamson answered, and made his excuses for disturbing them; but Elsie thought he was taking Staffer's cue, and she knew that they were both watching her. For all that, she smiled as she replied with conventional politeness.

"Well," resumed Staffer, "it's getting cold, and I'll look after Williamson. If you hear a door open another time, you'd better call me instead of going down." He paused a moment, and there was a slight change in his tone. "We know your pluck, but I can't allow you to run a risk." [Pg 223]

Elsie turned away with keen relief, and on reaching her room she locked the door before she took out the envelope. The name *Thorkelsen* was written across it. That suggested a Norwegian or a Dane, and was not what she had expected, but she sat for a time with the envelope in her hand. She had no doubt that it contained some dangerous secret. A plausible excuse had been made for Williamson's visit; but she had noticed his clothes, and deck-boots, which were not what one generally wore when motor-cycling. Then, why had the man in oilskins come to Appleyard when he might have expected every one to be asleep? It looked as if her uncle had a part, and a leading part, in some plot in which Williamson was engaged; but she could not reason the matter out. Now that the strain had gone, she suddenly felt limp.

With an effort she roused herself and threw the envelope into the fire. She could not betray her uncle, to whom she owed much; but he should not lead Dick into trouble, and Appleyard must not be used by her country's enemies. The situation, however, was embarrassing, and she felt that she could not ask Andrew's help. She longed to do so, because she instinctively turned to him when she was in a difficulty, and he had never failed her. But it was impossible now. She must wait and trust to finding some way of baffling the conspirators without staining the family honor.

At last she went to bed, and presently fell asleep; but she got up early in the morning and found Dick outside, watching Watson clean the car. [Pg 224]

"Are you going to Edinburgh to-day?" she asked, as they turned back to the house.

"Yes," said Dick. "A bit of a change is bracing."

"But Andrew and Mr. Whitney are coming back."

"I suppose that means you don't want me to go; can't trust me up in town?" Dick said lightly.

"It isn't that." Elsie hesitated. "I imagine they want to make some use of you."

Dick gave her a curious glance.

"I suppose you mean Williamson does?"

"No," said Elsie, with a touch of color in her face; "I mean both."

"Ah!" Dick looked at her keenly for a moment. "You're generally frank, Elsie; open as the sunshine, in fact; and I'm not clever at hiding what I think. Suppose you tell me what you really do mean?"

"I can't, Dick; but I want you to be careful in Edinburgh, for my sake."

"Very well. I'll promise that; and I think I can manage not to let others see I've had a hint. It's a funny thing, but although I am a bit of a fool, I really have more sense than people imagine."

Elsie was puzzled by his manner. The hardness in his tone was not like Dick; but she let the matter drop.

"Who is Rankine? Do you know him?" she asked.

"Yes; he's a friend of Whitney's people, a navy officer. Struck me as a remarkably good type."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know. Somewhere between here and Ireland, surveying for charts."

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"Perhaps Mr. Whitney will bring him to Appleyard when his ship's in port."

"I'll ask him to, if you like. But I don't know you as a plotter. What's the scheme?"

"I can't tell you," Elsie answered with a careless smile. "You'll have to trust me, Dick."

"That's easy," he said in a different tone. "Anybody who knew you well would trust you with his life."

Elsie gave him a quick, affectionate glance, and they went into the house.

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CHAPTER XXII

STAFFER'S MESSENGER

Dick spent several exhilarating days in Edinburgh, although on the whole he conducted himself with a sobriety that surprised his companions, who were thus encouraged to leave him alone.

As they were getting breakfast on the morning they left Edinburgh, Staffer said to Dick:

"We must start back as soon as we can, but there's an adjustment to be made on the car that may keep me half an hour at the garage. I don't suppose you'll mind doing an errand for me in the meantime?"

"Certainly not," said Dick.

"Then you might go to the Caledonian Hotel and see a man called Sanders. I'll give you his room number, so you needn't bother them at the office. Go straight up in the elevator and ask if he has any message for me; then you can come back to the garage, where we'll be waiting."

"He doesn't know me, but perhaps that won't matter?"

"I don't suppose so; the thing's not important," Staffer answered carelessly. "However, since you mention it, if he should hesitate, you can show him this."

He gave Dick a handsome silver cigarette-case, engraved with a rather unusual pattern round the crest.

"Be back in half an hour," he said.

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It was a fine morning with bright sunshine and a keen east wind, and Dick walked along carelessly, looking at the shops. At one he bought some gloves for Mrs. Woodhouse, and at another some delicate, quilled chrysanthemums caught his eye. He bought a larger bunch than he could conveniently hold, imagining that they might please Elsie, and farther on he purchased an enameled locket.

With a box of gloves sticking awkwardly out of his pocket, and a wrapped-up jewel case dangling by a loop from a finger of the hand with which he clutched the great bunch of chrysanthemums, Dick entered the hotel. None of the pages or porters asked him what he wanted when he strode through the entrance hall; for his twinkling smile and easy manner banished suspicion. There were very few people who ever distrusted Dick. Staffer had chosen his messenger well.

Dick found Sanders reading a letter in his room, and thought the fellow had been surprised when he entered unannounced. The paper in his hand was crumpled, as if he had meant to put it out of sight, but he turned to Dick with a quiet movement. His face was expressionless, but his glance was very keen.

"Perhaps I ought to apologize for breaking in on you like this," Dick said.

"It's not quite usual," Sanders replied. "The general custom is to send in a card."

"Well, I was told to go straight up; and as I was thinking of something else, I'm afraid I forgot to knock."

"I'm afraid you did," returned Sanders. "Who told you to come up?"

"Staffer. I understand you have a message for him. We're just starting home."

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"Ah!" Sanders' voice was quiet, but Dick imagined that he felt some surprise. "You will excuse my remarking that, as a rule, one likes to know something about a messenger."

"Of course; I forgot." Dick took out the cigarette-case. "Staffer is my step-father, and he said you'd know this."

"Then you're Mr. Johnstone of Appleyard?"

Dick nodded and felt that he was being quietly studied. It was obvious that Sanders knew something about him.

"How long have you been in Edinburgh?" he asked, and looked thoughtful when Dick told him.

"Well, I have no message for Mr. Staffer. As a matter of fact, I was expecting some news from him, and have not received it. You might tell him so."

"I see; you can't reply to a message you didn't get. But I'll send him round when I reach the garage, if you like—and there's the telephone."

"You seem to understand the situation," Sanders smiled. "I won't trouble Mr. Staffer, as it is not important. Will you come down and smoke a cigarette?"

"No, thanks. Staffer's waiting," Dick said.

Sanders picked up the cigarette-case, which he had left on the table.

"This is Mr. Staffer's, and perhaps you had better return it as soon as you see him. The thing is valuable."

Dick left the hotel, but took out the case and examined it as he walked back up the street. It was heavily gilded inside, and he thought the engraving round the small gold crest remarkably good. The case was beautifully made, and must have been expensive; but he suspected that this did not altogether account for Sanders' warning him to take care of it. Dick's face grew thoughtful as he remembered the crumpled letter, which the man had not had time to thrust into his pocket. Then, it was strange that he had been unwilling to use the telephone; and, when one came to think of it, Staffer could have avoided some delay by ringing him up. Moreover, Elsie had told him that he might be made use of in Edinburgh.

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As he remembered this, Dick smiled. After all, he was not so simple as he looked, and people who misunderstood his character sometimes suffered for their mistake. His mind was occupied as he went on to the garage, where he found the car waiting at the door with Williamson inside. They had not brought Watson, and when Dick appeared Staffer started the engine.

"I suppose you saw Sanders," he said carelessly.

"Yes," replied Dick. "Hope I haven't kept you; I wasn't with him long."

"Jump up," Staffer said, as he threw in the clutch, and the big car rolled away down the street.

The traffic was thick when they crossed the railway bridge, and Staffer was forced to drive cautiously; and when they ran between tall houses along the narrow highway out of the town, there seemed to be an unusual number of carts about and tramcars on the line. It was not until they were speeding past the last of the small villas on the outskirts that Staffer could relax his watchfulness, and then he did not speak to Dick. Staffer and Sanders had given him to understand that the message was of no importance, and Dick knew that Staffer would accordingly show no haste to ask about it.

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They ran under a lofty railway viaduct and through a colliery village; then the road led upward across open country toward a high, blue ridge that rose between them and the south. As the car sped on, the careful cultivation that marks the Lothian levels became less evident. There were fewer broad belts of stubble, and the dark-green turnip fields were left behind; no copses and patches of woodland lined the winding road. Rushy pastures rolled away from it, the hedgerows were made of ragged, wind-stunted thorns, which presently gave place to dry stone dykes. Round hilltops began to rise above the high table-land where the white bent-grass grew, and a keen wind from the North Sea stung their faces as they climbed the last ascent. Here Dick's eyes swept the landscape.

The Forth had dwindled to a thin, glittering streak, Edinburgh was hidden by a haze of smoke, and the Craigs and Arthur's seat were fading into the background of the highland hills. Ahead, across the divide, a long, gently sloping hollow opened up where Gala Water wound among the fields and woods. The road, however, ran straight along the hillside, which gradually rose above it, while the valley melted through deepening shades of gray into a gulf of blue shadow. As the car rushed down the incline a faint white line was drawn across the distance, and Dick, glancing at his watch, imagined it was an Edinburgh express.

Then Staffer turned to him.

"By the way, what about the message Sanders gave you?"

"Oh," said Dick, "he didn't give it to me."

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Staffer looked round as far as he was able, but dared not neglect his driving, and so missed Dick's grin.

"But you saw him!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes; but he had nothing to say. He didn't know what you wanted, because he hadn't heard from you. Anyway, that's what I understood."

The car had swung toward the edge of the road, and Staffer was occupied by the wheel for the next few moments, but Dick imagined that he and Williamson exchanged glances.

"Can you remember his exact remarks?" Staffer asked when he could turn again.

"I'm afraid not. Still, I think he expected you to send him something that hadn't come."

Staffer said nothing more, but Williamson put his hand into his pocket, and took out what appeared to be a time-table. A thin spire with a few white houses below it now stood out from the hillside two or three miles away, but Dick thought Williamson would not get out there. It would look significant after hearing his report, and he could get a train to Edinburgh farther on. Staffer said something that Dick could not hear, and the car raced through the village without slackening speed.

For a time the road ran southward beside the sparkling stream, and then wound round wide curves where woods rolled down the hollows of the hills, until, as they turned a corner, Galashield's factory chimneys rose about the waterside, and a haze of smoke floated across the valley. Staffer reduced speed as they ran in among the houses, and drove very slowly when they reached a sharp bend near the station.

"I want some oil," he said. "We'll stop here and get a tin."

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He pulled up in front of a big red hotel, and they went into the smoking-room.

Williamson walked over to the fire.

"It's a cold day for driving, and I don't think I'll go any farther," he remarked. "I want a few things that I can buy in the town, and I'll go on by the afternoon train."

"As you like," said Staffer. "Your place is off our way."

When Williamson left them, Dick turned to Staffer.

"I wonder if you would lend me a pound or two?" he asked.

"I might take the risk; but why do you want it?"

"Well," Dick said apologetically, "it's difficult to bring much money back when you go to Edinburgh; and if you don't mind I'll stop here. If Andrew and Whitney aren't in the neighborhood, I'll come on by train, but I expect to find them at Melrose or Abbotsford. You see, I felt rather shabby about leaving on the day they were coming home."

Staffer did not object, but Dick thought his compliance was accounted for by the whistle of a stopping train that was then starting for Edinburgh.

"Andrew has eccentric tastes, but, allowing for that, it's hard to see what satisfaction he and his American friend can get from cruising about the Galloway coast in winter," Staffer said.

"They're fond of a shot at the black geese."

"They can get snipe and partridges at Appleyard without much trouble."

"They can," Dick agreed, smiling; "that partly accounts for it. If you knew Andrew as I do, you'd understand why he prefers the geese. Anything he can get easily, doesn't appeal to him. No doubt, it's a matter of temperament, but I imagine he goes punting after geese because it's a remarkably good way of getting cold and wet."

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"Then it's only the shooting that takes him along the coast."

"Of course. I can't think of anything else. Can you?"

"No," Staffer said with a quick laugh. "But I'll admit that I don't understand your cousin's type of character."

They left the hotel soon afterward, but Dick's face grew thoughtful when Staffer drove off in the car. He had known for some time that Williamson derived an advantage from exploiting his extravagance, but he had not minded this. Of late, however, Williamson had left him alone, but Dick did not think this was because Staffer had interfered on his behalf. He had admired and trusted his step-father, who had always treated him indulgently; and he now retained some liking for him, though he was beginning to know him better.

Leaving the town he took the road to Abbotsford lost in gloomy thought; but presently he braced himself to ponder the line he ought now to take. After all, he was the heir to Appleyard, and although he had recklessly ignored his responsibilities, he loved the old house. Now, all was not well there: something mysterious was going on. Dick held Williamson mainly accountable for this, but it looked as if Staffer had a part in the plot. This complicated things, because Staffer was his step-father and Elsie's uncle, and Dick cherished the honor of his house.

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He looked up as he heard the hoot of a motor horn, and his tense face relaxed into a smile. Andrew, in the side-car of Whitney's bicycle, waved his hand and Dick's troubles began to vanish. One could rely on Andrew, who, after all, was a much better Johnstone than himself. Somehow, Andrew would stand between them and whatever threatened the honor of Appleyard.

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CHAPTER XXIII

AN EVENING AT APPELYARD

Rankine had got a few days' leave and was spending it at Appleyard. He sat beside Elsie in a corner of the billiard-room, where the party had gathered after dinner. He had arrived during the afternoon, and Andrew was not altogether pleased to see him, although he liked the man. Elsie had suggested that Dick should invite him, and had added that he might as well come when Madge Whitney was there. Since Elsie had not seen Rankine until he arrived, Andrew wondered what she meant; but he admitted that she generally had a reason for what she did.

Nobody had been playing billiards or wanted to begin. Elsie and Mrs. Woodhouse were knitting and the others were talking quietly, while they waited for the evening newspaper.

Presently Staffer made a remark about the Navy, and Madge Whitney looked at Rankine with a smile.

"Don't you feel that you must answer that?"

"I don't know that I can," Rankine answered good-naturedly. "To some extent, Mr. Staffer's right. The Navy certainly occupies the background of the stage, just now."

"It strikes me as being out of sight altogether," Staffer said.

"Well, perhaps that's its proper place. But I expect it will emerge from obscurity when it's wanted."

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"We must hope so," Staffer returned. "No doubt, your commanders are waiting for the right moment to make a dramatic entry on the scene; but one imagines that ambitious young officers must find being kept in the background rather galling."

Andrew caught Whitney's glance and understood it as a warning not to speak. It had been blowing hard for the past week and he thought of the great battleships rolling until it was scarcely possible to keep a footing on their stripped decks, while anxious men slept beside the guns and bitter seas foamed across the ponderous, low-sided hulls. It would be worse on the swift destroyers, driving, half submerged, through the gale and trembling when the combers struck them, until their thin steel skin and beams racked and bent with the strain. No man could really keep a lookout in the blinding clouds of spray, and their decks would be swept from end to end with icy water. Rankine knew this, but he smiled tranquilly as he turned to Staffer.

"Oh, I don't think they mind—so long as they feel they're useful!"

"Is that what you feel?"

"Something of the kind. Surveying's not the work one would prefer, just now, but it's necessary. The banks and channels shift and our commerce must go on."

"There have been interruptions," Staffer said dryly.

Andrew felt puzzled. Staffer's manners were generally good; but now, while there was nothing offensive in his tone, he had gone farther than was altogether tactful. It looked as if he wanted to sting the young navy officer into an indignant protest, though Andrew could not see what he expected to gain. Rankine, however, agreed with Staffer.

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"That's so; and it's possible we may hear of another interruption or two. Our men will do their best; but, while our cruisers are pretty active, they can't be everywhere at once."

The newspaper was brought in and Staffer handed it to Dick.

"You can read it to us. I can't see very well where I am."

Dick took the thin sheet.

"Nothing of importance on the western front; a trench or two carried, another lost."

He stopped with an exclamation, and the others leaned forward eagerly.

"What is it, Dick?" Elsie asked in a hushed voice.

"They've sunk another ship in the North Channel—a wheat ship from Canada!"

"Read it!" Andrew said tensely.

Dick gave a quick look at Staffer before beginning; but Staffer at that instant was lighting a cigar, so his face was masked.

"A telegram from Londonderry reports that the British cargo steamer *Meridian* with grain from Canada was beached in a sinking state near Greencastle last night. Full particulars have not yet been received, but a violent shock was felt when the vessel was off Malin Head and soon afterward she began to settle down. The water rose rapidly in two of her holds, but the bulkheads stood the strain and the captain was able to reach the mouth of Lough Foyle. Whether she struck a mine or was torpedoed is not at present known, but some light is thrown on the subject by the crew of the *Concord's* experience. The latter, a steamer of 6,000 tons, bound from Montreal to Glasgow, passed Tory Island yesterday, steering east. A high, confused sea was running, and it was getting dark when she was abreast of Portrush, where the lookout forward reported a submarine.

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"The captain immediately altered his course, and the vessel, which was rolling wildly, listed over as she obeyed her helm. The lookout, running across the forecabin, after he hailed the bridge, as if to see the submarine better, was thrown down the ladder and picked up, unconscious, on the iron deck. The captain steamed out to sea and returned an hour or two afterward nearer the Kintyre side. The injured seaman had not recovered consciousness when he was landed in the Clyde."

There was silence for a few moments when Dick put down the newspaper. Andrew's face was hard, for Rankine had given him a meaning glance; Elsie was very quiet, but she was lightly flushed.

"I suppose it wouldn't be difficult to recognize a submarine?" she asked presently.

"No," said Rankine; "not if it were at the surface. One might, however, mistake a spar or batten, floating upright, for a periscope."

No one followed up his explanation, but the party seemed to find the pause trying.

"They burn gasolene, don't they?" Madge asked.

"Either that or oil when they're running on the surface. The engines are driven by electricity when they're submerged."

"Can they carry much gasolene?"

"Not very much," Rankine answered, guardedly.

"Can they carry enough to take them from Germany and back?" Madge persisted.

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"I believe some can do so; but they wouldn't have much to spare, and they'd run a serious risk if they remained any time as far away from their base as the North Channel."

"You must see that the point's important," said Elsie.

"Its importance is obvious," Rankine agreed.

"If the boat couldn't carry enough fuel, she'd have to get some while she was out on a trip?"

There was another long pause and then Mrs. Woodhouse spoke.

"You must mean somewhere in Scotland," she said.

"Disagreeable conclusion, isn't it? But we don't know yet that it was a submarine," Rankine answered.

"But suppose there *should* be an enemy submarine in the North Channel that hadn't much fuel left, how could she renew her supply?" Staffer asked.

Rankine seemed unwilling to talk about the subject, but he smiled.

"Oh," he said, "it's hard to tell. One could form plausible theories, but they'd probably be wrong. Perhaps we'd better leave the matter to the people whose business it is."

He began to talk about something else, and the curious tension that all had felt gradually slackened. Soon afterward, a servant announced that Mackellar had arrived. Staffer had been

expecting him, and when he left the room Madge and Dick went to the drawing-room with Elsie and Mrs. Woodhouse, and Rankine found himself alone with Andrew and Whitney.

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"Have you made any progress with your investigations?" he asked.

"No," Andrew answered quietly; "nothing very marked."

"And you are still resolved to keep them in your own hands, after the news we got to-night?"

"Do you know that the loss of the cargo boat has any connection with the matter?"

"No; but it looks suspicious," Rankine answered, with a touch of grimness. "If I did know, my course would be clear."

"So would mine," said Andrew. "We found some matches and a candle on board the wreck, and followed a man across Criffell to the beach abreast of her—or rather we followed his tracks. Then we saw another fellow on the sands at night; but that's all I have to tell."

"Could you see either of the men clearly?"

"No. I didn't see the first at all; and the other was some distance off, and a thick fog was coming on."

"That means it was impossible for you to recognize him."

"Quite," Andrew said firmly. "Besides, I didn't expect to recognize him; there was nothing to indicate it was anybody I'd ever met. Have you learned anything?"

Rankine smiled.

"I've examined the wreck and dug up the sand, besides watching the flats for several nights. The place might be used for a wireless installation, but, lying in a hollow, with hills on both sides, it's not particularly suitable." He paused and looked at Andrew. "That had some influence with me."

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Andrew thought Rankine meant that if he felt certain that messages were sent from the wreck, he would have brought some pressure to bear on him.

"How did you get there?" he asked.

"We ran in behind Ross Island when it was too rough for surveying, and afterward brought up near Abbey Head. You get some shelter there so long as the wind's not south."

"But it's a long way from Abbey Head to the wreck," Whitney interposed.

"I shipped a steam launch at Belfast."

"And went to the wreck and back at night? Wasn't it blowing hard?"

"Hard enough," smiled Rankine. "We had some trouble to keep the fire from being swamped, but she's a powerful boat and has a good big pump. Then we traveled most of the distance shortly before and after low-water, when the sea was not so bad; but I'll confess that I couldn't have found my way among the shoals except for Mr. Johnstone's directions. We made three trips and got back before daylight without noting anything suspicious."

They looked at him in surprise. A steam launch voyage along that dangerous coast on a wild winter night was a bold undertaking, particularly when one must cross surf-swept sands with only a few feet of water under the boat. And Rankine had safely accomplished it thrice.

"What about the digging?" Whitney asked. "Mightn't it alarm our man?"

"The surf would level the sand in a tide," Andrew said; and turned to Rankine. "What do you think of doing now?"

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"I don't know, but I'm afraid I can't stay here as long as I expected. The steamer's in Loch Ryan. We went in to make some repairs after a hammering we got. Now, perhaps we had better join the others."

Andrew left them in the drawing-room and found Mackellar alone in the library.

"I'll have finished with these in a few minutes," he remarked, indicating the papers before him. "Mr. Staffer's accounts don't give much trouble. He's a man o' parts."

"Yes," agreed Andrew; "the estate is managed well."

"We must give him all the credit he deserves, but there's another matter I'm anxious about. We have not got to the bottom o' your cousin's debts."

Andrew frowned.

"Do you mean that Williamson has got hold of him again?"

"No; I'm thinking he's out of the game, and the borrowed money's none o' his. But Dick has incurred some fresh liabilities. Here's a bit statement; ye can study it."

Andrew felt disturbed, but he waited until Mackellar put the papers into his pocket.

"I can't see how Dick has spent so much money; but how did he get it?"

"On notes that will mature when he's twenty-one. I found the man who cashed them, but he parted with the paper, and I canno' tell who holds it now."

"I've no doubt you tried to find out."

Mackellar's eyes twinkled.

"Ye may take that for granted. If there had been a weak spot in the man's affairs, I'd have made him tell."

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There was silence for a minute. Andrew suspected that it was Staffer; but he did not think it was time to speak, and he knew that Mackellar would take him into his confidence when he saw fit.

"The fellow who really made the loan has some courage," he said presently.

"I'm thinking he kens the Johnstone character. Dick would no' disown his debts on the ground that he was under age; nor would ye, if your cousin died before he inherited."

"No," said Andrew. "Dick's debts must be met; but I would pay what he borrowed with reasonable interest, and nothing more."

"Ye're a true Johnstone," Mackellar remarked, with dry approval. "My opinion is that the lender's no' expecting ye to inherit."

"Well, it's most unlikely, and I'm glad it is so. I suppose you have nothing more to say, but you'll tell me when I can help."

"I will," Mackellar promised.

Andrew did not feel inclined to join the others. He strolled into the hall, and found Elsie sitting in a corner with her knitting.

"I stole away to finish this belt," she said. "It's the last of a dozen I promised to let the committee have to-morrow."

"You keep your promises," Andrew replied. "It must be a comfort to feel you're useful, because somebody in the snow and mud will be glad of that warm belt. I begin to wish I'd been taught to knit."

Elsie gave him a sympathetic glance, for there was a hint of bitterness in his tone.

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"What is troubling you to-night, Andrew?" she asked gently.

"It is rather hard to explain; a general sense of futility, I think," he answered with a smile. "Did you ever feel that you had come up against a dead wall that you could neither break through nor get over?"

"Yes; I know the feeling well. There is so much that ought to be done and it seems impossible. But what did you want to do?"

Andrew stood beside the hearth, silently watching her for a minute. Her face was quiet but faintly troubled, and although she was looking at the fire and not her knitting, the needles flashed steadily through the wool. Elsie had beautiful hands, but they were capable and strong, and it was not often that she allowed her feelings to interfere with her work.

"To tell what you meant to do and couldn't sounds pretty weak, but I had two objects when I came home," he said. "I wanted to help Dick and keep him out of trouble; but the proper kind of help needs tact, and I haven't much. Besides, there's something peculiarly elusive about Dick; you think you have him, so to speak, in a corner, and the next moment he slips away from you. Sometimes I suspect he's a good deal more clever than we imagine."

Elsie nodded.

"Yes; I know what you mean. But you're a very good friend of his and it wouldn't be like you to give him up."

"I don't mean to give him up; but just now it looks as if I could get no farther. That's the trouble."

"You mean part of it," said Elsie quietly. "What was your other object?"

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Andrew hesitated.

"It was rather vague, but I thought I might somehow be useful—to the country. I'm lame and can't enlist; I can't give much money; but I might, perhaps, help to watch the coast. Then there was the Eskdale road. You know my hobby."

Elsie stopped her knitting and gave him a steady look.

"And after a time, you thought you saw a way to be of use. You found out something?"

"Yes," he said in a disturbed voice. "Still, it looked as if I couldn't go on with the thing. Some of the clues broke off and those I tried to follow led me into difficulties. You can't act on faint suspicion: it might lead to unnecessary complications."

"One must take a risk now and then," Elsie answered. "I mean, do one's duty and face the consequences."

Andrew did not reply and she picked up her knitting.

"Well, peace must come, sometime," she said. "Have you thought what you will do then?"

"Yes; if I could see Dick starting well as the owner of Appleyard, and, better still, safely married, I'd go away again."

"What do you mean by 'safely married'?"

"I think you know. He's such a good sort, and a girl who understood him and was patient with his failings would soon help him to get rid of them. She'd make the most of his good points, and Dick has talents—"

"Are there girls like that?"

"Yes," said Andrew, firmly; "I am quite sure that I know one."

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Elsie gave him a curious glance.

"But you're only thinking of Dick. What about yourself?"

"Oh," he said with a brave effort to be cheerful, "I don't count for much. I've no money and no particular ability beyond being able to sail a boat. Still, I have the sea and I'm fond of wandering. It's a pretty good old world, after all, and if you keep an open mind, you make friends wherever you go."

"But it must hurt to leave the old ones."

"Yes," he agreed with a hint of strain; "it hurts very much. But you never leave them altogether. Things change, of course, but you can come back if you are wanted."

He left her rather abruptly, and Elsie dropped her work and sat looking into the fire, a curious, gentle smile on her face. Andrew was true to the core; he would never seek his own advantage when it conflicted with his loyalty to his friends. Now he was willing to sacrifice himself for Dick; though perhaps his poverty influenced him, too. Still, he should see—Elsie resolutely picked up her knitting. She must not indulge in disturbing thoughts like these—and the belts must be finished. Shivering men, worn with stern fighting in Flanders, needed them.

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE BUOYED CHANNEL

A bitter east wind was blowing through light mist, though the moon was in the sky, when Andrew came out of a little shop in a lonely village near the Galloway coast. He carried a basket of provisions and wore a thick jersey and oilskins, but he shivered as he looked down the street. It was empty, and dark except for a faint yellow glow here and there in the windows of the small, white houses that rose abruptly from the rough pavement.

"Dick's a long time in getting the eggs," he said to Whitney.

"That's so; we've been 'most half an hour buying the few things you wanted. He's probably talking to somebody. Making friends with strangers is a way he has, particularly when he knows we're waiting."

"I could suggest another explanation," Andrew replied.

He looked round at a clatter of heavy boots and saw two dark figures against a square of light. Then a door was shut and Dick came up with a man who wore an oilskin cap and jersey. Dick was awkwardly holding a big paper bag.

"It's no' a good night," said the seaman. "I wouldna' say but we might have a shift o' wind before long. They're telling me ye have brought up in the west bay."

"For the night," said Andrew. "It's an exposed place."

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"It's a' that. If the wind comes from the south'ard, it will take good ground-tackle to hold ye."

"What about the burnfoot gutter?"

"It's snug enough, but ye might have to stop a week. Ye canna' beat oot when there's any sea running on the sands."

"Are there any geese about?"

"Weel, I did see two or three bernicle, a week ago; but if it's shooting ye want, ye'll have to gang doon west. The geese have moved on, but I hear the duck are throng on the flats roon Deefoot,

behind the Ross."

Andrew said nothing. He had picked up Dick at Kirkcudbright on the Dee, but had not seen a duck about the river mouth. It seemed that the man had learned that they came from the head of Solway, but did not know they were then returning from the west. He left them at the end of the village and Andrew then asked Dick what had kept him.

"The eggs," Dick grinned. "Jim insisted on them and I didn't want to disappoint him, though they're scarce just now. I should advise him to take them before they smash; I'm not clever at carrying eggs in a paper bag."

"Where did you get them?" Whitney asked as he took the bag.

"Where do you think? When you're in doubt in a Scotch clachan, it's safe to try the change-house."

"I suppose that means the saloon," said Whitney. "Well, I suspected something of the kind."

Leaving the road outside the village, they struck across some wet fields and came to a marsh, through which a muddy creek wound crookedly. After jumping deep drains and floundering through rushes, they reached a steep bank of gravel, with a cut where the creek made its way to the sea. A mooring buoy floated in the channel; and across the channel lay a waste of sand, dotted with shallow pools. This ran seaward until it was lost in the haze.

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An old shooting punt that Andrew had repaired lay upon the gravel and they dragged her down. As she was larger than usual and the big gun had been unshipped for the voyage, she would carry them all; though her shallow hull was deep in the water and the yacht some distance off. They had brought their ordinary shoulder guns on the chance of getting a shot at geese or duck. The village was about a mile away, and the spot looked strangely desolate; although a raised causeway, lined by stunted thorns, that ran back into the mist, seemed to suggest that a road came down to the sands across the creek.

Andrew took the long paddle when they pushed off, and the tide carried them away between muddy banks veined with tiny rivulets of water. In coming, soon after high tide, they had crossed the sands, following the line of beach, but now they must head seaward until they could round the end of the projecting shoal. Soon the banks got lower and the riband of water widened; and then a tall upright branch rose ahead of them.

"That perch is new since I was here last," Andrew remarked. "Who was the fellow you were talking to, Dick?"

"I don't know. He told me he had a boat at the burnfoot, but the fishing wasn't good."

They drifted on until a strong ripple broke the surface ahead. A small black object tossed in the disturbed patch.

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"What's that?" asked Whitney. "Looks like a lobster trap."

"Lobsters prefer stones," said Andrew. "I don't think there are any here, but we'll see, if you get hold of the buoy. Anyhow, it will let me stop paddling and throw some water out."

He headed across the channel, and Whitney, crouching on deck, seized the ring of corks. The punt swung round sharply with her bow to the stream and there was an angry splash against her planks. Whitney was glad to ease the strain on his arms by making fast the wet line.

"The tide's running strong," he said.

Andrew nodded.

"The buoy's not on a lobster creel or we'd have pulled it up. I wonder what depth there is?"

He pushed down the double-ended paddle, which, as used in shooting punts, is about nine feet long, and touched bottom when it was wet half-way up. Then he held the blade against the stream until the punt sheered across the channel, dragging the line with her, when he tried again. This time he could not find bottom.

"It looks as if the corks are meant to mark a corner of the bank," he said. "In a way, that's curious, because fishermen don't often bother about a buoy. They know the ground and are satisfied with sounding with an oar."

Andrew began to bail her out, and Whitney and Dick sat on the after deck while he caught the water which ran toward them in the bailing can.

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"What about the geese?" Whitney asked.

"The man mentioned bernicle and I'd expect to find them on the outer end of the flat, because it's soft ground and bernicle get their food in the mud. Besides, I'd like to see how this channel runs as the sands dry; there's more water than I thought. Suppose we leave the punt and walk down the edge? As it's lower than the top of the bank, we'd be out of sight."

"I'll stay in the punt," said Dick. "I'm not fond of crawling through soft mud. Then, if you put up some birds, they'll probably fly over me."

They paddled ashore and left him with the punt, Andrew showing him two small rollers, which would help him to launch her if he wished to come after them. The sand was soft and made a sucking noise about their sea-boots, but this was the only sound except the faint ripple of the tide. The shore was hidden and there was nothing visible beyond the stretch of sloppy flat that vanished into the mist. The haze, however, was not thick, and faint moonlight filtered through.

"What do you expect to find here?" Whitney asked.

"I don't know. I'm curious about the buoy and I imagine that the fellow Dick was with wanted us to clear out. He was right in saying that we'd brought up in an exposed place; but why did he tell us ducks were plentiful down west?"

Whitney made a sign of agreement.

"It's certainly suspicious."

They went on while the sand got softer, but they saw nothing except a few small wading birds and a black-backed gull. Then Andrew stopped near the outer end of the bank. Something black floated in the midst of a tide-ripple, about forty yards away. [Pg 252]

"Another buoy and a bigger one, marking the fairway to the gut," he said thoughtfully. "With that and the compass course to the corks we saw, I'd take a boat drawing eight feet up to the burnfoot at five hours' flood, on an average tide."

"Eight feet draught would give you a pretty big boat; a vessel of about a hundred tons would float on that. But what would bring her here?"

"That's the point," said Andrew. "I believe old wooden schooners sometimes take cargoes of coal up these gutters and dump it into carts on the beach, but I'm not quite satisfied."

He turned suddenly, as he heard a flapping of canvas, and a few moments later, a tall dark shape emerged from the haze. At first, it had no clear outline, but Andrew knew it was the topsail of a cutter-rigged boat, beating in against the tide. She grew in distinctness until they could see her black hull washed by a streak of foam, and the straining mainsail, slanted away from them. The iron shoe of a trawl-beam projected between her shrouds, and the net hung in a dark festoon over her weather side. The wind was abeam just there and she passed them, sailing fast; but they waited, knowing that it would draw ahead where the channel curved. Presently, there was a banging of canvas that suddenly swung upright, and then filled and vanished on the other tack.

"Smart work!" Andrew commented. "They'll have about twenty yards of deep water to gather way in before they bring her round again, against the stream. The fellows who can beat her round that bend don't need buoys. I'd like to take some bearings: this gutter's very sketchily indicated on the chart." [Pg 253]

"Shore bearings wouldn't be of much use to anybody who wanted to come up in the dark."

"That's true," Andrew agreed thoughtfully. "But we came for geese, and we may as well make our way back across the middle of the sand."

After a while they found a nearly dry gutter, and moved up it cautiously until Andrew stopped. Out of the dark came a clear, high note, the clanging cry of the bernicle geese. It was answered from one side and behind, and then a measured fanning became audible. This swelled into a rhythmic creak as the broad wings beat the air.

The men crouched low, with tingling nerves, clenching their guns and straining for the first glimpse of the approaching birds.

"Flying low and right over," Andrew whispered. "Fire when you see the first!"

Whitney got down on one knee, while the ooze soaked through his trousers and ran into his sea-boot. But this did not matter; it was worth sinking waist-deep to hear the wild call break out close ahead. A dark object, planing downward on extended wings, shot out of the mist; another came close behind; and the gun-butt jarred Whitney's shoulder while smoke blew into his eyes. He swung the gun as he pulled the second trigger, and saw a red flash leap out; and then the dark was filled with a harsh clamor and the furious beat of wings. Andrew jerked his gun open and the burnt cartridges shot out while smoke curled about the breach.

"Two, I think," he said. "Yours is up the bank." [Pg 254]

Whitney found it presently: a small, black-breasted goose.

"My first bernicle!" he said with a thrill of pride. "They're more like a big duck than the heavy lag birds we've already bagged. Do you think Dick will get a shot?"

"He ought to. They were flying straight up the bank."

They waited a few minutes, but no gunshot came out of the mist, and when everything was silent they turned back down the gutter.

"The geese won't alight again," Andrew said. "As Dick knows that, he'll probably launch the punt and come to meet us."

When they reached the edge of the water, Whitney stopped and lighted his pipe.

"It's pretty soft farther on. Let's wait here for the punt," he suggested.

He had nearly smoked his pipe out when they heard the splash of a paddle, and presently the punt crept out of the mist. Its low, gray-painted hull was hard to see; but Dick's form was more distinct and Andrew made an abrupt movement as he watched him. He sat facing forward, on the after deck, and he lurched clumsily from side to side as he dipped the paddle. The punt was not going straight, but sheered about, and Dick did not seem to be making for the bank. This projected in a short cape, not far away, and then the sand ran back toward the east, leaving a stretch of rippling water that vanished in the haze. The tide was rapidly running seaward and the wind blew off the flat.

"Dip to leeward!" Andrew shouted. "Head her up for the point!"

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Dick stopped and flourished his paddle.

"I'm not coming ashore," he answered with a chuckle. "Do you good to walk back. Jim's getting fat!"

Whitney looked at Andrew in alarm.

"Yes; he's drunk!" Andrew said with an impatient sign.

It was plain to both that the situation was not free from danger. A shooting punt, with its sides only from six to eight inches high, is essentially a smooth-water craft and is easily swamped, in spite of her deck. There was a good breeze, and if Dick passed the short point, he would risk being blown out to sea. The tide did not follow the sweep of bank but ran straight out.

"Don't be a fool!" Andrew shouted. "Run her in at once!"

Dick sat hunched up, with the paddle on the deck, and they heard him laugh.

"It's quite oll ri'," he answered. "Needn't bother about me. I'm going to look for submarinessh."

Andrew ran toward the point, and Whitney, following, tore two buttons off his oilskin jacket as he tried to unfasten them with numbed fingers. He wore ordinary serge trousers and heavy sea-boots, but the punt must be stopped before she drifted past the little cape. Afterward, it would be too late.

Andrew reached the spot first, while the punt was still upstream of it, and at once plunged in; but Whitney, who had now got rid of his oilskin, stopped and tried to pull off his long, wet boots. He hardly thought Andrew could wade out far enough, and one of them might have to swim. He was furious with Dick; but the boy must be rescued. He got his boots off and went in up to his knees; but then he stopped; for he would not be needed if his comrade could reach the punt. Andrew was waist-deep but still floundering on, when Dick, laughing hoarsely, threw something at him. It fell into the water, but the next shot was better aimed, for Whitney saw an egg smash on Andrew's oilskin cap.

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Another struck him in the face; but the punt was near now, and after a few more floundering strides, Andrew threw himself forward. The craft lurched as he fell across her deck, and Whitney thought she would capsize; but the next moment Andrew flung Dick into the well and then, kneeling on the deck, brought the craft ashore with a few strokes of the paddle.

Whitney felt very cold, and he was getting stiffly on board when Andrew asked:

"Hadn't you better bring your coat and boots?"

Whitney found it a relief to laugh as he went back for the things; and Andrew pushed the punt off when he got on board.

"I'll paddle while you keep the young ass in the well," he said. "Knock him down if he tries to get up."

"Don't want to get up," Dick remarked. "Quite snug down here. Only trouble is I'm sitting in the eggs."

"I think that's correct," said Whitney. "*In* is the proper word. There's rather a mess on your face, too."

"Good shot, ole man," Dick observed with a grin.

Andrew said nothing as he swung the long paddle, for the ripples were getting larger as they left the sand, and the breeze was freshening, but at last the yacht's light twinkled in the mist. Getting on board, they hustled Dick below, where Andrew stripped off his wet clothes and put him into his berth, while Whitney got the stove to burn.

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After a time, Dick put out his head.

"Feel I'd like some supper, before I go to sleep."

"You can go to sleep without it," Andrew said sternly. "I suppose there's no use in talking about it now, but you've been warned that this kind of thing may kill you."

"I'm 'shured," Dick rejoined. "Good big policy and I don't pay the premiums."

"Who does pay them?" Andrew asked, in a quiet, insistent voice; but Dick only grinned.

"That's secret, ole man. You're very good fellow, but don't know everything. Don't bother me any more; I'm sleepy."

He was silent after this, but Whitney waited until he thought Dick was really asleep.

"He looked sober when he joined us at the village," he said.

"I think he was," Andrew agreed. "Perhaps he'd drunk enough to make him want more, and brought a bottle away. No doubt, we'll find it when we clean up the punt." Then he forced a smile. "You'll have to go without your eggs."

"That's obvious. But what did he mean about his being insured, and somebody else's paying the premiums?"

"I don't know, and don't expect to get any more information when he's sober, but I'll see what Mackellar thinks. Sometimes I feel like giving up the whole business. Dick's too clever for me; and when I turn to the other matter, I'm brought to a full stop."

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Whitney nodded sympathetically.

"It's an awkward job, but you won't let up. You're not a quitter, and luck or Mackellar may help you through."

He got into his cot, and the regular splash of ripples against the boat's side, and the soft slapping of the halyards on the mast, soon made him drowsy, but the last thing he saw was Andrew sitting on the opposite locker with a stern, thoughtful face.

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CHAPTER XXV

A CLUE

There was a touch of frost in the still air and the light was fading. A yellow glow lingered in the southwest beyond Criffell's sloping shoulder, which ran up against it, tinged a deep violet. Masses of soft, gray cloud floated above the mountain's summit; but the sky was clear overhead, and a thin new moon grew brighter in the east. This was why the murmur of the sea came out of the distance in a muffled roar, for the tides run fast when the moon is young.

Elsie, walking homeward, vacantly noticed how bright the crescent gleamed above the dusky firs, as she entered the gloom of a straggling wood at the foot of the hill on which Appleyard was built. She had been out all the afternoon and now she shrank from going home, for she felt that a shadow rested upon the house. Dick had returned from a cruise with Andrew, looking dejected and unwell; and she was glad that Whitney had taken both away again, on his motorcycle, because Dick had lately had fits of moody restlessness when he was at home. Still, she missed them badly, for her mother was silent and preoccupied; and when Andrew was away, she found it hard to banish the troubles that seemed to be gathering round. They were worse for being very vaguely defined, but she felt convinced that something sinister was going on.

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As she thought of Andrew, her face grew gentle and she smiled. She knew his worth and his limitations, and loved him for both. He had his suspicions, too, and would follow where they led. Andrew was not the man to shirk a painful duty, but she could not openly help him yet. That might come, and in the meanwhile she would at least put no obstacle in his way. Still, if her fears were justified, the situation was daunting and she might need all her courage.

As she neared the lodge, she saw a man loitering in the shadow.

"Are you waiting for somebody, Jock?" she asked.

Marshall, the fisherman, turned and looked at her thoughtfully.

"Weel," he said, "they telt me Mr. Andrew's no' at home."

"Did you want to see him about the yacht?"

"It wasna' that, a'thegither."

"No?"

"Ye see, I've missed him twice and I'm for Stranraer the morn. We're gaun west to try the herring fishing."

"And you wanted to tell Mr. Johnstone something before you left? Can I give him a message when he comes back?"

Marshall hesitated.

"Weel," he said, "ye can tell him that the *Nance* cam' up the Firth the night before he started for Edinbro'; that's a while ago, ye mind. Last night she cam' up again, wi' the same crew; the

Edinbro' man I telt him o', anither wha keeps a trawl boat doon the Colvend shore, and yin who has a reid mustache."

Elsie started, and then wondered whether she had betrayed her surprise.

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"I'll try to remember. I suppose this is for Mr. Johnstone alone?"

"Just that," said Marshall. "I'm thinking it would be better that ye telt naebody else."

He moved off, and Elsie, looking round a moment afterward, saw that he had vanished. It was nearly dark among the trees, but she knew that she could have seen him had he kept on the road; besides, his heavy, tacketed boots would have made some noise, and she had heard nothing. Then she saw a figure coming from the lodge and her brain acted quickly, because she recognized Staffer.

Marshall had hinted it was important that his message should be kept secret; and fishermen had good sight. He must have noticed Staffer before she did, and did not want to be seen talking to her. Then she remembered that the night before Andrew started for Edinburgh was when Williamson and the man with the red mustache had entered the house. The stranger had come up the Firth in one of the salmon boats shortly before his visit to Appleyard, and had been there again without her seeing him.

She felt a thrill that was half apprehension and half excitement as she went on slowly. The lodge was about a hundred yards away when she met Staffer.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said. "Have you any reason to doubt the honesty of our servants?"

Elsie saw at once where his question led, and tried to nerve herself. He was a clever man and she was young and inexperienced.

"No," she said; "I have none; and Mother's quite satisfied with them. Why do you ask?"

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"You'll remember the night Williamson arrived rather late. He lost a paper in an envelope, and it looks as if somebody in the house had picked it up."

"Have you inquired about it?" Elsie asked, remembering that it was the man with the red mustache who had dropped the envelope.

"No," Staffer said carelessly; "I didn't want to make the thing look more important than it was, and I thought the envelope might turn up."

"But it must be of some consequence, or you wouldn't bother about it now."

"That's obviously true. It has become important since we lost it. It gave us some particulars that we find we can't remember."

Staffer gave her a scrutinizing look.

"It was dropped in the house," he said slowly. "Somebody must have found it."

Elsie wondered whether he suspected her. He had seen her looking down from the landing and might not have been satisfied that she had come to see who was in the house; the men had been careful to make no noise.

Staffer frowned when she did not answer.

"If the thing doesn't turn up," he declared, "I'll dismiss everybody about the place! We can't have people round us whom it's impossible to trust."

"None of the servants found it," Elsie said with forced quietness.

"You seem strangely sure of it!"

Elsie hesitated. She could not allow innocent people to suffer for what she had done; but the matter had greater issues. Though much was dark, it was clear that she and Andrew were on one side, and Staffer and his friends on the other. Andrew could be trusted, but Staffer could not. For all that, she felt the tie of kinship and could not act treacherously to him.

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"I am sure," she said slowly, "because I found the envelope myself."

Although the light was bad, she saw his face change, and she grew suddenly afraid. There was a fury in his eyes that made her quail; but he kept his self-control.

"So you were downstairs that night!"

"Yes," she said, and waited with tingling nerves, though she thought the worst was past. For a moment or two she had, perhaps, been in danger.

"What did you do with the thing?" he asked harshly. "Did you give it to Andrew Johnstone?"

"Why do you think I did that?"

Staffer saw he had blundered by hinting that the paper related to matters which might concern Andrew.

"Never mind; answer me!"

"I burned it at once, without opening it."

He looked at her as if he found this impossible to believe.

"It is quite true," she said with forced calm.

"But why? You steal a letter belonging to my guest, which you must have thought important, and then burn it unread. Do you expect me to understand your action? The thing seems purposeless."

"It isn't easy to explain, but I must try," she answered, nerving herself for an effort.

"That's obvious."

She hesitated a moment and then spoke bravely.

"I knew that something not right was going on at Appleyard."

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"Ah! Did you know what it was?"

Elsie made a negative sign.

"I really didn't want to know; but I believed that the letter was dangerous. If I had read it, I might have felt forced to tell what I found out; so I put it straight into the fire."

"Knowing that its loss might embarrass Williamson or me!"

"Yes," she said; "I thought of that. But I felt it would be safer for us all if I burned the paper."

"I suppose you understand that what you have admitted must make a difference? You have set yourself deliberately against me."

"If I had meant to injure you, I would have kept the letter; but I won't urge this. If Appleyard were yours, I would go away at once, but it is Dick's and he could not get on without my mother."

"Then you mean to stay and continue spying on my guests!"

"So long as no harm comes to Dick or Andrew, I shall leave you and your friends alone."

Staffer laughed.

"I'm afraid you're letting your imagination run away with you. What harm could come to either of them through me? But we'll say no more about it, just now."

He left her at the door and she went to her room and threw herself down on her couch, feeling rather limp, for the strain had told on her. Besides, her suspicions now were no longer vague. She had found a clue and she began to see where it led. Andrew was obviously watching the mouth of the Firth, while Rankine had some mysterious business farther west. Marshall thought it well that Andrew should know that the man with the red mustache had come from the suspected neighborhood late at night, in a salmon boat. The man had been at Appleyard, where he dropped an important letter; and Williamson and Staffer were in league with him. From all this it looked as if their business were treasonable.

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This filled her with alarm, but she was glad she had told Staffer that she found the envelope. After all, he was her uncle and to have kept silence would have been treacherous; but the struggle between family obligations and her duty to the State got keener. It was unthinkable that she should spy upon a kinsman to whom she owed much; but would she not, in a sense, be an accomplice if she allowed him and the others to carry on their plots? This question, however, was dismissed for a time. There were other points to think about.

Did Staffer imagine she was in Andrew's confidence and secretly helping him; and had he believed her statement that she had destroyed the letter? If not, she was, perhaps, in some danger, because his laughing remark about her imagination had not been convincing. But, after all, what could he do? She could hardly be kidnapped and smuggled out of the country; and it was, of course, absurd to think of his attempting anything worse.

After a while she began to see her way. She would not watch her uncle, but if chance brought her clear proof that he was helping her country's enemies, she would see that he was stopped. This was a compromise that she suspected could hardly be justified; but the next decision was easier, because it had to do with those she loved. If Staffer or his friends plotted any harm to Dick or Andrew, she would remorselessly use every weapon she had against him.

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Then she roused herself and bathed her face and hands, for she had felt some physical strain while she thrashed out the painful matter. She would need calm and courage to meet Staffer as if nothing had happened, so that her mother might not suspect trouble. The part she had chosen was difficult, but she must play it out. When she went in to dinner she did not know whether she was relieved or not by Staffer's smile, but he talked to her with the suave good-humor he generally showed.

Two days after Elsie's talk with Jock Marshall, Andrew and Whitney were sitting in a Melrose hotel, when a postcard from Stranraer was brought to Andrew. There was a tarry fingermark at the bottom, alongside of the straggling signature, *J. Marshall*, Andrew read it aloud:

"As I'm away at the fishing, it might be weel if ye cam' home and lookit after the boat. Miss Elsie will give ye a bit message. I would not leave her until the tides get low."

Whitney smiled.

"You Scots are a remarkably cautious and capable lot," he said. "I can imagine the wrinkled old image writing this, with a wooden face and a chuckle inside. The meaning of the last sentence is cleverly ambiguous. I suppose the boat is quite all right?"

"Of course; no tide could hurt her."

"It's plain then that Marshall thinks you're wanted on Miss Woodhouse's account. I can have the motorcycle ready in five minutes, and if we pull out now we can be home soon after dark. Will you tell Dick?"

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"No. We'll put him on the train, if there is one. Get that railway guide."

Whitney opened it.

"If you mean to see him off, you'll have to wait an hour; and, on the whole, I think you'd better. He seems to have made a number of acquaintances in the bar. Anyway, with this light frost, the roads will be good and hard."

Dick showed some unwillingness to leave the town, but Andrew was firm and put him on the train. When it started, he joined Whitney, who was waiting with the motorcycle.

The light was getting dim as they ran down the long dip to Hawick, though pale saffron, barred with leaden gray, shone above the western hills. When they swept down the last hill, frosty mist hung about the woolen mills in the hollow, and Whitney throttled his engine as they jolted past glimmering lights and half-seen houses.

"It doesn't look very cheerful for a fifty-mile run, but I suppose you want to get on," he remarked.

"Yes," said Andrew. "I hope Dick won't miss the train at one of the junctions, but he'll be all right if he reaches Carlisle. He can't well get into trouble at the place we stay at there."

The mist melted into the keen brightness of a frosty night as they climbed beside Teviot to the snow-sprinkled moors. Whitney's eyes were watering and his hands numb as they crossed the high watershed.

"We haven't lost much time, so far, but I suppose I'd better let her go her best," he said. "There oughtn't to be much traffic on the road."

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Andrew nodded and pulled the rug tighter round him as the motorcycle leaped forward down the hill. He was eager to get back, for he felt anxious. It was not for nothing that Marshall had warned him that he was wanted.

There was moonlight in the shallow depression that led down from the summit, but soon the hilltops rose higher and they plunged into a dark glen. A glimmer of light flashed up to meet them, and as the side-car, rocking wildly, raced past the Mossypaul hotel, Andrew remembered what had happened there a few months previously. He had seen since then that Dick had not been in much danger when Staffer's car swerved; the risk of being struck down had been run by him only. Well, that did not matter much. If any one was threatened now, it was neither himself nor Dick, and it was horrible to feel that Elsie might be in some danger. Whitney was driving recklessly fast, but Andrew frowned impatiently as he watched the hillsides unfold out of the dark and rush by while the throbbing of the engine filled the narrow glen.

They swung out at Ewes doors, leaning over hard as the car took the curve with an inch or two between the wheel and the drop to the burn. Then the widening valley grew bright again and they raced up and down rolling hillsides, past scattered farms and white cothouses, until the lights of Langholm stretched across the hollow. Whitney slowed his engine here, but they narrowly escaped the wall, as they took the bridge below the town, and then sped on again furiously through the woods that line the brawling Esk.

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Appleyard was reached in time for dinner, and Andrew was relieved to find that Staffer was not at home. Everything was as usual; it was difficult to imagine any cause for alarm; and he wondered whether he had been needlessly disturbed. After dinner, Mrs. Woodhouse took Whitney into the drawing-room and Andrew found Elsie knitting in a corner of the hall.

She looked up with a smile when he sat down near her.

"Haven't you come home earlier than you planned?" she asked.

Andrew studied her face. It was quiet and undisturbed, but he suspected a thoughtfulness that she meant to hide.

"Yes," he said. "I got a postcard from Marshall. He's at Stranraer and seemed to think I ought to look after the boat."

"The boat? But it's fine weather. Isn't she quite safe?"

"Oh, the tides are pretty high and run up the gutter fast."

Elsie counted her stitches, and then gave him a quiet look.

"Dick was with you," she said; "so it couldn't have been on his account that you came back."

Andrew smiled.

"That's obvious."

Elsie was silent for a moment, while a faint touch of color crept into her face. His explanation about the boat had not deceived her, and she had noted his searching glance when he first came in. Marshall must have been hiding near by when she was talking to Staffer, and have given Andrew a hint. It was for her sake he had hurried back. She knew that he had hurried, because she had tactfully led Whitney into making some admissions about their speed. She hardly thought she had been in actual danger; but she knew that she was quite safe now, and her heart went out to the man who had come to help. If only she could confide in him! But it was impossible. His very loyalty to her made her feel more strongly that she could not betray her uncle and bring disgrace upon her mother.

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"Marshall gave me a message for you," she said. "I'll deliver it as nearly as I can."

She watched him as she repeated the fisherman's words. Andrew was a bad actor and she was not misled by his clumsy indifference. It looked as if he knew that the man with the red mustache had dealings with Williamson and Staffer.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm afraid we'll have to go west again, before long."

Elsie put down her knitting.

"You'll be careful, Andrew. I want you to keep out of danger."

His heart beat fast, for he saw that she was anxious about him. Elsie knew something and would be sorry if he got hurt; but he must not alarm her or show where his suspicions led.

"Of course I will," he answered cheerfully. "As a matter of fact, I'm not running much risk."

"I'd rather you didn't think so; it leads to carelessness. You won't be rash?"

"Certainly not. Tell me why you are anxious."

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Elsie hesitated, and the color in her face grew deeper.

"Somehow, I seem to feel that trouble is hanging over us, and"—her voice dropped to a caress—"I want to have you near."

Andrew caught his breath.

"Elsie," Mrs. Woodhouse interrupted, "I think Mr. Whitney would like to have some music."

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CHAPTER XXVI

TIGHTENING THE MESHES

Andrew spent a week at Appleyard, without noticing anything that caused him uneasiness; and then he got a letter from Rankine asking him to meet him in the pool behind the Ross, near Kirkcudbright. He did not want to go; but he thought that he could get back in three or four days; and Staffer was to be away from home. Besides, Dick would be there to take care of Elsie.

Sailing at high-tide, with a keen east wind blowing down the Firth, he found water across the sands to the mouth of the Nith, where he left the boat and drove to Dumfries. Here, he and Whitney called upon Mackellar and were taken into his private office.

"I have some news that may surprise ye," the banker said. "Dick's principal creditor is his step-father. Here's a list o' his obligations, though I'm no' sure it's complete."

"Ah!" exclaimed Andrew, "I don't know whether I'm surprised or not, but I begin to see a light." He frowned, as he noted the figures. "It won't be an easy matter to pay this off; the estate will feel the strain for some time. But how has the young idiot got rid of the money?"

"Betting."

"But he doesn't go to many races, and turf accountants wouldn't deal with a boy under age."

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"Verra true," Mackellar agreed dryly. "Dick would get somebody else to put the money on for him—or at least that's no doubt what he thought he did. Williamson, or one o' his friends, would be willing."

"Why do you say it's what Dick thought?"

"I have my doubts whether his go-between made the bets at all. Where was the need? The fellow had only to take the money when Dick lost."

"But Dick's not a fool! He wouldn't back the wrong horse every time. He reads the sporting papers and I suppose their forecasts are right now and then."

Mackellar smiled.

"If he's no' a fool, he's near it. A tip anybody can buy for a penny is no' of much account; but it's flattering to feel ye ken the secrets o' the inside ring. Staffer's friends would see he had that satisfaction. In other words, they'd tell him how he ought to bet with them, and, although they'd let him win at times, I imagine they found it a profitable game."

"It must be stopped!" said Andrew.

"Just so; but ye would prefer it to be stopped quietly. There's another thing I learned, and ye put me on the track when ye told me what Dick said about his being insured. A policy has been taken out for a large sum."

Andrew made an abrupt movement, and Whitney looked puzzled.

"That's pretty hard to understand. His is not the kind of life they'd take except at a big premium."

"It gave me something to think about and I have no' come to the bottom o' it yet. It's possible the insurance was effected some time ago, before Dick's weakness had developed. His parents were sound and it was long before we suspected there was anything wrong with him. However, I had an interview with the company's local agent and afterward with the Edinburgh manager."

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"What did you learn?" Andrew asked.

"Nothing much. In fact, I'm thinking I met my match; the heads o' that office are men o' some ability, and I had no good ground for interference. For a' that, they know something and if it was offered the bank in the way o' business, I would not make a big advance against the policy."

"In whose favor is it drawn?" Whitney asked.

"I canno' tell ye; they were verra reserved gentlemen, but the name would no' be Staffer's, though the transaction would be ultimately to his benefit. Mr. Staffer's a man o' retiring habits."

Andrew was silent for a minute and then looked up.

"I see now that I have suspected something like this from the beginning," he said. "What are we to do?"

Mackellar's face hardened.

"I think we'll see Mr. Staffer and tell him what we know. It's possible he'll fight, but that's no' what I would expect. I'm most concerned about Dick's attitude. We canno' do much if he's against us."

"Dick has been rather a puzzle lately. I'll be away for a few days, but we'll interview Staffer as soon as I'm back."

Mackellar said that he expected to call at Appleyard shortly, and would make an appointment then; and Andrew and Whitney drove back to the yacht. Getting under way at once, they sailed down-channel with the last of the ebb between wastes of drying sand; and dusk found them slowly forging out to sea against the incoming flood. They met Rankine where he had arranged, and, carrying out his instructions, sailed east again. One evening late they landed from the dinghy at the mouth of the buoyed gutter. It was near low-water and the tide had run far out. Fine rain was falling and it was very dark, but as they waded ashore through the fringe of splashing ripples, an indistinct figure appeared at the edge of the bank.

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"Is that you, Jock?" Andrew called; and Marshall came up.

"I startit when yere letter came and Mistress Wilson at the wee shop in the clachan has taen me in," he said.

"Did you keep the letter?"

"Na," said Marshall; "I pit it in the fire."

Andrew nodded.

"Then I suppose you understand what you are to do."

"I'm to try the net-fishing for flounders and keep my een open, though it's no' just the season the flatfish come up on the banks. They telt me, at the clachan, there were verra few to be had; but I allooed they couldna' be scarcer than Loch Ryan herring."

"He's got it right," Whitney laughed. "Come along and take your net. You'll have to carry it up the bank; the dinghy's loaded deep and the tide's still running out."

When they had dragged the net ashore, Marshall lighted a lantern and examined it carefully. Whitney, picking up the light, turned it on the fisherman's wrinkled face and was not surprised to see a twinkle in his eyes.

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"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"It's gran' gear, but maybe, a bit heavy for flounders. I wouldna' say but the heid-rope would haud a shark."

"It's better to be on the safe side," Whitney said with a laugh. "When you set a net you can't tell what you're going to catch. That's why we brought you some iron pipes for the posts. Now you'd better show us where you want the net put up."

They went back and pushed off the dinghy while Marshall plodded up the bank abreast of them with the net on his shoulder. At a bend of the narrowing channel he hailed them.

"She'll do here—though I dinna' ken about the fishery board," he said, when they landed and gave him the iron posts. "Ye're no allooed to stop a through-running watter."

"I'll be responsible for that," Andrew told him.

"Then it would be a kind o' pity to leave yon gutter open," suggested Marshall, turning to Whitney. "A flounder-net in a runway only fishes on the ebb. Ye haul her up to the heid-rope when the fish come in with the flood, and let her doon when high-watter's past. Then a' that's gone by her canna' get back. Onyway, yon's the usual plan, but she'd maybe fish better here if we keepit her doon with lead and pulled her up afterwards wi' a heid-rope tackle."

"I was going to suggest something of the kind," Andrew said. "You'll want a boat, but there are two or three old punts on the beach. Hire whichever you like and I'll be accountable. But what about the trawler fellow who keeps the boat at the point?"

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"They telt me he's awa' doon west."

"Good. You can begin to put up your stakes, using the pipe. We have another job to look after, but we'll come back when it's done."

Whitney shoved the dinghy off and they paddled up the channel. It was very dark and the rain made the obscurity worse, but Andrew searched one bank carefully as the dinghy crept along its edge. Everything was quiet, for there seemed to be no birds about, but they could hear the thud of Marshall's hammer as he drove in the pipes. Whitney, sitting aft, felt damp and cold as the water trickled down his oilskins.

"How much do you think the old fellow suspects?" he asked.

"I can't tell. He suspects something, and I didn't try to put him off the track. There were one or two reasons for thinking I'd better not. Anyway, he's to be trusted. Where's that corner buoy?"

Whitney laughed.

"If you were anybody else, I'd wager you wouldn't find it on a night like this. You don't know it was on a corner, to begin with."

"Well," Andrew said, "I'm pretty confident about hitting it in the next few minutes."

He pulled on steadily, while the rain ran down his face and trickled from the dinghy's thwarts. The bank was scarcely distinguishable a few yards away, but the water had not the opaque blackness of the sand, and Whitney scanned its surface narrowly. There was not a ripple, for the stream was slackening, and the channel was smooth as oil except for the disturbance the dinghy made. The water she displaced lapped upon the sand astern, but there was nothing on the narrow dark strip ahead.

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"You haven't made a center shot this time," he said presently.

Andrew laughed and, pulling hard on one oar, swung the dinghy round.

"The buoy's certainly not in the water. We'll try the bank. The tide hadn't ebbed so far when we were here last."

They landed, and plowed through slushy sand. At last Whitney caught his foot in a rope.

"You've struck it after all," he laughed, as he followed up the rope to a ring of large net-corks. "Now, we'll get to work."

Returning to the spot where the rope came out of the sand, he began to dig with a spade they had brought; but he did not make much progress. Water and soft ooze ran back into the hole almost as fast as he could throw them out; his heavy boots sank into the yielding ground; and his oilskins hampered him greatly. When he was hot and breathless, Andrew took the spade.

"The fellow who moored the buoy here, didn't mean it to go adrift," he remarked as he flung the wet sand about.

The spade jarred upon something hard, and Andrew worked its edge under the object while Whitney seized the rope. For a time, they tugged and wrenched at it, and then, when they were gasping and splashed all over, a heavy stone slowly rolled out of its muddy bed. Andrew let it lie and walked back a short distance toward higher ground.

"The next step needs care," he said. "We mustn't move the stone far, because that would show that its position had been changed; but the bank is steep and a few yards will make a difference. If I can shorten the depth by half a fathom, it will satisfy me."

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Whitney chuckled.

"That ought to be enough. When your draught's pretty deep it's embarrassing to find half a fathom less water than you expect."

Andrew carefully estimated the difference of level along the bank.

"I think we'll put it here," he decided.

It took them some time to move and bury the heavy stone.

"What about the fairway buoy?" Whitney asked when they had finished.

"We'll let that stay. I want our man to get in and his troubles had better not begin until he's going back. The flood would soon float the vessel off if she grounded going up, but it will be a different matter coming down, when the tide's on the ebb."

They pushed the dinghy off and Whitney pulled away against the stream, which was beginning to run up the channel. The rain had got heavier, but they could hear Marshall's hammer as he drove down the stakes. When they were abreast of him, Whitney stopped rowing. For a few minutes the fisherman stood beside the dinghy while Andrew gave him instructions, and then he vanished into the gloom as Whitney pulled away. Andrew lighted a small lantern and, putting it beside a compass in the bottom of the craft, kept his comrade on his course.

"Harder with your left; the tide's on our port bow," he said: "Steady at that; we're round the point. Pull as even as you can."

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The sharper rise and fall and the splashing about the craft showed Whitney that they had reached open water, but he had no other guide. They had left no light on the *Rowan* and black darkness enveloped the dinghy. The faint glow from the lantern in her bottom made it worse, and all that Whitney could see was Andrew's face and the wet front of his sou'wester as he bent over the compass. The rest of his figure melted into the surrounding gloom. Whitney was tired and wet, and gritty sand scraped the backs of his hands as the oilskin sleeves rubbed across them. There was some risk of Andrew's not finding the yacht, and he must pull hard to reach her before the tide got too strong.

This was very different from yachting in hot weather on the Canadian lakes and Long Island Sound; but it had a fascination he would not have thought possible a few months ago. Andrew and he were playing a bold and somewhat dangerous game, the end of which, he thought, could not be long delayed. As an American, he had no stake on it, except, perhaps, his life, but he understood his comrade's patriotic keenness and meant to see him through. Then he had read enough about the sinking of unarmed merchant ships and the drowning of the crews to fire his blood. He thought this was excuse enough for not observing a strict neutrality; then, as he felt the dinghy lurch across the swell and heard the hoarse murmur of the surf upon the shoals, he knew that the sport was in itself engrossing.

He had caught the big gray trout of the lone Northwest, the bass, and the fighting tarpon, but he was now angling for fiercer prey and he hoped the murderous steel monsters that lurked in the dark water would rise to the bait. They were handled with a relentless cunning that struck him as devilish; and Rankine had hinted that two of the largest and fastest were not far away, lying in wait for a huge new battleship that was coming from the Clyde. Whitney could not think calmly of her lurching under, shattered by a torpedo, with her swarming crew. Besides, his partner had resolved that this should not happen.

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"Pull with your right!" said Andrew. "She's sagging to lee'ard now."

They crept on against the tide, Whitney panting as he tugged at the oars, for he had enough; and it was with keen satisfaction that he heard Andrew call out presently:

"Hard with your left; let her swing! I see the boat!"

Whitney got a glimpse of a rocking mast, as the dinghy came round, and a few moments afterward he put out his hand to ease the shock as they ran alongside. A quarter of an hour later the anchor was on deck and they went eastward with the flood under easy sail.

"You might put on the kettle. It will be high water before we're up the Firth," Andrew said. "If we can get our business with Staffer done to-morrow, we'll sail again for the wreck as soon as it gets dark."

Whitney hesitated a moment.

"No doubt you see the consequences if we catch our man at work."

"They're obvious, but they must be faced," Andrew said in a hard voice. "I've held back longer than I should, but it wasn't for my own sake and I can't shirk my duty now."

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CHAPTER XXVII

THE RECKONING DAY

It was getting dark in the library at Appleyard, and Mackellar stopped speaking when a servant entered to light the lamps. Staffer leaned back in his chair as if the interruption were a relief, but Mackellar sat grim and upright, watching him. Irvine, the other executor of Dick's father's will, nervously fingered his gold-rimmed eye-glasses; and Andrew found the servant's deliberate movements exasperating. He wanted the matter settled. The situation was painful and galling to his family pride; and the cautious way that Mackellar had led up to the climax had tried his patience. So far, Staffer had made no reply.

At last the servant withdrew, and the feeling of tension grew keener after the soft snap of the closing door. They could now see one another's faces, and all looked somewhat strained. No one spoke for a few moments, and Irvine began to polish his eye-glasses with his handkerchief.

"It might now be well if Mr. Staffer would tell us his views," he said. "I think Mr. Mackellar has made ours plain."

Staffer seemed to rouse himself.

"It's obvious that you want to get rid of me. Your suggestion is that I should relinquish control of Dick and leave Appleyard at once?"

"Precisely," said Irvine. "I see no other way."

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"Does your demand extend to my sister and niece?"

"Certainly not," Mackellar replied. "We all think it would be an advantage if Mrs. Woodhouse stayed at Appleyard, and, with Dick's consent, we would make her a suitable allowance. The management of the household could not be in better hands."

"That's some relief," said Staffer. "Now, in the ordinary course of things, my authority here would terminate very soon, when Dick is twenty-one, and I should be willing to go then. Is it worth while to make a drastic change, which would inconvenience everybody, for so short a time?"

Andrew was somewhat surprised by Staffer's half conciliatory attitude, but he thought he saw anxiety in the man's face. It looked as if he had some strong reason for not wanting to leave Appleyard just yet.

"Our opinion is that it would be well worth while," Irvine said dryly.

"Suppose I refuse to go? How do you propose to turn me out?"

"We'll apply for the necessary powers," Mackellar answered.

"Do you mind telling me what grounds you mean to urge?"

Mackellar sorted the papers in his hand, and Andrew marked his quiet deliberation. Indeed, in spite of a certain feeling of tension, the proceedings had, so far, been characterized by a curious calm. Perhaps this was because three of the actors were Scotch; but Andrew felt that the calm was deceptive. The situation had strong dramatic force.

"I cannot see why ye should not know," Mackellar replied. "I would begin by proving undue and dangerous influence on a young man of extravagant habits who had been placed in your charge."

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"Can you prove it?"

"Weel, these figures relating to money lent and bills discounted, would go some length, particularly when it was shown that ye concealed the part ye took by acting through agents."

He read out particulars of the money borrowed, with the high rate of interest charged, and traced the transactions back to Staffer through other hands. It was a telling accusation and Andrew thought Staffer was surprised and alarmed by Mackellar's knowledge.

"I'm not sure that we could not establish a charge o' conspiracy," Mackellar concluded.

"There is no fraud!" Staffer declared hotly. "The terms were stated; Dick knew what he would have to pay."

"He did not know to whom he would have to pay it," Irvine interposed.

Staffer was silent for a moment.

"You can do nothing without Dick's consent," he said slowly. "Why did you not let him speak for himself? Are you afraid of him?"

"We found ye had sent him to Dumfries, and we thought ye would prefer that he was not consulted yet. But there's another matter: the insurance policy, by which we have ground for believing ye would ultimately benefit."

"What do you know about that?"

"At present we do not know everything, but there's much that we suspect, considering the state o' Dick's health."

Staffer looked at him keenly.

"Do you imply that Dick's health is very bad?" he asked.

"Ye should ken."

Andrew thought Staffer looked puzzled, as if he suspected the other of knowing more than he did himself.

"Well, is it your intention to dispute my claim or disown Dick's debts?"

Mackellar took up a paper.

"No' at all. Here's a memorandum of our terms, which ye would be wise in agreeing to. I'll read them out."

Staffer smiled.

"Then if threats prove useless, you mean to bribe me to go! Very well. Give me another three months here, and I'll accept."

"Our offer is made on the understanding that you leave at once."

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to turn me out—and you may find it rather hard. But you haven't answered a point I raised. Suppose Dick takes my side and insists upon my staying?"

"Our being executors would warrant our interference; and there's another party on whose behalf we could make a plea. Mr. Andrew Johnstone could claim the protection o' his interest as the next heir, on the grounds o' the direct inheritor's dangerous health."

"Would you urge this in court?"

"If we were forced," Mackellar said dryly.

Staffer's self-control gave way and he turned to Andrew with a savage, sneering laugh.

"So *you* are responsible for the extraordinary line these gentlemen have taken! You have been counting on your cousin's death!"

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Andrew flushed.

"As you well know, I came home from Canada to take care of him. Still, I agree with the executors. If you can still persuade Dick to believe in you, he must be saved in spite of himself."

Staffer gave him a curious look. It was plain that Andrew was his most troublesome antagonist. There was something in Staffer's expression that disturbed the others.

"Very well," he said. "You must do what you think fit. I shall remain at Appleyard."

He rose, as if to intimate that there was no more to be said; and Andrew accompanied the others to the car that was waiting at the door, and afterward found Whitney and told him what they had done.

"You'll have to be careful, partner," Whitney cautioned. "He might be dangerous now."

"Well," Andrew replied thoughtfully, "I must try to avoid risks. But we must get down the Firth, to-night, and you'd better bring the motorcycle round as soon as you can."

A quarter of an hour later, Andrew came downstairs, dressed in a thick jersey and his old boating clothes and met Elsie in the hall. She thought his face looked unusually stern.

"Are you going to sea again, to-night?" she asked, in surprise.

"Yes; I didn't know beforehand whether I could get away until to-morrow. As a matter of fact, I don't want to go at all, but I must."

She put her hand gently on his arm.

"If you feel it's your duty, you must go; but I'm anxious, Andrew, and you'll be careful for my sake. You see, I have come to depend on you, and I feel that something is threatening us all."

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He thrilled at her touch, and it cost him a stern effort to stand as if unmoved while he noted the tenderness in her eyes and the flicker of color in her face.

"You mustn't imagine things."

"Tell me the truth, Andrew. Am I mistaken?"

"Well," he said quietly, "perhaps Appleyard has, so to speak, been under a cloud for a little while, but I see the light breaking. In fact, the shadow may be gone in the next few days. But you may need some courage—and I know you have it."

"Ah!" she said. "You mean that something may happen here?"

"I'm sorry I can't tell you anything now," Andrew replied, with an embarrassed air. "I may be able to do so when I come back."

She gave him her hand with a gentle look.

"Then I must wait. But you won't be rash. Remember that I shall be anxious about you!"

He left her and for a while she sat quietly in the hall. Andrew was not going on a shooting cruise; it was some more serious business. She had already connected it with Rankine and the sinking of the merchant ships. The reasons that led her to this conclusion were not very clear, but she felt that Williamson and the man with the red mustache had something to do with the matter. She wondered whether she ought to warn Andrew; but she felt that she could not betray her uncle unless she was certain that Andrew was in danger.

She roused herself when she heard the car outside. Madge Whitney was coming to spend a week with them. Shortly after Madge's arrival, Dick returned from Dumfries, looking ill; and when the party gathered in the drawing-room after dinner, conversation dragged. It was a relief when Mrs. Woodhouse suggested that they go to bed. Elsie went with Madge to her room, and they sat together on a low divan before the fire. [Pg 289]

"Now," Madge said, "what's the matter with you all?"

"I don't know," said Elsie. "I don't feel very gay; but you didn't cheer us much. I'm sorry your head aches."

"The trip was pretty bad. But I had a little adventure."

Madge smiled charmingly.

"What?" Elsie asked indifferently.

"When we stopped at Dumfries, I got out to get a paper, and as I ran along the platform I bumped into a man who'd come from the cars across the track. He had his hands full of things and said a kind of swear in German, when he dropped them all about."

"In German!" Elsie exclaimed.

"Sure. Well, I didn't want him to miss the train, so I picked up the nearest thing. It was a nice little box that flew open, and I thought it had a clock in it. He got into my car and began to apologize in very good English, and then I asked him what was in the box. I thought he hesitated, but he showed me that it was a compass, with a brass thing that turned around its top and had two little slits for looking through."

"An azimuth; Andrew has one. They're used when you want to be accurate in taking bearings. But go on." [Pg 290]

"There's not much more. He was rather a charming man and had been in America. We talked all the way to Annan, where he got out."

"What was he like?"

"Tall and big with a sunburned face, very light blue eyes, hair between red and brown. He looked like a sailor—a captain or something of the kind, though he was dressed plainly in thick, blue clothes and had a bundle of oil slickers."

"Had he a red mustache?"

"He had none at all, but I guess it would be red if he let it grow. Do you know him?"

"No," Elsie said quietly; "at least, I'm not sure."

Madge gave her a keen look.

"You make me curious; I went into detail because you are more interested than you want to show. Of course, I thought it strange that a man who spoke good English should relieve his feelings in German when he felt annoyed, and afterward try to convince me that he wasn't a foreigner. I think he did try and that was the reason he talked so much."

"I was thinking about the compass; you said it was in a nice little box. They use things like that on small yachts and boats."

"This one was about as long as your hand. Where does the other track that runs into Dumfries come from?"

"From Glasgow."

"Oh!" said Madge. "You build warships there, don't you?"

She opened her traveling bag and took out a time-table which contained a map of Scotland. [Pg 291]

"Look at this," she said, indicating Stranraer, Portpatrick, and Ramsey. "Rankine's been at these places, because I've had notes from him, and you see how they command the way out from the Clyde. His business doesn't stop at making charts."

"Has he told you so?"

"No." Madge blushed prettily. "Still, he's admitted something; you see, we are friends. Besides, he's a smart officer; they wouldn't waste a man like him on taking soundings. That would be quite

absurd."

Elsie's smile was sympathetic, for she thought she understood her friend's belief in Rankine's talents.

"He's here on guard in the west," Madge went on; "Andrew's there, about half way between him and Annan; and now we have a German sailor, who speaks English and has a boat-compass, at the head of the Solway Firth."

Elsie made an abrupt movement, for Madge had found the missing link and the chain was complete. Men were working night and day at armaments and warships on the Clyde. Her face was troubled, but her lips set firm, for she began to see that she could no longer keep her secret. The time when she must act had come.

"I think you have guessed right," she said after a moment or two.

"Then you understand that we have some responsibility."

"I don't see yours."

The color crept into Madge's face.

"Oh, well! For one thing, my brother's with Andrew." Then she put her arm impulsively round Elsie's waist. "We've got to see this through, dear."

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Elsie's reserve gave way.

"Yes," she answered steadily; "we must. The man you met has been at Appleyard when they thought we were all asleep—and I'm afraid he'll be here again."

Madge showed no surprise.

"I know how you're fixed. But think! Andrew and Jim may be in danger. We can't let them get hurt."

"That's impossible! But what must we do?"

"Watch for the German sailor, first of all," Madge advised. "Try to find out what he has come for, and spoil the plot. I'm glad you gave me the room next to yours. I can reach you by that inner door, if it's necessary." She leaned forward and kissed Elsie. "Now you must go to bed, dear. You look anxious and tired."

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CHAPTER XXVIII

A WILD RIDE

Elsie went to sleep at last, but her rest was broken and once or twice she awoke with a start. She was uneasy and highly strung, but she heard nothing unusual. The wind moaned about the house and the splash of the little burn rose from the glen. Staffer had gone out before dinner and as he had not come back when she went to bed, she did not think any stranger would visit Appleyard. Telling herself that she must not indulge in nerves, she went to sleep again. Some time later, when lying half awake, she heard a soft rattle; and her heart beat fast, for she knew that the handle of her door was being gently turned. She was glad that she had locked it, though this was the first time she had ever done so.

The sound stopped, a board in the passage creaked, and as the shock of alarm began to pass, Elsie guessed that it was Staffer trying to make sure that she was in her room. This implied that he was going downstairs to meet some one; but she waited until she got calmer, wondering if, after all, she had been mistaken. Staffer could not have returned until late, and it was strange he had allowed his visitor to risk coming to the house when he might be out. She tried to believe he had not done so; but when she heard a faint tap on the other door, which opened into Madge's room, there was no longer any doubt. Nerving herself for a painful effort, she got up and hastily put on some clothes. Then she went into the other room and saw Madge's shadowy figure standing by the window.

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"You heard it?" Madge whispered. "Somebody's gone down. Do you know who it is?"

"Yes. . . . It is my uncle."

Madge put out her hand in the darkness and squeezed Elsie's cold little fingers sympathetically.

"You have to choose between him and Andrew, dear," she said.

"Yes," Elsie agreed in a strange, toneless way.

"Then we must find out what's going on. My brother's on board the *Rowan* too, you must remember—and there's the survey ship. I was thinking of them all and I couldn't sleep."

"Are you ready to come down?" Elsie asked.

Madge shivered as she opened the door. It was very dark and cold in the passage, and she shrank from the adventure; but she followed Elsie, when the girl quietly locked the door, taking out the key. Elsie had better cause to hesitate than Madge, but her resolution was fixed. Andrew might be threatened and that was enough. She loved him, and he loved her, though he had tried to hide it. He was hers, and, with a woman's deep-rooted instincts, she was ready to fight for him. The choice she had made was no longer hard. Her uncle had now no claim on her; he was her lover's enemy. For the time, all complexities had vanished; Elsie was driven by primitive impulses. She would protect Andrew as a mother protects her child.

As they approached the top of the stairs, she put out her hand and stopped Madge.

"Not this way," she whispered. "Follow me close. We'll go down by the back."

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They turned into a passage that led through the servants' part of the house. It was dark and narrow, but Elsie moved down the middle and Madge kept behind her. When they reached a small, back landing, Elsie guided her to a hole in the floor, and, putting down her foot cautiously, Madge felt a step. They were newel stairs and the stone struck cold through her stockings as she tried to find the broader side. When she reached level ground, she crept forward behind Elsie, across a large empty space which seemed to be the kitchen. The next moment Madge struck something that jarred noisily on the floor, and she and Elsie stopped with frightened gasps. The sound seemed to echo through the house.

They waited, listening with tingling nerves, but all was silent, and they crept on until they came to a closed door. Elsie, putting both hands on the knob, turned it cautiously. The latch clicked and they stopped again; but heard nothing. The gloom in front was impenetrable, but a draught of cold air touched their faces and Madge thought they were looking into the hall. After a few moments, she heard a sound that suggested a chair being moved, and then a half-distinguishable murmur. It seemed to come from somewhere near by.

"They're in the drawing-room. Wait here," Elsie whispered; and the next moment Madge was alone.

It was very cold and the darkness was daunting, but she tried to brace herself. Her brother was engaged in dangerous work, and the secret conference that was being held in the room across the hall might threaten him. Then, Rankine had some part in the business. She felt a thrill that brought the blood to her face and gave her courage as she determined that no harm should come to him.

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The murmur in the drawing-room grew louder, and Madge wondered if she could get nearer to it. Advancing cautiously into the hall, she tried to remember where the furniture was; but her outstretched hand struck something that rattled, and she stopped, alarmed. She had been on the point of knocking down a vase, and it was plain to her that further progress would involve risk. Elsie had some plan, and a noise would spoil it. Madge went back to her post and waited there in the darkness, highly strung and shivering.

Elsie, in the meantime, had left the house and crept round it on the grass until she reached a greenhouse built against one side of the drawing-room. The door was open, as she had expected, and, feeling for the edge of a flower-stand, she followed it up until she could crouch down beside the steps leading to a French window. It was closed but not latched, for when she ran her fingers along the joint, she felt an aperture; but she dared not try to pull it open. Still, she could see in. The lamps had not been lighted, but an electric torch lay on the table and threw a ring of light on the opposite wall, two or three feet from the ground. The rest of the room was in darkness, but a dim illumination which spread beyond the bright beam showed two figures faintly.

The men sat at the table. Elsie could not hear what they said; for their voices were low and they spoke in curt sentences. As soon as they had finished their business, one of them would get up and go, and she might not be able to steal away in time; besides, another man might come in by the door behind her. She must risk trying to open the window. She got her fingernails into the crack; but the hinges began to grate, and she let her hand drop. The voices, however, were now a trifle more distinct and she recognized one as her uncle's. Only a word or two was audible here and there, and she could not connect them with what she missed; but, after a time, she heard Staffer say:

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"All falls through unless Williamson gets into touch. . . ."

"He must . . . should be there now . . . low water," said the other man.

Elsie missed Staffer's answer, but soon she caught:

"Andrew Johnstone and the American. . . ."

"Must be stopped . . . know too much . . . No scruples . . . can't hesitate."

Staffer laughed; and Elsie shuddered at his half-heard voice.

"I don't . . . do what you like . . . But make sure . . . know too much . . . both dangerous."

Elsie shrank down as Staffer rose and the light traveled along the wall, but the men crossed the floor and she heard a cupboard being opened. They were now near the hall door and she missed what they said; but she had heard enough and must escape before the stranger left by the window.

Stealing out of the greenhouse, she ran back, with her brain busily at work. Madge was waiting where she had left her. Together they crept up the back stairs and into Madge's room.

Elsie was very calm when at last she felt it safe to speak.

"They came to the door once. What did you hear?" she asked in a whisper.

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"*The wreck. About three hours. There before high water!* It wasn't Staffer's voice."

Elsie pressed her arm, and, listening eagerly, they heard a stealthy footstep in the passage. Then the handle of Elsie's door shook, as if it had been touched, and there was silence.

They waited for a few minutes while Elsie thought quickly. The situation, though still obscure, was getting clearer. Andrew was interfering with something it was necessary that Williamson should do, and Staffer had told his visitor that he could stop him as he liked, but must make sure. There had been something horribly threatening in his laugh as he said that Andrew and Whitney knew too much. The visitor was to do what he had undertaken, about low water, near a wreck.

The question was: *What had he undertaken?*

"What is that?" Madge whispered, turning to the open window.

A faint throbbing came out of the dark. It was some distance off, but Elsie recognized it as a motor running down the valley.

"It's the man going to Annan," she said. "Listen while I explain—"

Her conclusions grew clearer and more logical as she put them into words, and she got up resolutely when she had finished.

"We can do nothing more; Dick must help us now."

Stealing down the passage, she entered his room and shook him gently. He awoke, and she put her hand on his face to check the exclamation she half expected.

"It's Elsie; you mustn't make a noise," she whispered. "Do you know anything about a wreck?"

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"I know where it is," he answered drowsily.

"Andrew's there to-night, isn't he?"

"It's possible," said Dick, lifting himself on his elbow. "Why do you ask?"

She told him what she had overheard, and he was silent for a moment, though she knew that he was now wide awake.

"Andrew must be warned," he said; "and the other fellow's got a start. I couldn't get the car out without bringing Staffer down, and Whitney's motorcycle is at the Burnfoot. I'll have to take my bicycle."

Elsie noted that he had shown no surprise, which was curious, and that he was very cool. Then she remembered that he had not been looking well for some days.

"Can't you get a fisherman to go?" she suggested. "You could give him a guarded message or a note."

Dick smiled.

"I'll have to take a fisherman, but I'm going. Andrew's a very good sort and I owe him something." His tone changed strangely. "Will you give me a kiss, Elsie? You haven't done so since we were kiddies—but I'd like you to."

Elsie stooped and kissed his cheek and he put his hand on hers.

"Thank you, dear. Now you'll have to go. I must start as soon as possible."

She left him, wondering at something unusual in his manner; and five minutes afterward Dick crept down the back stairs. When he wheeled out his bicycle, the lamp would not burn and he had no time to look for fresh carbide. It was difficult to keep on the drive, and he feared that Staffer might hear the crash if he ran into the border and fell, but he avoided this, and opened the gate at the lodge without wakening its occupants.

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The valley was dark, the road wet, and Dick could scarcely see the clipped hedgerows. Indeed, at first, he ran on to the grass, but by degrees his eyes got used to the gloom and he let the bicycle coast down a long hill. It gave him a good start, but when he came to the bottom, the hill in front was steep, and he knew a stern effort would be needed, as he changed to the low gear. He was distressed and panting hard when he was half-way up, and as he forced the cranks round, the tires slipped and skidded in the mud. The trees that stretched their bare branches overhead kept the road soft, but it seemed to him that they also shut out the air. He could not breathe in the thick gloom beneath them, and his heart was throbbing painfully.

This was the kind of thing he had been especially warned against; but he could not stop. The wind was light, and, allowing for some loss of time in waking a fisherman and getting his boat away, it would be past low-water when they approached the wreck. Remembering what had happened the night the lamp went out, Dick saw that Andrew's danger would begin when the

flood-tide raced across the sands.

The breeze met him in the face when the road turned toward the coast at the summit of the hill. He found it refreshing, but it threatened to increase his labor and the mud got worse as he ran down to the seaboard plain. Light mist thickened the gloom and the bicycle skidded badly when he struck the boggy strip along the half-seen hedgerows. Still he toiled on, while the perspiration dripped from his forehead and he got dizzy. The exertion he was making was not sufficient cause for this, but he had paid for rashly running upstairs at a Lockerbie hotel a few days before. Something the doctor had warned him of had happened, and he had not recovered from it yet. For all that, he must reach the lower end of the channel before the tide began to flow.

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He knew the road well, but he could not distinguish where he was, and was half afraid he had taken a wrong turning, until a few faint lights shone out ahead. These must mark the outskirts of Annan. Five minutes later he ran down the main street. The houses were dark, and he had some trouble to find the narrow lane that turned off to the waterside. There were no lights here, but the road was paved, and when he passed under a railway bridge tall black buildings rose between him and the river. A sour smell came from the wet mud-banks behind them, and the splash of running water warned him that the tide was falling fast. He must lose no time if he meant to get away before the boats were left aground.

He passed a silent factory and a long, shadowy mill; a schooner's masts rose out of the gloom, and he was in the open. When the road stopped near a wharf-shed, Dick pushed the bicycle through a gap in a hedge and across a field, until he reached a very muddy lane. He would rather have left the machine; but time did not permit; and for the next five minutes he jolted furiously among the pools and ruts. Somehow, he saved himself from falling, and jumped down when a dark row of houses, on rising ground, cut against the sky. Throwing the bicycle against a fence, he climbed the hill, breathing hard, while his head swam and he felt the heavy thumping of his heart.

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When he knocked at the door, a man came down and took him into a small, plainly furnished room. He was a big fellow, with keen blue eyes, and a brown face covered with fine wrinkles.

"Noo ye can tell me what ye want," he said.

Dick gave him a rather inadequate explanation, and the fisherman looked thoughtful.

"Weel," he said, "I dinna' understand it atehgither, but it's enough if ye think Mr. Andrew's in trouble." He paused for a moment, as if pondering, and then resumed: "The big shrimp-boat would take us doon faster, but she draws four feet and we'd want a punt to get ashore. I'm thinking we'll take the whammeler. She's a smart bit craft and we could pull her if there was need."

He gave Dick a bundle of black oilskins.

"Pit these on. Ye'll need them."

Dick thought this probable, for he was wearing only his thin, ordinary clothes.

"Thanks," he said, as he got into the oilskins, which were softer and more pliable than any he had seen in shops. "You see, I left in rather a hurry."

"I ken. An' noo we'll start."

His curtness was reassuring, for Dick knew his countrymen. The fellow's immediate business was to take him to the wreck, and he would fix his mind on doing so. It was obvious that there was something mysterious about their errand, but although the Scot is as curious as other people, he seldom asks unnecessary questions when there is work to be done. His habit is to concentrate upon the main issue.

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They left the house, and a few minutes later crept along a slippery plank to a boat lying against a timber framework on which nets were dried. She was sharp at both ends, half-decked, and about twenty feet long; with a short, thick mast. Now that the tide had ebbed, the river mouth was about a dozen yards across, and a row of larger craft, sheering to and fro in the eddies, nearly filled the channel. Behind these, a cluster of white buildings and a low promontory loomed out of the dark. On the opposite side, a high gravel bank seemed to close the narrow entrance.

"Lowse the stern-moorin'!" said the fisherman; and there was a harsh rattle of chain as the boat slid out into the stream.

He threw an oar into the sculling notch and they drifted away, slipping between the trawl-boats that rose out of the gloom and vanished astern. A minute later, the stream boiled noisily along the gravel bank, the white buildings faded, and they were swept into the darkness that brooded over the Firth. The fisherman hoisted a small, black lugsail and jib, and took the tiller as the boat listed gently down to a biting wind.

"Maybe ye'll find it warmer in the for'ad den," he said. "Ye can light the bit stove and set the kettle on."

Dick was shivering, and he was glad to crawl through a hatch into a narrow dark hole, where he lay down, after feeling for and lighting the stove. There was no room between floor and deck-beams to sit comfortably, but an old sail and some ropes made a couch on which he could rest.

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He felt shaky, and an unpleasant faintness threatened to overcome him.

He heard the water splash against the planks and felt the boat list. That was comforting, because he thought it was fourteen miles to the wreck. Still, the ebb would run nearly four miles an hour, there was some wind, and the whammel boats sailed fast. If his companion could keep her off the ground as the banks dried and the channel narrowed, they ought to arrive by low-water.

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CHAPTER XXIX WHEN THE TIDE TURNED

The wind fell as the tide drained out, and belts of mist hung motionless about the sands when the whammel boat crept slowly down to the mouth of the channel. The sail lay on deck, and Dick panted as he pulled an oar while his companion sculled astern. He felt faint, and the heavily ballasted boat was hard to move, but he thought the tide was turning now and he knew that he must hold out. Occasionally he turned and looked ahead, but saw nothing except the mist. There were no birds about, the water was smooth, and everything was very quiet. At length, a tall mast grew out of the haze and Dick stopped rowing.

"The *Rowan*. Scull her in to the bank," he said. "I want to see where the dinghy is."

They could not find her, but presently came upon a whammel boat lying near the edge of the sand.

"It's the *Nance* that Tam Grahame selt awa'," the fisherman remarked. "I canna' see what she's doing here with naebody on board."

"We'll pull off to the yacht," Dick replied.

The dinghy was not astern when they boarded the *Rowan*; and when Dick went below and lighted a lamp, his companion looked puzzled.

"It's queer! There's seeven feet o' watter, and Mr. Andrew wouldna' swim ashore."

"Not when he had the dinghy."

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"But she's no' on the bank."

"I imagine she's out at sea, by now," Dick said grimly. "How long do you think the *Nance* has been here?"

"Maybe half an hour. Her keel's weel in the ground and the tide doesna' fall much on the last o' the ebb. They're no' expecting to be back until the flood makes, because her anchor's up the bank."

"That's what I thought," said Dick. "Now, I will tell you that Andrew is in danger. I had meant to find him, but I don't feel well enough. I suppose you can use a gun?"

"We get a shot at a whaup or shellduck whiles. Ye're no' looking weel."

Dick lifted a big 10-bore gun from a rack and searched a locker for cartridges.

"Fours," he said, putting down a packet. "I think you'd better have B's. Here they are."

The fisherman looked at him curiously as he took the cartridges, which were loaded with large shot; and Dick smiled.

"You may meet the man who set the punt adrift," he explained. "I want you to go to the wreck and find my cousin. Tell him to be careful, because one of the gang has come down the channel after him. If there's trouble going on when you get there, do what you think best; but bring Andrew back. The police won't blame you afterward if you have to use the gun."

The man nodded quietly, and Dick knew that he could be trusted.

"Ye'll be for staying here. Will I light the stove?"

"No," said Dick. "I imagine it would be safer if I waited in your boat. She'll be needed when the tide flows, and I can make myself comfortable in the den."

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The fisherman sculled the boat ashore and put out an anchor; and then he went away across the bank and Dick crept into the forecastle. The stove was still burning, and the small, dark place was warm. It had been a strain to hold out until all that was necessary had been done, and now he was glad to lie down among the ropes and sails. There was a weight on his chest, his breathing was hard, and his pulse seemed to be getting sluggish. He wished he had some brandy or there was somebody about; but he must not give in yet. The boat would be needed when Andrew came back and it might be tampered with.

While the fisherman and Dick had been hurrying to them, Andrew and Whitney, well armed, crossed the bank toward the wreck and then separated at a short distance from her. Andrew

went straight forward while his comrade made a round so as to approach her from the other side. Hitherto, their visits had led to nothing, but Rankine seemed to think it would be different this time.

When he got near the wreck, Andrew found that the tide had scoured out a pool round her after part, and this threatened to make things difficult. His figure would be visible against the pale gleam of the water and he could not get across without splashing. He must go round, but this would take him away from the place where it was easiest to get on board. For all that, he must not make a noise, and he moved cautiously across the wet sand until he reached the broken timbers on the edge of the pool.

He heard the water trickle through the vessel's seams and the murmur of the languid surf in the distance, but presently he thought there was something else. The sound seemed to come from inside the wreck. He moved a few yards nearer and then stopped, with his feet in the pool, listening hard. There was a curious snap and crackle, like the striking of matches; and, looking up, Andrew saw that something was sticking out from the masthead. His lips set in a hard line. A wireless installation was at work, perhaps giving a message that would send another ship to its doom. But it looked as if he could surprise and seize the operator, and he meant to do so, though he realized what the consequences might be.

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It was, however, impossible to climb up with the gun in his hand, and he was sorry that he had brought it. Leaning it against the wreck, he found a rest for his hand and lifted himself to a stringer. His head and shoulders were now above the top of the vessel's ribs, but he did not see how he was to reach the deck, which had fallen in abreast of where he was. While he looked about there was a sharp report behind him and a tremor in the wood. It had been struck by a bullet a few inches from his side. Letting go quickly, he fell back with a splash.

Andrew was afterward uncertain whether he lost his hold in alarm or dropped back with instinctive caution. He came down in the water, and did not get up, because a dark figure stood on the other side of the pool and he feared that a movement would draw a bullet. His gun was some yards away; but Andrew thought he would be nearly invisible against the side of the wreck so long as he kept still, and the shot would bring Whitney to his help.

There was a shout from the deck, and Andrew recognized Williamson's voice. He was obviously alarmed, but the other man called out sharply in German, ordering him back. Andrew imagined from this that the message he was transmitting was of urgent importance, or perhaps the newcomer had another to send.

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It was plain that the men must not be allowed to finish their work, and Andrew wondered whether he could creep back to where his gun lay while the fellow's attention was diverted. He was getting up cautiously when the enemy's pistol flashed and a spurt of water splashed into his face. Then there was a streak of light and a heavier report farther back on the sands, and his antagonist turned and ran a few yards along the beach.

Andrew knew that Whitney could not have fired the shot. But at the moment this was not important; he must get his gun while the man was occupied. As he felt for it he heard Whitney run round the stern of the wreck. He was safe now; but that crackling sound had begun again, and at all costs Williamson must be stopped. Besides, Andrew had a signal of his own to make. Leaving the gun, he climbed up a timber and had just reached the deck when an indistinct figure rushed across it and vanished over the broken bulwarks on the opposite side. Then a patter of feet on the sand indicated that Williamson was escaping.

For all that, Andrew stopped, and, dragging a tin from his pocket, put it on the rail and struck a match. As he dropped it into the tin a bright blaze sprang up. Then he jumped down to the sand and seized his gun. The fellow who had shot at him had disappeared and there was nobody in sight; but he could hear men running on the other side of the wreck.

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"Come on!" Whitney's voice reached him out of the darkness.

As he splashed through the water around the vessel's stern he saw two figures on the sand. One he took to be Whitney and the other was evidently a friend. Making an effort, he caught them up, and Whitney began to talk in breathless gasps.

"An Annan man—Dick sent him. Think coastguards will see your flare?"

"Where's Williamson and the other fellow?" Andrew asked quickly.

"Close ahead. They were going back to the channel, but couldn't get past us. What about the tide?"

Andrew began to understand the situation. While he was trying to surprise Williamson, his assailant had quietly come up behind him; and he, in turn, had been followed by the man Dick had sent. The fugitives must now make for the Scotch shore, or risk being shot at if they tried to go around his party's flank. In order to prevent this, he must extend his line.

"Spread out!" he cried. "Tide's flowing now, and the water will be in the gut when we get there!"

Whitney and the fisherman moved off left and right, and Andrew, glancing round, saw that his flare was burning. The men they followed could not see it because they faced the other way, and although there was some mist, he thought the signal would warn the coast-patrol, whom Rankine

had told to keep a good lookout. They ran on, splashing across wet sand and into pools. Sometimes they caught a glimpse of two figures ahead and sometimes lost them in the haze. It was hard to tell whether they were gaming or not. Andrew dared not stop to take off his long boots, and the Annan man, hampered by his oilskins, was falling back; but Whitney was running well and drawing in front.

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The sound of the advancing tide steadily grew louder, and a breeze was getting up. As the three men came panting out of a belt of mist a streak of water glimmered among the sands, and beyond it a black hillside rose from the dusky beach. The fugitives were plainer now, and it looked as if they could not escape; but the men held on steadily, and Andrew wondered what depth there was in the gutter. Glancing to one side, he thought he saw something moving along the edge of the channel; but he could not be sure because there was mist about the spot, and he could not stop to get a better view, for he was determined to follow Williamson.

A few minutes later he saw the men in front stop at the edge of the water, and he wondered why they did so. The channel was rapidly widening and they must cross at once or surrender. Instead, they ran along the bank for some distance and stopped again; and Andrew now saw that a white boat was moving along the opposite side. Changing his course, he ran on, panting hard, and saw that the men in front were waiting. A moment later one plunged into the channel while his comrade stood still.

As Andrew got nearer, there were two or three quick, bright flashes, and he heard a bullet pass his head and saw the sand spurt up at Whitney's feet. The fellow meant to stop them while his partner got a start; or perhaps he imagined that the water was too deep to cross.

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Whitney stopped. A puff of smoke blew about him and there was a heavy report. The man on the bank staggered, fired his pistol again, and splashed awkwardly into the water. A moment later Andrew plunged in. He was close to the fellow now, but he had dropped his gun, because he did not mean to shoot. The man turned and raised his pistol, but his arm fell back, and Andrew sprang upon him.

They went down, and the stream boiled about them, but Andrew held on, and a minute later Whitney was at his side. They dragged their prisoner out.

"My arm!" he said breathlessly. "There is also some shot in my leg."

"Where's your pistol?" Andrew asked.

"In the sea."

"Well," said Whitney as the fisherman joined them, "I wish I knew what we ought to do with him. We can't stay here."

This was obvious; for the tide was already flowing past their feet. As they stood a moment, puzzling, they heard a hail and saw the white boat pulling slowly toward them against the stream. She struck the sand and a man in uniform jumped out.

"I see you have got one of them," he said. "Do you know him?"

"I never saw him before," Andrew answered. "Where's the other?"

"Gone down, I think. We saw him trying to swim, but the tide swept him up the gut, and when we were getting close he disappeared. We pulled round the spot, but saw nothing. No doubt, he'd have on his oilskins and sea-boots."

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"Well, this fellow's hurt. Will you take him?"

"Certainly. And you'd better come with us. You're Mr. Johnstone, I suppose. We were told to look out for you. We launched our gig as soon as we saw your flare."

Andrew said that he must get back to his boat and barely would have time enough to do so; and after a hurried account of the affair, he set off across the sands with his companions. Though they lost sight of the water presently, they made the best pace they could, and the Annan man, whom Andrew had recognized, related Dick's attempt to join him.

"It's as weel, Mr. Johnstone stayed behind," he concluded. "I'm thinking it was the fellow ye caught who set your dinghy adrift and he'd maybe have a mate hanging roon the *Nance*."

When they came down to the channel, the tide was rising fast and the *Nance* had gone. The other boat was floating, but was held by the anchor the fisherman had carried up the bank. There was no answer to their hail and Andrew plunged into the water.

"Mr. Johnstone's nae doot in the den. He wasna' looking weel," said the fisherman.

Andrew was on board in a few moments, and as he looked into the forecastle while the others pulled the boat ashore, it was with relief that he heard Dick's voice.

"Got back all right, old man?"

"Yes; we owe that to you."

"I'm glad," said Dick. "You might help me out; I'm not sure I could get through the hatch."

Andrew noted that his voice was faint and strained, and he felt disturbed when he saw how helpless the boy was when with some trouble they lifted him through the narrow scuttle and put him down on the floorings.

"Don't talk any more," Andrew said; and turned to the fisherman. "Scull her off to the yacht as fast as possible!"

They were alongside in a few minutes and soon had Dick on a locker in the cabin.

"Give me some whisky," he gasped. "I think I'm pretty bad."

"We'll soon run up the Firth and put you in a doctor's hands," Andrew replied, as he held a glass to his lips.

Dick drained it, and then was silent for a minute or two.

"Andrew," he said finally, "there's something to talk about. You see, I'm not sure I'll get over this."

"Rot!" Andrew exclaimed gruffly, trying to hide his alarm. "You've been as bad before."

"No; not quite. But wait—"

Dick closed his eyes, and Andrew saw his fears reflected in Whitney's look. Dick's face was chalky-white and haggard, and they noted his labored breathing.

The tide splashed against the yacht's planks, the halyards had begun to tap against the mast, and there was a sharp rattle of blocks as the fisherman hoisted sail. They let him go and sat watching Dick from the opposite locker. Presently he looked up.

"Think I can talk a bit now. You'll have Appleyard, Andrew, if I don't get well. There's nothing to be said about that, because you'll look after it much better than I should have done. Still, you'll keep the old hands until you can pension them; and there's Bob, my old pony—I shouldn't like him sold."

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"You're taking too much for granted, Dick," Andrew replied. "You knocked yourself out in hurrying down here to warn me, but you'll be all right again in a few days."

"I know you hope so. It's possible, too; but we'll get things straightened up. Of course, Appleyard is Mrs. Woodhouse's home—she's not responsible for her brother, you know. Elsie will keep everything right unless she marries." Dick paused and looked at Andrew with a feeble smile. "She may, you know."

Andrew turned his head, and after a minute, Dick went on:

"I'd like my debts paid off, but the estate must not be robbed. If you open my desk, you'll find an old pocket-book. It will show you what I actually got. Pin them down to that. Now give me a little more whisky."

Dick rested for a short while before he continued.

"You see, I did get their money, though not all that the notes called for—and they'll have some trouble about the insurance."

"Ah!" Andrew interrupted. "How's that? But you'd better not bother about it now."

"I may not be able to bother later," Dick smiled. "When I got the doctor's warning I was very hard up, so I went to the insurance people and asked how much they'd let me have if I surrendered the policy. Well, though they asked a lot of questions, we didn't come to terms. It seemed the other fellows were entitled to benefit; but something wasn't straight and I think the office will dispute their claim. I felt amused about it now and then; but they mustn't lose what they really lent."

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"I'll see to that," said Andrew, "Now, you lie quiet and Whitney will look after you while I take her up the Firth. A doctor must see you as soon as possible. Perhaps it will help things if you can go to sleep."

Andrew went on deck, and after weighing anchor and making sail he sat at the helm, lost in disturbing thought, while the *Rowan* stood up-channel.

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CHAPTER XXX

THE NET

It was a calm, dark night and the trawler's engines ran at half speed as she closed with the land. The badge of a British steam-fishing company was painted on her funnel, and a correct registration number appeared in bold, white figures on her bows; but she carried no lights and her crew were not Englishmen. Ahead, formless black hillsides faded into the gloom, but the skipper, provided with the latest Admiralty chart, knew his bearings and the leadsman had found

the depth of water he expected.

A plume of vapor trailed away from her escape-pipe, for, as she moved slowly shoreward with the flood, the engines could not take all the steam it was prudent to raise. After a time, a light twinkled upon the unseen beach, went out, and shone again; and the skipper, ordering another cast of the lead, made a quick calculation. The tide would rise for an hour yet and there was already two feet more water than his vessel drew in the channel he must enter. Then the lookout reported a buoy ahead, and he rang his telegraph for more speed. He was in the channel now and another buoy farther on would warn him of the only dangerous bend. He was anxious to pick up his cargo and get to sea again.

Moving shoreward faster, the vessel faded into the gloom of the land; but the beat of engines and the splash of displaced water travel far on a calm night, and men with keen ears were listening for these sounds on board a powerful steam-launch two miles away. She traveled at a moderate speed, towing a big, white gig filled with coastguards, but her crew were navy men. A smart young lieutenant held the wheel, trying to remember the soundings, bearings, and courses he had studied so carefully. They were hard to check, particularly as the flood-tide swept him along, but he was glad to remember that three feet of water was enough for him. [Pg 318]

Presently he stopped the engine and listened. At first, he could hear only the ripple of the tide across some hidden shoal and the wash of the languid swell upon the invisible beach; but after a time a measured thud came out of the distance, and he knew that it was the beat of a steamer's screw.

"Between us and the land, I think," he said.

"Yes, sir; about two miles off," agreed the second officer.

"Then she must be going up the gutter, because there's not a fathom on the banks. We'll go ahead; there's enough water anywhere for us."

The launch swung round on a different course when her engines began to clank, and a man sounded now and then as they ran for the shoals. The lieutenant hardly expected to follow the channel; his object was to keep within hearing of the other vessel, and, if he were lucky, his work would be finished before the tide ebbed much. Suddenly a sharp, pulsatory roar came out of the dark.

"It looks as if she were on the ground and carrying plenty steam," he said, when he had ordered the engines to be stopped. "As they'll no doubt back her off, we'll wait a while, to give them time to ship their cargo." [Pg 319]

For the next few minutes the crews of launch and gig listened eagerly. They knew that when the vessel ran aground the steam her stopped engines could not use had blown off. The roar died away, as was to be expected, when the machinery was restarted, hard-astern, but now that the immobility of the stranded craft increased the resistance, the thud of the screw was louder. Presently, it changed to a steady beat that drew away from them; and they knew she had got afloat and was steaming up-channel.

"Easy all, for half an hour!" said the lieutenant, looking at his watch.

The boats lay close together, rolling gently on the languid swell, while the men sat in relaxed attitudes and talked in low voices. Still, there was a feeling of suppressed excitement and it was a relief when their officer grasped the wheel.

"Let her go at half speed!" he ordered.

The tow-rope tightened as the gig swung into line astern, and they moved steadily toward the land for some time. Then they heard a roar of steam again, louder than before and continuous, and the lieutenant signed to the engineer.

"Full speed! We have her now!"

The water hissed along the planks, the gig lifted her bows on a surging wave, and the wash of the screw ran far astern. A blurred object grew out of the darkness in front of them, and then the officer called to the coastguards:

"Cast off and get to your work! Burn a flare if you want us!" [Pg 320]

A rope fell into the water, the engines stopped, and there was a rattle of oars as the gig drove by. They fell with a simultaneous splash, and their regular thud receded as she swept up-channel while the launch's crew waited.

In a few minutes the sound stopped. There were alarmed shouts and hoarse orders; while the roar of steam continued. Then the beat of oars began again. The boat came back slowly, with two men pulling, and ran alongside the launch.

"You don't seem to have had much trouble," the lieutenant remarked.

"We hadn't, sir," answered a coastguard officer. "They were busy and didn't hear us until we'd got our boat-hook on her rail. Only one of them drew a pistol and he was knocked down. We'll land them and leave a guard on board when she's moored."

"Very well, if we can't take her to Barrow this tide?"

The coastguard laughed.

"So far as I could see, there's a big piece of flounder-net wrapped round her propeller and trailing about her aft. It has an unusually thick head-rope, and some lengths of iron pipe are jammed between the blades and the rudder. The fellow who set the net made a good job. We'll have trouble in cutting it loose when she dries."

"Did you find much oil?"

"About a boat-load of heavy drums, which had just been thrown on deck. We got the boat and I guess our fellows ashore have seized another lot. However, here are your two men. I don't think you'll do much with the skipper, but the other seems less obstinate."

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Two handcuffed men were put on board and the boat dropped back as the launch leaped ahead. The water rose about her bows in a white, curling wave, her stern sank down in a hollow ridged with foam, and she shook with the fierce throb of hard-driven machinery. Dark hills slid past to starboard, bold cliffs that stood out from their dim background rolled by, and after a time a flash from a lantern was answered by a gleam of light ahead. Then the blurred outline of a steamer grew into distinct form. In another minute the launch was alongside and the winches strained and clanked as she was hoisted in.

"Everything went as we expected, and I've brought you the two prisoners," the lieutenant reported to Rankine, who sat in his room before a big chart.

"Send them in, one at a time. And clear the guns and get under way. The course is west by south."

Rankine spent some time examining his prisoners. One preserved an obstinate silence, but when he had been taken away, the other seemed to see the force of Rankine's arguments. When the second prisoner had been dismissed, Rankine went up to the bridge and changed the course a few points.

"The fellow bears out what we have been told," he said to the young officer on watch. "I rather think he'll deal straight with us in order to save his skin. Anyhow, he has given me their supply-boat signal. The craft we're after is the latest and biggest thing of her kind."

"We ought to bag her," the officer replied thoughtfully. "I've got the searchlight rigged, and Wilson's the best shot we had on the battleship. Still, the little guns are awkwardly mounted and we haven't a clear field of fire."

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"It won't need more than one shot. A perforated submarine isn't much use under water, and the game's ours if she stays on top. I'll give you the call-up signal and you can get things ready."

An hour later, Rankine pressed a button and the engines stopped. The clang of a steamer's bridge-telegraph can be heard some distance off, but Rankine had substituted an electric signal. Having undertaken a dangerous piece of work, he had carefully made his plans so that he need not announce his movements to the enemy. Two guns had been put on board the vessel, but as it was thought advisable to conceal them, and the deckhouse and the masts were in the way, their fire commanded only a limited strip of horizon.

Rankine searched the water with his night-glasses.

The coast was out of sight, mist drifted across the sea, and the night was dark. On the whole, this was an advantage, for his antagonist was expecting a trawler, and the darkness would prevent him from noticing the vessel's size and rig until they were close together. There was some swell, though the surface of the water was smooth, and the vessel rolled languidly. A feather of steam eddied about her funnel, and there was a soft splashing as her slanted side sank into the sea. No gleam of light pierced the darkness; everything was still; and Rankine stood waiting eagerly.

Presently he gave an order and one of the prisoners was brought to the bridge; then the steamer slowly moved ahead while a petty officer, standing behind a canvas wind-screen, alternately held up and lowered red and green pyrotechnic flares. The streams of colored light showed shadowy figures waiting motionless at their stations and drove a radiant track across the water. Then they died away and men whose eyes had been held by the glitter felt relief. Now they could see about the ship, and they knew watchfulness was needed.

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For five minutes nothing happened, and Rankine, conscious of keen tension, began to wonder whether he should signal again. It was possible that he had overshot or fallen short of his distance. Then a sharp hail came from a lookout and he saw the sea break not far ahead. A confused white ripple spread away from something that moved amidst it, and drew out in a long, wavering line. A lantern flashed between regular intervals of darkness, and presently a low, black object grew out of the advancing foam. Rankine pressed the button and the throb of engines slackened; then he gave an order to his prisoner.

The man hailed in German; the submarine swerved and slowed; and the two vessels drew abreast, perhaps fifty yards apart, while Rankine's quarter boat swung out from the davits.

"Tell them to jump into the water and I'll pick them up!" he ordered the prisoner.

As the man called out, a dazzling beam from the searchlight played upon the submarine's hull

and her wet steel skin glittered like silver. The next moment there was another flash, streaked with a vein of red; and a cloud of thin, acrid smoke whirled up. The steamer quivered with the heavy concussion; the submarine reeled and listed over. Indistinct figures plunged into the foam that lapped about her side; and then the bright beam showed an empty stretch of seething water: Rankine was watching his boat, which moved into the lighted track on her work of rescue, when a lookout shouted a hoarse warning.

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Swinging round, Rankine saw a feathery streak of foam on the opposite side of the vessel. It was heading toward her at tremendous speed, and he knew the wash of a torpedo.

"Starboard, hard!" he called to the helmsman; and set his lips as he pressed the button for full speed.

Two submarines had answered his signal, instead of one, and the last had crept up to attack him while he was sinking her consort.

The steamer, however, answered her helm, slowly, but enough. The swift white streak drove past her stern with a few feet to spare, and she began to shake as her engines quickened.

"Port!" Rankine shouted in a harsh voice. "Steady that!"

A flash blazed out of the darkness, a panel of the wheelhouse was shattered, and the canvas bridge-screen fell apart in rags; but Rankine had seen a long, dark shape on the water close ahead. It might vanish in a moment, before his guns could be swung and trained. Indeed, he doubted if the submarine were within their field of fire, and he meant to use a surer means. One end of the black hull tilted up and the other began to sink. His enemy was going under. But would she be quick enough? The steamer's sharp steel stem was only a dozen yards away now.

Shouting an order to the crew, Rankine gripped the bridge-rails hard.

The water ahead boiled and rose in a tumbling ridge; there was a heavy shock, and the steamer trembled violently. One could feel her forge through something that crumpled up beneath her bows; but the jarring and grinding passed aft, and she leaped forward when she was once over the obstacle. Rankine saw a curious disturbance down the screw-torn wake, but it subsided and he stopped the engines.

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"Sound the forward well! Swing your light aft and lower the gig!" he ordered.

The stream of radiance flashed astern and spread about the vessel; but there was nothing on the water except their own boat, which made toward them. Then a man came up to report that the well was nearly dry.

"She's a strong old ship," Rankine remarked, and turned to another man: "Where's that prisoner, Evans?"

"I haven't seen him, sir, since the torpedo missed us."

"Ask on deck," said Rankine. "Why isn't the gig away?"

As the man went down the ladder, a splash of oars began, and the searchlight's moving beam swept the sea. It picked out the larger boat and then passed on, leaving black darkness, and followed the gig. Ten minutes later, the boats returned and Rankine received the young lieutenant in his cabin.

"We have six men; all from the first craft, so far as we can make out," the lieutenant reported, with rather strained quietness.

"Then the rest have gone," Rankine said. "We have lost one prisoner, too. It's pretty obvious that he jumped over. He must have known there were two submarines and expected the last to sink us."

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"He was not in the boats. Do you want to see the men we picked up?"

"Not just yet. Let them have dry clothes and anything else they need. I wish we'd got some of the others; I don't know that one ought to think they deserved their fate. But, after all, when one remembers the torpedoed merchant ships— However, we'll land them in Loch Ryan. Let her go west by north until you make the Mull of Galloway light."

The lieutenant went out, and Rankine, lying back on the locker, lighted his pipe. It was his first battle, and he wanted to recover his normal calm. He had won, but he did not quite feel the exhilarating flush of victory he had expected. Instead, he rather shrank from dwelling upon the fight.

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CHAPTER XXXI

UNEXPECTED HAPPINESS

Elsie, lying half awake, raised herself on her pillow as she heard a clock strike. The anxiety she had half forgotten returned to her with double force. Although she had not been quite asleep, she had lost count of the time, and it was now nearly three hours after low-water. The danger that had threatened Andrew must be past, but she did not know how long she must wait for news of him. Besides, some mischance might have befallen Dick. He had looked ill when she sent him on an errand that would severely try his strength.

After a long time she heard a sharp throbbing coming up the valley. It sounded like a motorcycle and she jumped out of bed and began to dress, wondering whether Dick had borrowed the machine at Annan and was returning. The sound grew louder; the motorcycle had passed the lodge and was nearing the house when Elsie quietly entered Madge's room.

"I heard it," Madge said. "I haven't been asleep. Shall I get up?"

"No." Elsie touched her in warning as a door opened.

There were steps in the passage, and they waited until the sound died away.

"Are you going down?" Madge asked.

"Yes; I feel that I must. But it might be better if you didn't come."

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She heard the hall door open as she descended the stairs, but she kept on and waited at the bottom. The machine had stopped and she thought it significant that its driver had boldly ridden up to the house. If Dick had done so, he would have come in; but nobody had entered and Staffer had gone out. After a few minutes, she heard the sliding door of the garage run back. Elsie knew the sound of the small wheels as they grated upon the iron carrier.

The motorcycle sped away noisily down the drive, and soon afterward Staffer came in carrying a lantern. He did not see Elsie as he put the light on a table and locked a traveling bag. She thought it curious that the bag was ready packed; and since he had taken no precautions against being heard, it looked as if speed were more important than secrecy. The message that had been brought him must deal with some urgent matter. Still, Dick had not returned and she was horribly anxious. She could not wait to learn what had happened at the wreck.

As she moved forward to speak to Staffer, he looked up. His expression was tense, but she thought he was calm.

"So you have spied on me again!" he said.

"Where's Dick?"

"Dick?" repeated Staffer. "Ah! Now I begin to understand! You sent him down the Firth!"

"Yes; I did. And where is he?"

"On board Andrew's yacht, I imagine."

Elsie was sensible of keen satisfaction; but only part of her fears were set at rest.

"And Andrew? Is he on the yacht?"

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Staffer looked hard at her. She was trembling with excitement and cold, but she did not flinch, and he surprised her by a curious, bitter laugh. It carried a hint of understanding that brought the blood to her face.

"I don't know where he is, but there's reason to think he has come to no harm. That ought to satisfy you."

Elsie was silent. Her relief was great, but now that Andrew was safe, her mind could fix itself on other matters. Staffer had guessed her secret and knew that she had spoiled his plans; but his manner was more ironical than revengeful. For all that, it disturbed and frightened her. She thought something that had hit him hard had happened, and his cold-blooded calm was daunting.

"Well," he said, "there's a touch of grim humor in the situation. I found you a home and gave you the advantages you enjoy; and now you have baffled me and ruined the work of cleverer brains than mine. It's humiliating to see one's schemes brought to nothing by a raw girl's devotion to her stupid lover."

"I'm sorry the course of things made us enemies. It was unavoidable," she said quietly.

Staffer made an impatient sign.

"I'm going away and it's very doubtful if I'll ever return; but I'd rather you didn't mention the matter until breakfast to-morrow. Then you can say I've gone to Edinburgh. Perhaps you can promise me that?"

"Yes. Don't you want to see Mother before you go?"

"No," Staffer answered thoughtfully; "it might be better if I didn't."

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He broke off as the car came throbbing to the door; and Elsie followed him across the hall.

"If things had only been different," she said, "we might have been friends—"

Staffer did not seem to hear, for he jumped into the car and it rolled away. Elsie stood looking out into the darkness for a long time; then she shut the door and went slowly upstairs. She felt limp and bewildered now that the strain had gone; the one thing she realized clearly was that Andrew was safe.

Madge turned to her eagerly as she entered her room; but Elsie did not stop.

"They are all right, but I can't talk about it now," she said and passed on into her room, closing the door.

While Staffer was leaving Appleyard, Andrew was picking his way toward the burnfoot, across a boggy heath. He had landed about an hour earlier and gone to a farm to ask for a horse and trap and had sent a man to Annan for a doctor. Now he was returning as fast as possible, because he felt anxious about Dick; but caution was needed, for many deep drains crossed the heath. The mist had closed in again, and, as he stopped at the last drain to look for a narrow spot, he heard the languid splash of the surf and the wild cry of a black-backed gull. For some reason, the harsh sound disturbed him; and, jumping the drain where he stood, he went on as fast as he could. The splash of the sea grew louder, and at last he saw an indistinct figure waiting near the water's edge. Andrew was used to the sands at night, but the motionless dark form seemed to strike a deeper note of desolation. His steps slackened as he approached it.

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"Is that you, Jim?" he called.

Whitney waited until he came up, and then put his hand on his arm.

"I'm afraid you must brace yourself against a shock," he said gently.

"Ah! You mean Dick's worse?"

Whitney pressed his arm sympathetically.

"He's dead."

There was silence for the next minute, except for the mournful murmur of the sea.

"It wasn't long after you went ashore," Whitney added. "He looked up and beckoned me to sit on the locker by his cot. 'Tell Andrew I'm glad he'll have Appleyard,' he said."

Whitney paused for a moment.

"He lay still afterward, and I thought he'd gone to sleep. Then the cabin seemed to grow strangely quiet, and when I got up to look at him I saw that he was dead."

"The hurried trip down-channel killed him, and he made it for my sake!" Andrew said, in a tense, hoarse voice.

"You mustn't take that for granted; but, if true, he certainly wouldn't grudge the risk. He might have died at any time from some trifling exertion."

Andrew indicated the dinghy, in which he had rowed off from the yacht alone.

"How did you get ashore?"

"The bank's steep and I sheered her in until I could jump from the bowsprit end. I didn't want you to come on board without knowing."

"Thanks," said Andrew. "I'm going off to her now. Try to get into Marshall's hut and make a fire. We'll have to wait some time for the doctor."

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He launched the dinghy, and when he returned Whitney had lighted a few sticks and peats in the fisherman's sod hut. Andrew's face was grave as he sat down on an empty box.

"If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk," he said.

He let Whitney row the doctor off when he arrived; and day was breaking when they reached Annan. An hour later, Andrew, feeling limp and cold, got down from a trap at Appleyard and walked stiffly into the hall. Elsie came to meet him with a glow in her eyes; but she stopped abruptly when she saw his face.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

He looked at her compassionately and she gasped.

"Oh! Is Dick—?"

He put his arm around her and led her to an oak bench near the big fireplace.

"Dick's dead," he said quietly. "On board the *Rowan*. Heart failure, the doctor thinks."

"I sent him, when I knew he was ill!" she cried in distress.

"You didn't know it would do him much harm, dear."

"But I did!" Elsie moaned with a shiver, turning her head.

Andrew was puzzled, but he answered soothingly:

"I know what you feel, because I felt it too—Dick might have got better and lived a long time if he hadn't gone down-channel to warn me. In fact, I spoke to the doctor about it, but he didn't altogether take this view."

"He didn't want you to blame yourself."

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"No; I don't think that was it. But it's a blow to us both, and the worst is I can do nothing to soften it for you."

"You loved him," she said with a look of pain. "You came home from Canada and fought Williamson for his sake. I was often impatient with him, and he always bore it well. He was generous and forgiving—and we know he was brave. He must have known the risk he ran—but he didn't hesitate. I knew it—and I sent him—"

Her voice trailed off and she broke into stormy sobbing, while Andrew, with his arm around her, awkwardly tried to comfort her. His touch seemed to have a soothing influence, for Elsie got calmer.

"You were always a help, Andrew; one turns to you in trouble," she said. "But I mustn't give way like this."

She rose as she spoke, and when she left him Andrew went up to Whitney's room.

"I expect Miss Woodhouse feels the thing keenly," Whitney said.

"Yes; in fact, she feels much as I do, in spite of what the doctor said. If Dick hadn't gone to our rescue, he'd have been with us yet. Still, I don't quite understand—"

"You don't see why she let him go, when she thought it might be dangerous?"

"Yes; that's what bothers me," Andrew said with some hesitation.

Whitney gave him a keen glance. He saw that Andrew had no suspicion of the truth; but it was not his business to enlighten him.

"Well, she may have thought there were two lives that could be saved against one that must be risked. It would be desperately hard for a young girl to face the responsibility of deciding right. Miss Woodhouse probably feels the strain—and, no doubt she's rather overcome by the consequences of the line she took. But when she gets calmer she'll see that she can't blame herself. But you had better change your clothes and get some breakfast."

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It was a relief to Andrew to find his time occupied. At noon he was surprised by a request for an interview with a man he did not know. The stranger was shown into the library and gave Andrew a letter.

"My card may convey nothing to you, but here are my credentials."

The letter was from the Home Secretary's office and was countersigned by an eminent military authority.

"I'm at your command," Andrew said. "What is it you want to know?"

"Perhaps I'd better state that my visit is made in a friendly spirit. We recognize the patriotic line you and your cousin have taken. I met him once, and, it's rather curious, he invited me to Appleyard."

"Ah!" exclaimed Andrew. "I never thought that Dick—"

"Shared your suspicions? I can't tell you how far his went, but he may have known more than you imagine. He certainly once did us an important service. But we'll let that go. Did Mr. Staffer offer any explanation for leaving here early this morning?"

"He said he was going to Edinburgh; that was all."

"Well, he got to Hawick, where we lost trace of him, but I think it's impossible that he went farther north. Have you any ground for suspecting who brought him the warning?"

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"None," said Andrew shortly.

"I'm glad I can take your word, Mr. Johnstone. Now I must ask you to tell me about your recent adventures on the sands. You see, I'm in touch with Lieutenant Rankine and the coastguards."

Andrew related what had happened, and his companion looked satisfied.

"You don't seem to know that Williamson's body was washed up on the Colvend shore, a few hours ago."

"Oh!"

"The man who could have told us most has gone. Our hope now is to catch Staffer."

"You'd better make Appleyard your headquarters while you're looking into things," Andrew said. "We have nothing to hide."

"Thanks; I'll be glad to do so. It may be some satisfaction for you to learn that no unnecessary

publicity will be allowed to attend this matter."

The next day, the officer told Andrew that Staffer's car had been found on the roadside, near a small fishing village on the Northumberland coast.

"He doubled back into England by Norham," he added. "When our men got upon his track they found he'd covered the distances between the points at which they heard of him extraordinarily fast. In consequence, he had a number of hours' start when he left the car, and as a fishing boat sailed soon afterward, I'm afraid he got away across the North Sea."

"I can't say that I am sorry he escaped," Andrew replied; "but I won't complain if his friends on the other side keep him there for good."

Dick was buried two days later, in a lonely kirkyard where many of his race had been laid to rest. The kirk had long crumbled down except for one tottering arch, but, as usual in the country, the funeral service was held at Appleyard, and Andrew's heart stirred as he saw the long stream of mourners coming up the drive. Dick had not died unlamented, but even those who knew him best were astonished at the number of his friends. None of his tenantry was missing, his neighbors had come from far and near; but there were others—fishermen, shepherds, men who lived by horse-couping and other devious means, and innkeepers from Dumfries and Lockerbie. The respectability of some was doubtful, but their grief was obvious, so far as the Scottish character allowed it to be seen, and Andrew gave them all his thanks and hand. This was an ancient custom and he was now the head of the family; but as he looked at the rows of solemn faces, he wondered whether he could win the love his predecessor had won.

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That night, when the others had gone to bed, Andrew sat talking to Rankine by the fire in the hall.

"Has the fellow we caught on the sands made any admissions?" he asked. "I understand you have seen him."

"None so far. He declined to talk, and, if I'm a judge of character, it's the line he'll stick to until the end. He sees that he has no defense. I'm rather curious about his rank; but he's obviously a navy man."

"He'll be court-martialed?"

"Yes. It will be kept quiet, for one or two reasons, and I don't think you'll be wanted."

"That's a relief. What's your private opinion about the matter? Was the plot confined to supplying the submarines?"

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Rankine lighted a cigarette before he answered.

"On the whole, I don't think so. In fact, it's possible there was some foundation for your theory about the Eskdale road."

"Then you know something?"

"Something," Rankine agreed with a smile. "Now that my business on the coast is finished and I'm going to join a battleship, I may perhaps tell you that my rank is not lieutenant."

"Well, now that you are here, I hope you can spare us a few days."

"Thanks; I'll be glad to. My new ship needs some refitting and they don't want me at Portsmouth yet."

The next few months passed uneventfully at Appleyard. For the most part, Andrew was kept occupied, investigating Dick's affairs and making new arrangements for the improvement of the estate. It was a relief to be busy; for his loss still weighed on him; and he had another trouble. Every day he grew deeper in love with Elsie; and she seemed to try purposely to avoid him. When they met she was friendly, but he noticed a hint of reserve in her manner. At last he began to think he would better go to Canada for a while when he had put everything straight.

Then, one cold spring evening, when he came back from a visit to a moorland farm, he found her sitting by the fire in the hall. The light was getting dim but the glow from the logs fell on her, and he noted her quick, nervous movement as she saw him.

"I'm afraid I startled you," he said, stopping beside her. "I've been walking about a wet bog all afternoon, examining drains, and it looks very cozy here. I won't disturb you if I sit down?"

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"Of course not."

Andrew took a chair near her, and stretched his hands to the fire. Neither spoke for a few minutes; and their silence seemed the deeper because of the loud ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner.

"I've always loved Appleyard," Andrew said slowly, looking about the big hall; "but somehow it doesn't seem homey to me now. There's something wanting; it's too big, or I'm better used to a boat."

"You miss Dick," Elsie answered softly, with a touch of color in her face. "Though he was often ill, it's wonderful how bright he was."

"Yes; I miss him all the time—but perhaps not as you do."

Andrew's voice was full of sympathy, and Elsie gave him a quick glance.

"You must know the truth, Andrew," she said impulsively. "At first I did feel miserably guilty for having sent Dick on a dangerous errand when I knew he was ill—"

"Dick went because he wanted to go," Andrew interrupted. "He never shirked a risk, and least of all when he could help his friends."

"But if I had loved Dick in the way you seem to think I loved him—perhaps I would not have been brave enough to let him go—I can't be sure."

"You didn't love him in that way?"

Elsie looked down at the book which lay in her lap. Her face was flooded with color, but a smile played about her lips.

"I would never have married Dick," she said, in a voice so low that Andrew had to lean toward her to catch her words. [Pg 339]

"There was some one else?" he asked tensely.

She looked up at him then, and he gasped at the deepening glow in her eyes.

"What a stupid thing you are, Andrew! You ought to—"

He waited.

"Elsie—"

His voice was a mingling of incredulity and joy; and she answered his unspoken question with a shy smile.

"Of course—dear!"

THE END

Transcriber's Note: The following typographical errors present in the original edition have been corrected.

In Chapter II, a missing quotation mark was added before "Attendez, mais attendez".

In Chapter III, "expensive yatching cap" was changed to "expensive yachting cap", and "the Isle of Man, rose" was changed to "the Isle of Man rose".

In Chapter VII, "is if the man had meant to jump across" was changed to "as if the man had meant to jump across".

In Chapter XVI, "single-cyclinder engine" was changed to "single-cylinder engine".

In Chapter XXVI, "his heavy boots sank" was changed to "his heavy boots sank".

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