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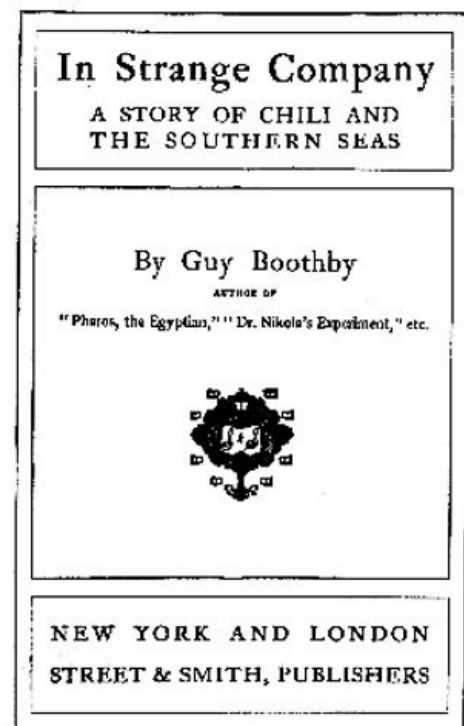
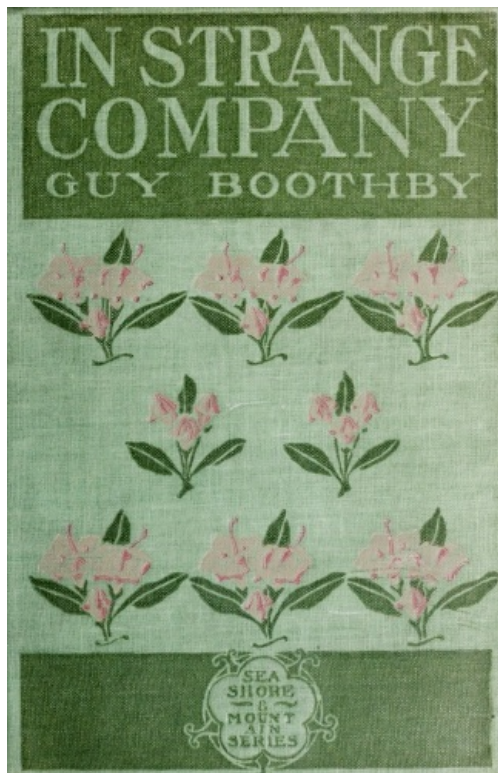
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In Strange Company

A STORY OF CHILI AND THE SOUTHERN SEAS

By Guy Boothby

AUTHOR OF "Pharos, the Egyptian," "Dr. Nikola's Experiment," etc.

NEW YORK AND LONDON
STREET & SMITH, PUBLISHERS

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By F. TENNYSON NEELY.

Copyright, 1900,
By STREET & SMITH

Dearest Mother,
IT IS
WITH THE UTMOST LOVE
THAT I
DEDICATE TO YOU THIS BOOK,
THE OUTCOME OF TEN LONG YEARS OF SEPARATION.

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IN STRANGE COMPANY.

INTRODUCTION.

[Pg 1]

IN WHICH IS SET FORTH HOW THE BOOK CAME TO BE WRITTEN.

First and foremost it should be stated how I, Luke Sanctuary, came to be connected with this most extraordinary and, to say the least of it, mysterious business. For my own part, I do not doubt but that when you have read a few pages you will have come to the conclusion that, personally, I had no share in its actual making, for I am a man of peaceful disposition, as much unaccustomed as I am unfitted to bear a hand in such adventurous concerns; and what is perhaps more to the point, one who has never been out of England in the whole course of his existence.

This preliminary having been set forth, and your mind disabused of any false impression, I am brought to the plain matter at issue, namely, the reason of, the facts which led to, and the people who induced my taking up the writing of this book. And as this again—for it seems I am not

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permitted to escape it—necessitates the narration of more concerning myself, let me, if I can be nothing else, be brief.

To begin with, my name is Luke Sanctuary; I am a bachelor; a man of regular and studious habits; the possessor of what is vaguely termed a comfortable income; and, as the result of such an income, a house, my friends tell me, of considerable attractions, situated in that Garden of all England, the Isle of Wight.

And truly enough it is, if the two terms be not synonymous, both a comfortable and pleasant home; for while I have endeavoured to make its internal accommodation what I imagine a dwelling-house in these enlightened days should be, its external advantages have not been unconsidered. From my windows, looking towards the north, I can command one of the most beautiful and extensive views along the whole length of the English coast; while straight before me, and as far as the eye can reach to right and left, stretches Spithead, glittering, as I write, a bright sapphire blue, in the warm sunshine of this September morning. Across its placid surface may be seen the forts and mast forest of Portsmouth, with Gosport on the near, and Southsea dim and distant on the far side; to all of which the hills of Portsdown form an effective background.

Of shipping there is no lack: a cruiser of the latest pattern, newly commissioned, lies at anchor immediately before me; a deep sea cable-steamer is in the act of entering the harbour; while torpedo-boats, ferry-steamers, colliers, mud-dredgers, yachts, and such-like small craft pass to and fro continually, as if for my peculiar and individual benefit.

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It is a picture of which I never grow weary, and indeed I sometimes feel, were its attractions not so irresistible, my book, 'The First Fruits of the Renaissance,' upon which I have been engaged these eight years past, and which is as yet only in its fifty-second chapter, would long ago have been in print, delighting an appreciative public, or, what is more likely, cumbering the shelves of our second-hand dealers. And surely—for I am in the humour for philosophical reflection—no better view, or one more suited to the opening of this strange story, could possibly be chosen than Spithead on this pleasant autumn morning.

But it is easier, I find, to talk of beginning than actually to begin, for twice I have dipped my pen in the ink, and twice I have pulled my virgin foolscap towards me, but somehow I have not yet managed to commence. Now, however, I will sound the bugles and open the attack.

But it is of no use! Fate, in the form of a heavy footstep, is on the stairs, and a masculine voice is calling, "Cousin Luke, Cousin Luke, where on earth have you stowed yourself away?"

The voice is the voice of my sailor cousin by marriage, John Ramsay, who, with his bride, has been my guest this fortnight past. His bellow has something of the resonance of a fog-horn, and, partly for the safety of my roof and partly to gratify my own curiosity, I am induced to acquaint him of my whereabouts. Thereupon he rushes impulsively in, for he will never be aught but a boy in his manners, his face aglow with excitement, and brandishing a sheet of note-paper in his hand.

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"Vast working, Cousin Luke," he cries, scattering my MSS. with the violence of his inrush; "pipe all hands, for here it is, just arrived by post from Sir Benjamin!"

"What is here?" I ask, looking up into his handsome sunburnt face with a smile. "What has Sir Benjamin been kind enough to send me? A brace of partridges perhaps, or——"

"A brace of horse-marines!" is the prompt reply, and thereupon my manuscripts are unceremoniously swept off the table, to make room for the sheet of note-paper I have mentioned above.

"Now, Cousin Luke, I'll have to trouble you for the loan of your best attention," he says, "for here is the mysterious letter of which I told you last night; here is the bit of paper which has caused four people to play hide-and-seek all round the world, occasioned the death of two, and done its best to kill half-a-dozen others. Oh! my dear departed grandmother, just fancy that innocent little slip of cream-laid having once been worth a couple of hundred thousand pounds!"

I am supposed to know intuitively to what he refers, for he waves his hand with a commanding gesture, forces me back into my seat, and then, smoothing the letter out, bids me read it aloud for his and my own information. This is what I read, and as upon it depends the whole point of this book, I beg that you will give it your best attention.

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*"Valparaiso, Chili,
"8th August, 1891.*

TO SIR BENJAMIN PLOWDEN, KNT., ETC., ETC.,
EAST INDIA AVENUE, LONDON.

"My worthy and respected Uncle Benjamin,

"I beg you will not suppose for an instant that I am unable to imagine with what apprehension and surprise you will receive this letter from one so unworthy as your nephew, written from such a place, and dated at such a serious time. And yet, both the place and the serious time are part and parcel of the reason which induces the communication.

"To lay my business properly before you, it is necessary that I should carry your memory back, let us say fifteen years, when, after a certain episode which it would become neither of us to recall, you were good enough to show me the front door of England, and the back entrance to the outside world, at the same time enriching me with much good advice, two trenchant sayings from the works of that priggish person Solomon, and last, but by no means least, Five Hundred Pounds sterling.

"Reflecting that all countries present equal possibilities to the possessor of five hundred pounds in hard cash, I came out here, with the result, that by ceaseless energy and thrift (of the possession of which latter virtue you have hitherto scarcely believed me capable) I have added to the five hundred pounds you advanced me, four hundred similar amounts.

"In other words, my revered relative, my adventures have prospered beyond my wildest expectations. My silver mines have achieved wonders. As for my Haciendas, by which name these ignorant foreigners denominate such farms as those of which I know you, my uncle, to be the possessor, I managed to dispose of them, prior to this unfortunate Revolution, for considerably more than twice their real value. Therefore, to all intents and purposes, I may be considered what you, in your absurd City jargon, would term a decidedly *warm* or rich man. So much by way of introduction.

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"Now though I am, both by instinct and training, distrustful and suspicious, yet, strangely enough, I am about to forswear my principles so far as to repose in you, my father's brother, being perfectly assured of your probity and honour, such confidence as one man seldom places in another. In other words, having in my mind the perilous times now upon this unhappy country, I am remitting to your charge by the good ship *Culloden*, advised as leaving here on Thursday of next week, the entire amount of my fortune, amounting to *Two Hundred Thousand Pounds of English money, in specie*, securely packed in accordance with the steam-ship company's regulations, and addressed to you in London. The bill of lading accompanies this present letter, which will be conveyed to and posted in London by Captain Porson of H.M.S. *Chanticleer*, leaving Valparaiso to-morrow morning.

"That this extraordinary trust will occasion you some little surprise I do not doubt, but from what I know of your character, I feel certain that not only will you accept the charge, but that you will guard my interests as you would your own.

"Were it not that I consider it my duty to remain in this country until these troubles are overpast, I should certainly come home to guard my fortune personally. But such a thing being, for the present, impossible, I have, I believe, by placing it in your hands, done both what is wisest and best to secure its safety.

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"One earnest piece of advice I would entreat you to remember. For the reason that I am successful, I have made many enemies here, who would not scruple to employ any means, however base, to bring about my ruin. I beg and implore, therefore, that you will pay no attention whatsoever to any person, male or female, who may approach you in my name, either by letter or otherwise, with the following exception.

"Should it be necessary for me to communicate with you, either personally or by messenger, you will do nothing, listen to no proposals, or even hint that you know anything of my existence or my fortune, until you have in your hand the following authority.

"Having carefully considered the matter in all its bearings, I have arrived at the conclusion that there is only one thing absolutely and wholly unforgeable and unmatchable within my reach, and that is, *the tear in an ordinary sheet of paper*.

"To apply this knowledge to my own purposes, I have obtained from a certain source a sample of quite unknown note-paper, and torn it in half in a peculiar manner. One portion I send to you herewith; the other I shall retain in my own keeping, until I desire to communicate with you. It is obviously impossible—no one having seen this paper in my possession—that any third party could so tear another as to match, fibre for fibre, the piece you hold, even could they obtain a similar description of paper, which I happen to know is out of the question.

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"This being so, any person bringing to you a sample of the same water-mark, of the same texture, and, more important still, torn in such a manner as to exactly fit the piece you hold, must either have stolen it from me (which I can confidently promise shall not happen), or be my *bonâ-fide* agent. I beg therefore that you will pay to him whatsoever sum, up to the entire amount, he shall ask of you. *But remember, on no consideration shall you pay even so much as one half-penny to any person whomsoever, even one representing himself to be your unworthy nephew, until this duplicate is in your possession.*

"For reasons which would not have the slightest interest for you, I am compelled to act in this mysterious fashion; and such is my absolute trust and confidence in your honour and integrity, that I go so far as to freely absolve you beforehand from any blame whatsoever, should the precautions I have enumerated here miscarry.

"Believe me, such warnings are not idle; attempts will certainly be made to obtain the money, and after careful consideration, I think I have hit upon the only safe way to guard myself against any such conspiracies.

"If by any chance no word shall reach you from me within the space of twenty-one years, day for day from this 8th of August, you may regard it as complete evidence of my death, and in that case I bequeath to your children, should you at that time have any living, or failing them to such members of my father's family as may then be alive, the entire amount of my fortune, with all interests and accumulations which may have become added thereto.

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"I am, my uncle,
"Your obliged and obedient nephew,
"MARMADUKE PLOWDEN."

When I reached the signature, Ramsay, who had been listening with unabating interest, hit me a heavy thwack upon the shoulder, at the same time crying enthusiastically—

"There, my learned cousin, what is your opinion of that precious document?"

"I think," said I, with a gravity befitting such an important decision, "that it is the letter of a very unscrupulous, and I should say at the time he wrote it, very frightened, man."

"My idea exactly," Ramsay replied. "It is interesting to note how his impudence dies out as his letter progresses, and how its place is usurped by a good wholesome fear. One thing more, do you honestly believe that that vast sum of money, £200,000, came from the respectable sources to which he alludes—silver mines and farm properties, and such-like; all accumulated by his own thrift and industry?"

"How can I tell? But from what I know of the man, I should be rather inclined to guess—*not!*"

"Very good. And now, as we're agreed upon that point, let me ask you what recollections, if any, you have of this peculiar relative of yours?—for relative he certainly is."

"Of Marmaduke Plowden?"

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"Exactly; *in Chili known as Marcos Veneda*. Surely you must have seen him often when he was a boy?"

"Not often, Jack—half-a-dozen times at most; certainly not more. He lived on the other side of the kingdom, you must remember; and then again, he was not the sort of youth of whom one would be anxious to see very much."

"What was he like?"

I hesitated before replying. The truth was, it was an awkward question, for upon the last occasion of my seeing him, he was sitting in the office of my kinsman, the Sir Benjamin Plowden before referred to, looking very frightened and miserable, and wondering how a certain interview which was being conducted in an adjoining room would end; that is, whether it would result in his being sent to gaol or abroad. As may be imagined, under these circumstances, he did not look his best. But then that was well-nigh twenty years ago.

So absorbed was I in recalling these recollections, that I had quite forgotten my companion's question. He brought me back to my senses with a start.

"Come, come, Cousin Luke, no day-dreams, if you please; you haven't answered my question yet."

"Well, Jack, as a young man, perhaps I cannot give you any better description of him than to say that he was, without doubt, the handsomest, and at the same time the most untrustworthy being, with whom I had ever come into contact. As old Darby, our coachman in those days, once put it, 'Young Master Marmaduke's as 'andsome as paint, but lor, there, it's all on top, like bad coach varnish!' In fact, there was something about the lad's good looks that repelled rather than attracted one."

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"How do you mean—a sort of fierceness?"

"No; a something that was rather crafty than fierce, a something that betrayed cruelty as well as cunning. As a school-boy there was nobody more admired for his beauty or more despised for his moral character."

"Was he a plucky boy?"

"To an extraordinary degree, I believe, as far as personal bravery went; but somehow he was always at daggers drawn, not with his school-fellows alone, but with everybody with whom he came into contact."

"And when he left school?"

"As far as I remember he went first into some office in a country town, where he remained for a year; then Sir Benjamin took him in hand, and got him a situation in a large banking institution in London."

"And after that?"

"Commenced his downfall; he fell in with a low set, became a frequenter of second-rate race-courses, an admirer of ballet-girls and objectionable barmaids; finally, is said to have forged his benefactor's name, and to have come within an ace of standing in a felon's dock."

"A nice character truly! And Sir Benjamin honoured the signature?"

"For the sake of the lad's mother. And then it was, I suppose, that he gave him the £500 referred to in that letter, and shipped him out of England."

"And, as far as you know, he was never heard of again, until his letter and the £200,000 arrived?" [Pg 12]

"Not to my knowledge; in fact, until you recalled it, I had almost forgotten his existence."

"Very well then. Now you'll just come for a walk with me, and, as we go, I'll tell you something of Marmaduke Plowden's—otherwise Marcos Veneda's—wonderful career, from the day he left England till I made his acquaintance, under such peculiar circumstances, six months ago. Then you shall take pens, paper, and ink, and write the first half of it. I'll do the last, and together we'll make it into a book for the information of the world. Here's a case full of first-class cigars; it's a perfect day for a tramp; so get your things and come along."

Resistance being useless, I collected hat and stick and went, and the result of that walk is the story—strange enough, goodness knows—which I now place before you.

PART I.

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CHAPTER I.

SHOWING WHERE THE MONEY REALLY CAME FROM.

So far we have seen, that shifty Marmaduke Plowden, in Chili known as Marcos Veneda, despatched to the care of his uncle, Sir Benjamin Plowden, of the East India Avenue, London, £200,000 in English gold, with the request that that gentleman would keep it for him until he could come home to look after it himself.

Now, to properly understand our story, we must hark back to the very beginning of things, and endeavour to discover where such an enormous fortune came from in the first instance; for the statement of its owner that he derived it from his silver mines and Hacienda properties is not worthy of a moment's credence. There is only one person who can elucidate the mystery for us, and his extraordinary adventures we must now proceed to consider.

You must understand that Michael Bradshaw, of 3 Parkington Terrace, South Kensington, was that sort of superlatively clever person who, after a life of grand *coups*, always comes to grief in some superlatively silly fashion. From the day on which he first entered the service of the Anglo-Kamtchatka Bank, to the evening of the dinner in his honour at the Whitehall Rooms as general manager, his career was one of exceptional brilliance. He it was who hit out the scheme which saved the Bank in the matter of the Bakell-Askern Syndicate; he it was who manipulated the Patagonian Bonds and the Golden Sunset Silver Mining Company to the Bank's ultimate advantage; he it was who—but there, his devices are matters of history, and beyond being corroborative evidences of his cleverness, are of little or no moment to this story. The following notice of the dinner above referred to appeared in the columns of the daily press the next morning, and is worth considering—

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"At the Whitehall Rooms, last evening, Mr. Michael Bradshaw, the well-known and universally respected General Manager of the Anglo-Kamtchatka Banking Company, was entertained at dinner by the Directors of that institution, prior to his departure for a brief holiday in the South of France. Covers were laid for a hundred guests, the chair being taken by the Right Honourable Lord Burgoo, Chairman of the Company. In proposing the toast of 'Their Guest,' the noble Chairman eulogized Mr. Bradshaw's services to the Bank, and hoped that the holiday he was about to enjoy would enable him to devote many more years to the advancement of the institution he had served so well. Mr. Bradshaw replied in feeling terms."

After the dinner the manager drove back to his house in Kensington. Though it was well-nigh two o'clock, he did not think of going to bed, but went into his study and lit a cigar. As every one had noticed that evening, he certainly looked as if he needed a holiday; his face was woefully haggard, and his eyes had a peculiar brilliance that spoke, as plainly as any words, of sleepless nights and never-ceasing worry and anxiety.

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For a long time he promenaded the room, his hands in his pockets and his face sternly set. Once he smiled sardonically as the recollection of the evening's speeches crossed his mind. Then, throwing himself into a chair before his writing-table, he began to unlock the drawers, and to destroy the papers they contained.

When this task was completed, the sun had been up some time, and a large pile of paper-ash lay inside the grate. He pulled back the curtains, unbarred the shutters, and opened the window, letting in a flood of sunshine. Then, dropping into a comfortable chair beside the fire, he fell asleep.

By eight o'clock he was at Charing Cross, his ticket was taken, and he was bidding good-bye to a large crowd of friends.

Next day, instead of busying himself with the enjoyments of Monte Carlo, as his friends supposed him, he was in reality at Dieppe, anxiously awaiting the arrival of a small brig, the *Florence Annie* of Teignmouth. As soon as she arrived he boarded her, and half-an-hour later, a course being set, she was bowling down Channel, bound for Buenos Ayres. It was peculiar that the captain invariably addressed his passenger as "Mr. Vincent." It was strange also that, for a voyage of such duration, he should have brought with him so small an amount of luggage. In the hold, however, were half-a-dozen barrels inscribed with his name, and labelled "Cement." Now cement, as everyone knows, is a staple article of export from Great Britain to the South American Republics.

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A month later, all England was astounded by the news that Michael Bradshaw, the admired and universally respected, was *wanted* by the police on a charge of defrauding the Anglo-Kamtchatka Banking Company of £250,000. But so carefully had his plans been arranged, that not a trace of either the money or his whereabouts could be discovered. Being a cultivated person, he might have replied with Plautus, "*Doli non doli sunt, nisi astu colas.*"

On the arrival of the *Florence Annie* at her destination, Bradshaw, *alias* Vincent, went ashore with his barrels of cement, determining to settle himself down to the study of Argentine life and character, having pleasing knowledge of the fact, that at that time "on no condition was extradition allowed in Buenos Ayres." But careful though he was not to excite attention, before he had been a week in his new abode he began to have suspicions that his secret was discovered. He fought against the idea with all his strength. But the more he struggled, the stronger it grew, till at last, unable to support his anxiety any longer, he determined to cross the Andes into Chili, confident that in the Balmaceda turmoil his identity would never be discovered. A long and agonizing railway journey brought him to Mendoza. There, with prodigious care, he chose his muleteers, packed his barrels of cement, and plunged into the mountains.

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At no time is that journey across the Andes one to be lightly undertaken. To Michael Bradshaw it was a nightmare, from which there seemed no awakening. Fear spurred him on behind; vague terrors of the Unknown beckoned him ahead; while treachery menaced him continually on either hand. When at last, more dead than alive, he arrived in Valparaiso, he paid off his team; and leasing an obscure residence in the Calle de San Pedro, prepared himself to wait, guarding his treasure night and day, until the war should be over.

But though he was not aware of it, his arrival in the town was already known, and plans were in active preparation for relieving him of his wealth. His enemies had failed before, they had altered their tactics now. Sooner or later, they must succeed.

One evening Michael Bradshaw sat in the only room he had made habitable, earnestly perusing a Guide to the Spanish language. He had been in Valparaiso nearly a week, and as he never ventured outside his own door, he found his time hang heavily on his hands. I am not quite certain that he had not already begun to regret his felony; not from any conscientious motives perhaps, but because he found himself in an awkward if not dangerous position. You see as far as his own personal feelings went he was still the respectable English banker, therefore to have assassination menacing him continually was a future he had certainly neither mapped out for himself nor was it one he would be likely to understand. He had been obliged to leave the Argentine because he believed his secret had been discovered, and now in Chili he was afraid to go very much abroad lest any of his former enemies might meet and recognize him. He had many regrets, but perhaps the most bitter was the fact that Valparaiso is an extradition port.

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Since his arrival he had unpacked his barrels of cement, and with infinite trouble concealed the treasure they so cunningly contained under the floor of his room. This exertion, if it had served no other purpose, had at least afforded him some occupation.

After a while he looked at his watch and found it was growing late. Putting down his book, he was in the act of making up his bed, which, by the way, was not as luxurious as the one to which he had been accustomed in his old house at Kensington, when to his horror he heard stealthy footsteps in the corridor outside his room. Next moment the door opened, and a tall and singularly handsome man entered. He bowed politely, and said in excellent English—

"Mr. Bradshaw, I believe?"

The ex-banker was too terrified to reply.

"I have taken the liberty of calling upon you on a little matter of business. May I sit down?"

Without waiting for permission, he seated himself on the bed. Bradshaw sank back with a groan into his chair.

"You are lately from England, I believe?"

Bradshaw found his voice at last, and said the first thing that came into his head.

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"What do you want with me? I cannot see you now; I'm not well."

"I am sorry, but what I have to say admits of no delay. You arrived in Buenos Ayres by the brig *Florence Annie* of Teignmouth—and oh, by the way, what have you done with that £250,000?"

"For mercy's take, tell me what you want with me?"

"All in good time, my friend. You're pretty comfortable here, but your floor needs repairing sadly—it looks as if you've been digging. You must be very dull all alone. Let me tell you a story."

"I don't want to hear it."

"I'm desolated, but you must. The business upon which I desire to consult you depends upon it, so here goes. Once upon a time, as they say in the fairy tales, there was a young man who was turned out of England, accused of a felony which he never committed. He was treated very badly and, being a youth of spirit, resented it. He came to Chili, where he has lived for the past fifteen years. Now, strangely enough, considering it has done everything for him, he detests Chili and the people with whom he has to associate, and he wants to return to England, where everybody hates him. What he would do if he got there I don't know, but he seems to think he might turn over a new leaf, marry, and settle down to a quiet country life. Perhaps he would; perhaps he wouldn't—there's no telling; at any rate, that has been his dream for fifteen years. You ask, and very naturally too, if he's so bitten with the notion, why doesn't he carry it out? And I reply, with an equal pretence to nature, because he can't; the poor fellow has no money. Some people have more than they know what to do with—£250,000 for instance—he has none!"

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"Who are you, and what makes you tell me all this? Look here, if you don't leave me, I'll——"

"No, you won't," the stranger said, drawing a revolver from beneath his coat. "I see you've got a Smith and Wesson in that pocket. I'm sorry, but I'll just have to trouble you for it."

Thus menaced, Bradshaw surrendered his pistol, which the other coolly examined, and deposited in his own pocket.

"As I was going to say, and this is where the curious part of my story commences, that young man, who, after all, is not a bad sort of fellow, wants to give up his wild unchristian life out here, and get home to England. Possibly with six thousand a year he might become a credit to his family. It is his only chance in life, remember, and if he doesn't want to go under for ever, he has to make the most of it. Meanwhile he has not been idle. To assist his fortunes, he has joined a certain Society, whose object is the amassing of money, by fair means or foul, and which is perhaps the most powerful organization of its kind in the wide, wide world. Now pay particular attention to what I am about to say.

"News reaches this Society from London (their method of obtaining information, I may tell you, is little short of marvellous) that a certain well-known banker has absconded with £250,000. His destination, though he thinks no one aware of it, is Buenos Ayres. On arrival in that port, he is watched continually, and on two occasions attempts are made to procure his money. By a mischance they fail. Suspecting something of the sort, he crosses the mountains into Valparaiso, and takes a house in the Calle de San Pedro. The Society's spies have followed his movements with undeviating attention; they shadow him day and night; they even take the houses on either hand of his in order that they may make quite sure of his safety. One night they will descend upon that unfortunate man and—well, I leave you to picture what the result will be!"

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Bradshaw said not a word, but he looked as if he were about to have a fit.

"Now, look here, I'm not the sort of man to rob any one without giving him a run for his money. You've had your turn, and you've bungled it. Now I have mine, and I'm going to carry it through. I see my chance to a straight life in the best land under the sun if I can raise the money. You've robbed the fatherless and the widow to get here; why shouldn't I rob you to get there? You can't get out of this house alive, and if you remain in it they'll certainly kill you. There's a man watching you on the right, and just at present I'm supposed to be looking after you on the left. If you doubt me, go out into the street, and take a walk round the block; before you've gone fifty yards you'll find you're being shadowed by a man in a grey poncho. It strikes me you're between the devil and the deep sea. What do you think?"

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Bradshaw only groaned feebly. His pluck, if he ever had any, had quite deserted him. His visitor took a pack of cards from his pocket, and threw them on the table.

"Do you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to sell my friends; in other words, I'm going to do business with you on my own account. It's been done before in the history of the world. We'll have a little gamble. But you must pull yourself together, or you won't be able to look after your own interests. The stakes shall be as follows. If I win, I take the lot, the whole £250,000, or what there is left of it, and find my own way to get it out of the house. If you win, I pledge myself solemnly to assist you to escape with it. You'll have to trust me, because you can't do anything else. Do you understand? Don't make a noise, or I assure you I'll shoot you where you sit. There shall be fair play between us, come what may. Now cut! The highest wins, remember!"

"I can't! I refuse! What right have you to make such a demand?"

"What right had you to betray your trust? Go on. I'll give you half a minute, and if you don't cut then, I solemnly swear I'll blow your brains out!"

"Have you no mercy?"

"Drop that and cut. Ah! you're going to,—that's right. Show!"

Trembling like a leaf, Bradshaw turned up a card.

"*Queen of Hearts!*"

"A splendid cut! My luck will have to be good to beat it. Great Jove, prosper me, you alone know for what a stake I'm playing!"

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"*King of Spades!*"

"I'm afraid, Mr. Bradshaw, I've won by a point. I'm sorry it turned up King Death though—doesn't look as if I'm destined to get much good out of it, does it? If I'd lost, I should certainly have shot myself before daybreak; as it is, the money's mine. I suppose you've buried it under the floor here. Bring me a shovel!"

When the shovel was forthcoming, Veneda, for so we will, with your permission, henceforth call Marmaduke Plowden, set to work, and in ten minutes had Bradshaw's treasure unearthed. Having made sure of it, he turned to the unfortunate banker, and said—

"Now, my friend, I should advise you to make yourself particularly scarce. For if they find you here, and the money gone, they'll probably make things unpleasant for you. As for me, I've got to find a way to get this out of the house, and then out of the country. Confound the man, he's fainted."

That Veneda did manage to smuggle the money out of the house without attracting the attention of the watchers on the other side is evident from a letter written the next night (a copy of which we have already seen), and which, we know, left Chili by an English man-of-war. That a case of specie followed it a week later, and duly arrived in London, I have also ascertained by perusal of a certain Steamship Company's books.

It only remained now for Veneda to follow it himself, and this he was making arrangements to do. He was, however, compelled to exercise the greatest caution, for he was quite aware that the Society (whose name had so much frightened Bradshaw), of which he was one of the executive, did not regard him with any extraordinary trust; and to leave the country suddenly by one of the usual routes would, in all probability, result in his being met and knifed on arrival at his destination. This risk he had not the least desire to run.

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As for Bradshaw, that unfortunate man, he was indeed in parlous case, so much so, that he dared not venture out lest he might be assassinated, while he dared not remain where he was for fear he might be murdered; he was in fact destitute of everything, even of the consolation of that time-worn maxim, "Virtue is its own reward."

CHAPTER II.

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A STRANGE NIGHT.

Just a week, night for night, after the events recorded in the previous chapter, Marcos Veneda was making his way slowly along the Sea-Front, towards a distant portion of the city. The short winter day, made all the shorter by a thick pall of cloud stretched across the sky, was fast drawing to a close. Far out beyond the harbour a faint streak of silver light still lingered, as if loth to say farewell; but nearer the wharves the water lay black and sullen like the mantle of approaching night. In the streets, though the hour still wanted twenty minutes of six, but few people were abroad; for such was the lawless condition of Valparaiso at that time, that walking after nightfall had become not only an unpleasant, but in many districts an exceedingly dangerous undertaking.

But though, after he had proceeded a little way, Marcos Veneda stopped abruptly in his walk and stood for some moments gazing out to sea, there was nothing in his face to show that he was in any way conscious of either the atmospheric effects or the personal danger to which I have just alluded. It might rather have been inferred, from the frown that contracted his forehead and the expression which fixed itself round his mouth, that his thoughts were very far removed from any such minor matters. Certain was it that he was more than a little disturbed in his mind, and it was equally probable that, so far as he saw at present, he was no nearer a solution of his problem than he had been at any time during the previous twenty-four hours. Twice since he had come to a standstill his lips had moved in commencement of a sentence, and twice he had dug his stick impatiently into the ground before him, but the frown did not relax nor the expression change. The truth was he found himself in a very awkward predicament, one which will readily explain itself when I say that he had been summoned to, and was on his way to attend, a council meeting of the Society, to confer *as to the best means of obtaining possession of Bradshaw's treasure*. As he walked he was trying to arrange his course of action, for he was the victim of a natural

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delicacy, which he knew would prevent him from informing his colleagues of the fact that he had already appropriated and disposed of the money.

Presently, however, he seemed to have decided upon some course, for he pulled himself together, adjusted his hat, which had slipped somewhat out of its usual position, and resumed his walk with the air of a man who had only made up his mind after mature consideration. Just as he did so the clouds opened their store, and a heavy shower descended.

While he is passing along the Front, perhaps we may be excused if we seek to become better acquainted with one in whose company we are destined to travel many thousands of miles.

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He is indeed a strange man, this Marcos Veneda, a man of such perplexing mixtures that I doubt very much whether his most intimate friend could, under any circumstances, properly describe him. Gifted by nature with such advantages, both personal and otherwise, as but seldom fall to the share of one man, it seemed the irony of Fate that he should be debarred from deriving the slightest real or lasting benefit from any one of them. Hated with a cordial and undisguised hatred by the Chilanos themselves, and barely tolerated by the English section of the community, he supported an existence in Chili that was as unique as his own individuality was complex and extraordinary. To any one more sensitive such a life would have been unendurable, but Marcos Veneda seemed to derive a positive enjoyment from his social ostracism, and to become more and more satisfied with his lot in life as the gulf which cut him off from his neighbours widened. Among other things, it was characteristic of the man that he treated every one, high and low, alike; he unbent to nobody; but if it could be said that he was more amiably disposed towards one class than another, it was to those who would be the least likely ever to repay his cordiality. How he lived—for he practised no profession, and he certainly served no trade or master—no one knew; he made it a boast that he had never received a remittance from the outside world, and yet he was well known to have no income of his own. On the other hand, though he owed nobody anything, he had always money to spend, while those who had been privileged to see, reported that he occupied quarters in a semi-fashionable portion of the town that were very far removed from poverty-stricken.

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Like most other people in Chili, in the year 1891, he had been drawn into the bitter civil war then proceeding, and he knew, if only on the score of party politics, the next twenty-four hours would decide much for him.

And not to Veneda alone, but to many other unfortunates compelled to remain in Valparaiso that night, was the question which the morrow would determine, of vital moment. The fierce struggle which for the better part of a year had been raging between the forces of the Dictator Balmaceda and those of the Opposition or Congressionalist Party, as they were more usually called, had at length reached such a pitch that it required but one more vigorous battle to find a termination.

From being spread over the land, the two opposing armies were now come face to face. The previous week had proved a deeply exciting one. Events had crowded thick and fast upon each other, beginning with the battle of Colmo; when, after a stubborn, hard-fought engagement, lasting something like five hours, the Opposition had gained a well-earned victory. Balmaceda's army had marched into battle 14,000 strong, and had been obliged to beat a retreat, having lost, besides 1000 men killed and many more than that number wounded, 18 field-guns, and 170 mules laden with stores and ammunition. So signal was the disaster that, on realizing it, no less than 1500 men of the Government forces threw down their arms and fled into the mountains, while twice that number changed their uniforms and went over *holus bolus* to the enemy.

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Immediately this crushing news became known to him, Balmaceda reinforced the garrison of Valparaiso with troops from the south, and then, with an army of 8000 men, perched himself on the heights above the city, and prepared to fight the last and decisive battle of the campaign.

In Valparaiso the result of the impending engagement was, as may be imagined, anxiously awaited by every one, *Gobiernistas* and *Oppositores* alike. The former made no secret of their intention, in the event of victory crowning their arms, to wreak vengeance upon their enemies. But the *Oppositores*, on the other hand, though equally sanguine of success, wisely refrained from giving vent to their feelings, for not only were they located in the enemy's camp, so to speak, but they could not help foreseeing that even a victory for their cause would involve them in great risk, inasmuch as the Government troops would undoubtedly fall back upon the town, when they would in all probability commence to sack and burn Opposition property.

Such was the position of affairs on the evening described at the commencement of the chapter.

As I have said, Marcos Veneda appeared to have made up his mind. This might have been gathered from the set of his shoulders and his carriage of his body when he resumed his walk. There was also a new and singularly defiant look in his face as he passed into the Calle de Victoria which had not been there five minutes before.

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Half-way down the street he paused to try and decipher a notice newly pasted on a wall. As he read, he became conscious that he was being watched. Looking up, he found himself confronted by one of the most respected English residents then remaining in the town. This gentleman, whose personal appearance would not have been out of place in a London board-room, had always shown himself one of Veneda's most inveterate foes, and for this reason the latter was inclined to cross over the road without a second glance at him. That, however, the elder man would not permit; he advanced and button-holed his victim before he had time to leave the pavement.

"I think you are going in my direction," he began, in order to give Veneda time to recover from his astonishment. "In that case I shall not be trespassing upon your time if I ask you to allow me to walk a little way with you. I have something I want to say to you."

"I object to being button-holed in this fashion," the other replied, an angry flush mantling his face.

"Not when it is to enable you to learn something to your advantage, I think," his companion said quietly. "However, don't let us quarrel, I simply stopped you because I want to do you a good turn. I know very well you dislike me."

"It may be bad policy to say so," Veneda sneered, "but I must own I do not exactly love you; you see, you have never given me an opportunity."

"Well, we won't discuss that now. What I want to say is, that I think in times like these we Englishmen ought to hang a bit closer together, don't you know; to try and help each other in any way we can."

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The old gentleman, whose intentions were really most benevolent, gazed anxiously at his companion, to see how his speech would be taken. But Veneda's only answer was to laugh in a peculiarly grating fashion. It was an unpleasant performance, born of the remembrance of snubs and bitter discouragements received at the other's hands in by-gone days. For the space of thirty seconds neither spoke, and then it was the younger man, who said abruptly—

"Well?"

"You don't mind my going on?"

"I certainly should if I could prevent it," replied Veneda; "but you've got me at a disadvantage, you see. I must listen to you."

"Well, the long and the short of it is, I want to warn you."

"That's exceedingly good of you; and pray what of?"

"Of yourself. It is—forgive my saying so—an openly discussed subject in the town that you are playing a double game."

Veneda stopped suddenly, and leaning his back against a wall, faced his companion.

"A double game," he said slowly, as if weighing every word before he allowed himself to utter it; "and in what way is it supposed that I am playing a double game? Think carefully before you speak, for I may be compelled to hold you responsible."

The worthy merchant experienced a sensation of nervousness. His memory recalled several little episodes in Veneda's past, the remembrance of which, under the present circumstances, was not likely to contribute to his peace of mind.

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"Now don't get angry, my dear fellow," he hastened to say, "I'm only telling you this for your own good. I mean that it is said you are endeavouring to stand with a leg in either camp; that while you pose among us as an active Oppositionist, you are in reality in communication with Balmaceda's leaders. In other words, that, while we have been trusting you, you have been selling our secrets to our foes."

"Well?"

Now it was a remarkable fact, that while the old gentleman expected and even dreaded an exhibition of wrath from his companion, he was in reality a good deal more frightened by this simple question than he would have been by the most violent outburst. And yet there was nothing startling in the word itself, nor in the manner in which it was uttered. Veneda still lounged in the same careless attitude against the wall, looking his companion up and down out of his half-closed eyes, as if to cause him any uneasiness would be the one thing furthest from his mind; but it was noticeable that his right hand had stopped fingering the trinkets on his watch-chain, and had passed into his coat-pocket, where a certain bulginess proclaimed the existence of a heavy object.

"Go on," he continued slowly, "since you seem to be so well informed; what else do my kind friends say?"

"Well, if you want it bluntly, Veneda, they say that if our side wins to-morrow, of which there seems to be little or no doubt, and you remain in the city, your life won't be worth five minutes' purchase."

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"And—and your reason for telling me all this?"

"Simply because I want to warn you. And because, in spite of your Spanish name, which every one knows is assumed, you are an Englishman; and, as I said before, Englishmen ought to do what they can to help each other at such times as these. You don't think I've said too much?"

"By no means. I hope you'll understand how grateful I am to you for your trouble."

"No trouble; I only wish the warning may prove of some use to you. Look here, we haven't been very good friends in the past, but I do hope—"

"That in the future we may be David and Jonathan on a substantial New Jerusalem basis, I suppose. Do you hear those guns?"

The noise of cannonading came down the breeze. And as he heard it the merchant shuffled uneasily.

"What does it mean?"

"Well, I think it means that to-morrow will decide things more important than our friendship. That's all. You're not coming any farther my way? Then good-night!"

With a muttered apology for having so long detained him, the old gentleman continued his walk to the left hand. When he had quite disappeared, Veneda resumed *his* walk, saying softly to himself, "This is what comes of listening to the voice of woman. I was an idiot ever to have mixed myself up with Juanita. I might have known she would have given me away. Never mind, the money's gone to England, and if I can manage to stave Macklin off to-night, and Boulger comes to terms about his schooner, I shall beat them yet. But suppose Juanita *should* suspect? What on earth should I do then?"

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This thought was evidently of an absorbing nature, for he walked briskly on, regarding no one, and turning neither to the right hand nor to the left, until he had gone about three hundred yards. Then finding himself face to face with a tall and narrow archway, guarded by a substantial iron gate, he paused irresolute. To all appearance he was endeavouring to make up his mind whether he should enter. Having decided in the affirmative, he knocked upon the iron-work of the gate. It was immediately opened, and an old man holding a lantern looked out, crying as he did so

"Quién esté ahí?" ["Who is there?"]

Submitting his name, after a brief scrutiny he was admitted into the patio, or courtyard of the building, of which the gate formed the outer guard. The wet stones (for it was still raining), the dripping gutters, and the weird moaning of the wind round the corners and between the housetops, did not add to the cheerfulness of the place.

Half-way across the patio Veneda turned to his guide.

"Hold on, Domingo," he said, "in these matters it is just as well to be prepared. Whom have we here to-night?"

"Pablos Vargas, José Nunez, and the Englishman, John Macklin, senior."

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"All three? Very good. Go on!"

They approached a small door in the wall on the left hand of the courtyard; between its chinks a bright light streaked forth. A subdued murmur came from within, which was hushed as if by magic when the old man rapped upon the panel. Next moment Veneda was inside the room, endeavouring to accustom his eyes to the bright light of a common tin lamp hanging upon the wall.

It was but a small apartment, destitute of any furniture save a rough table and a chair or two, and filthy to an indescribable degree. The three men, for whose presence Veneda had been prepared, were evidently awaiting his coming. It was doubtful, however, judging from their expressions, whether they were pleased or annoyed at his punctual appearance. Though the heads of that mysterious organization which had so much frightened Bradshaw, with one exception they were not interesting. Pablos Vargas and José Nunez were simply Chicanos of the middle class, but the Englishman, John Macklin, was altogether extraordinary.

Besides being in many other ways peculiar, he was an Albino of the most pronounced type, possessed of the smallest body and the largest head imaginable in a human being; his arms were those of a baboon, so long that his fingers, when he stood upright, could touch his legs below his knees. His complexion was as delicate as the inside of a rosebud, his eyes were as pink as those of a white rabbit, while his hair was nothing more nor less than a mop of silkiest white floss. Added to these peculiarities, his voice was a strangely high falsetto, and when he became excited, he had a habit of cracking his finger-joints one after the other, a thing which in itself is apt to be a disconcerting trick.

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His history, so far as could be gathered, was an eventful one, and would repay perusal. By his own statement he was a native of Exeter, England, in which city his father had at one time conducted a school for the sons of small tradesmen. At the age of ten, young Macklin became a choir boy in the Cathedral, but his personal appearance and moral character proving too much for his fellow-choristers, after a month some charge was preferred against him, and he was dismissed with ignominy. This circumstance, very naturally, was hardly of a kind calculated to straighten his already warped nature, and then and there, with a precocity beyond his years, he embarked upon a war against society, which, as I shall endeavour to prove later, had suffered no diminution when our history opens.

At the age of seventeen he became a lawyer's clerk in Bristol, following this vocation until his majority from which time until his thirtieth birthday nothing definite can be learnt of him. It is believed, however, that for the greater part of that period he served a sentence in one of her Majesty's convict prisons for fraud; and a semblance of truth is lent to the belief by the

knowledge that directly he re-appeared in society he took ship for America.

The record of his doings across the Atlantic would form interesting reading, if only for its variety. For three years, from thirty to thirty-three, he followed many professions, including those of railway scalper, book fiend, and insurance tout, eventually figuring as "The Wild Man of New Guinea" in a dime museum in San Francisco, eating raw meat in a cage, and growling at the public from behind substantial iron bars. When this latter enterprise panned out unsatisfactorily, it left him no alternative but to migrate into Mexico, where he supported a chequered career as a money-lender, a lottery runner, keeper of a Monte hell, and suspected leader of a gang of most notorious thieves. Mexico no longer affording sufficient scope for his peculiar talents, he repaired to Brazil, thence drifting by easy stages into Chili, where, at the time of the Revolution, he had embarked on this new and exceedingly remunerative line of business.

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Veneda looked from one to the other before he spoke, but his eyes rested longest on the face of the Albino and it was to him he addressed his opening salutation. It was a part of his policy to ignore Vargas and Nunez, as if they did not exist.

"Well," he said, by way of introduction, "gentlemen of the Executive, you're annoying, to say the least of it. What may be the reason of this unexpected meeting? I had more important business to-night."

"You always seem to——" Nunez commenced.

"Be silent," sneered the Albino, with truculent courtesy, "you're wasting the honourable gentleman's time. Can't you see he's in a hurry to attend the Council of the President? Ho! ho! Senor Veneda, you can't bluff me, so don't attempt it."

"Who wants to bluff you?" said Veneda. "Don't be a fool, Macklin. Tell me why this meeting has been called."

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"Because there is a lot of important business to be got through, and by reason of the disturbances we may not be able to hold another for a week or two."

Veneda seated himself, and the meeting commenced.

"In the first place," said the Albino, who acted as chairman, "there is some important correspondence from the branches to be considered. I have here a letter from London, informing us that on the 13th May, Emanuel Bendalack, secretary of a well-known Building Society, absconded from England with £18,000. He left in the steamer *Royal Sceptre*, bound for Cape Town; he is disguised as a Wesleyan missionary, and booked his passage in the name of Blander. If you will allow me to make a suggestion, I would advise that our agents in South Africa be directed to meet Mr. Blander on his arrival, and that the Greek, Manolake, be despatched from here as soon as possible to attend to the affair. Does that meet with your approval?"

Assent having been given, the Albino made an entry in a book, and took up another letter.

"This is a communication from Buda-Pesth. It is to the effect that the well-known merchant, Julius Karlinska, left that city on the 6th June, taking with him a sum equivalent to £22,000, the property of his creditors. He is believed to be making for Australia, and has been traced as far as Port Said. Photograph enclosed. What do you desire regarding Herr Karlinska?"

Nunez was the first to offer a suggestion.

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"I would advise communicating with our agent in Melbourne, and sending some one at once to take over the affair."

"Who is at liberty just now?" asked Veneda.

"Emil Valdor, Shivaloff, and Maunders of the men, that is if Manolake goes to Cape Town; Marie Darnée and Juanita Valdores of the women."

"Juanita? The very person; despatch her!"

"Impossible! She is wanted here."

Veneda gave a little sigh of disappointment.

"Where is the Italian, Automa?" asked Nunez.

"In New York, shadowing Clifford Blake-Ganon, who is expected to bolt at any moment," answered Macklin.

"Then send the Darnée," urged Vargas; "she will find him and do the business better than any."

"Is that your wish, senors?" the chairman asked.

They signified that it was.

"Very good, then the Darnée goes. And now we come to another matter, one nearer home."

Veneda gave a start, so small that it was unnoticed save by the Albino.

"What matter?"

The dwarf cast a look at him full of withering contempt.

"Now, see you," he said angrily, "it's not a bit of good your coming here and trying to make me believe that you want the whole story overhauled again. You know very well what I mean."

"That poor hunted devil of an English banker in the Calle de San Pedro, I suppose?"

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"You suppose! Look here, Marcos Veneda, what the devil's the use of your wasting our time playing 'possum like that?'"

"How was I to know to what you alluded? we've so many irons in the fire. But since we are on that subject, Macklin, I've got something to say about it. Don't you think we might give the poor cur a run for his miserable life? From all accounts he's pretty well frightened out of his senses already!"

The Albino, Vargas, and Nunez stared with astonishment; in all their experience of him, they had never known Marcos Veneda behave like this before. The Albino laughed suspiciously.

"I wonder what your little game is, my friend," he said. "This is a new line for you. Want us to spare him, do you? Very pretty, I'm sure; would look well in a tract, wouldn't it, with a devil dodger's head on the frontispiece!"

"Stow that, Macklin; I only want fair play for the wretch."

"Fair play, is it? Oh, I promise you he shall have *dead* loads of that."

The Albino laughed uproariously at his own vile joke. He was joined by Vargas and Nunez.

Veneda's face grew black as thunder.

"That's enough," he said, with a sudden outburst of passion. "Stop that! I'll not be laughed at by a set of greasy scattermouches like you."

The merriment ceased abruptly, and the Albino took the opportunity of re-commencing business.

"To-morrow, whichever way the fighting goes, there'll be rioting and sacking of houses. That's our opportunity."

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"And who is to do the work?"

"We will decide that by lot."

"But how do you know that he hasn't taken flight, or that the information hasn't leaked out, and the *cache* been rifled already?"

"Because, my friend, as you're perfectly aware, the house has been watched day and night ever since he sneaked into the town. No, no, don't be afraid, we have taken very good care of ourselves; nobody has come out, not even the old mole himself; and certainly no one has gone in. You needn't be alarmed, the money is safe enough. He would be a clever and courageous man who managed to play false with us."

Veneda breathed again. It had been an anxious moment; but he flattered himself he had not betrayed his uneasiness, while at the same time he had learnt all he wanted to know. The questions he was about to ask were only intended to disarm any suspicions his manner might have aroused.

"And after the money is our property?"

"It will be divided here, on the capstan-head, so to speak; and when each man has received his share, he can up stakes, and go to the devil with it his own way."

"And how much do you say it will amount to? Remember the old man's had a good slice out of it himself."

"Lord grant me patience! How many more questions do you want to ask? Why, as near as we can fix it, Two Hundred and Twenty-five Thousand Pounds; isn't it enough for you?"

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"Pretty near," Veneda answered, with a laugh; "and now, if you've got anything else to do, let's get to it at once. I've business down town."

At a signal from Albino, Vargas placed dice upon the table, and the gamble commenced. Luck was with Veneda, for finally Vargas and the Albino were elected to carry out the robbery. When that point had been decided, the hour for meeting on the following night, and a few other minor matters arranged, Veneda wished them a sneering "good luck" of their work, and started homewards as fast as his legs would carry him. As he went he laughed softly to himself, as one who enjoys a joke of extraordinary humour. He was decidedly in better spirits than when he accompanied him to the house. He even forgot himself so far as to whistle.

Considering the state of Valparaiso at the time, and the fact that there was no protective power at hand to quell disturbances, the city was wonderfully quiet. A great anxiety was upon everybody, a disquiet that was not at all attuned to noise.

Veneda strode briskly along, occupied with his own thoughts. But strange though it may seem, he was not thinking of the scene he had just left, nor of the impending battle of the morrow; he was recalling a certain box and letter he had despatched to a London merchant a week previous, and

reflecting that by the time the Society could discover his treachery, he would in all probability be on the high seas, far beyond the reach of vengeance or defeat. There was only one thing; at any risk he must prevent the woman Juanita from suspecting his intentions.

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So absorbed was he in his thoughts, that he had arrived at his house, let himself in, and ascended the stairs to his own peculiar sanctum before he was really conscious that he had done so. The staircase and the room were in total darkness. He crossed to a bracket where matches were usually kept, and striking one, turned to light a candle close at hand. As the flame caught, a low, musical laugh, distinctly feminine, greeted his ears. His nerves must have been overstrung, for he started violently, and came within an ace of dropping both candle-stick and match. Holding the light aloft, he glanced in the direction whence the sound proceeded. The room was big enough to contain many shadows, and the candle did not give a very good light.

"Juanita?"

"Yes, Juanita certainly; are you so surprised to see me?"

He paused to light two other candles before replying. His visitor did not fail to notice the trembling of his hand. Then the room being illuminated to his satisfaction, and the door carefully closed, he remembered his duty as host, and bade her welcome in proper form. When she heard him say that he was glad to see her, she laughed very softly, and said—

"Marcos, I wonder when you will learn to tell a falsehood with an air of truth?"

Evidently he did not deem this question worthy of a reply, for he threw himself into a chair, and began to roll a cigarette, without vouchsafing one.

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Now, when I say that Juanita Encarnación Valdores, whose name we have heard mentioned so many times before, was altogether an uncommon woman, I desire to imply that she was uncommon not only in a physical, but in several other senses besides. Her beauty alone was such as to arrest immediate attention. Of rather more than middle height, she carried herself with an erectness calculated to give one the idea that she was several inches taller than her real stature. Even for one owning Spanish blood, her complexion was dark almost to swarthy, while her upper lip was not without a suspicion of what is irreverently termed a moustache. Yet it was strange that these two things, counted in other women serious defects, in Juanita not only failed to detract from the general effect, but in a great measure added to it. Her hands and feet were in keeping with the rest of her frame, neither too large nor too small; her manner could be anything she chose, from caressing to fiendish; and her voice and laugh, when she so desired, sounded on the ear like sweetest music. Like Marcos Veneda, she was all mysteriousness. Many curious stories were told of her past, and as a faithful chronicler, I must admit that they did not all redound to her credit. She had been in Chili nearly four years; but where she had hailed from before that I am not prepared to say. It only concerns us that, at the time of which I write, she was without a protector, and indeed it appeared as if she would be likely to remain so, for no man was careless enough of his reputation with the public to take such a position upon himself. It is possible that this may have been the reason why she drifted towards Veneda, whose predicament, as we have seen, was not altogether dissimilar to her own.

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"Come, come, Marcos," she said, "I cannot say that you're the best of company to-night. Tell me, don't you think I'm a plucky woman to venture out on such a night, and to call on you of all people?"

"I am proportionately honoured," he replied gravely; "but I suppose you have some very good reason, or you wouldn't have run the risk."

She shrugged her shoulders, and made a little gesture with her hands, as one who would say, "who knows." Then her manner changed completely, and leaning forward, she placed one hand on his arm. He had been earnestly regarding her all this time, endeavouring to read in her face what was passing in her mind. Now he prepared himself for the struggle he felt was imminent.

"My Marcos," she said softly, and the name came very prettily from her lips, "I suppose you have heard that people call me a witch, because they say I turn men's heads. They also say—no, do not speak till I have done—that sometimes I can read men's thoughts, and not unfrequently foretell future events."

"Then, Juanita," he answered, as soon as he could get a word in, "you certainly could not have come at a better time. You shall read my fate, and advise me as to what course I should pursue regarding it."

Without another word she lifted his hand, which lay upon the arm of her chair, and examined it carefully. The flickering candle-light fell upon her bent head, and danced amid the luxuriant tangle of her hair.

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"Shall I tell you everything I see?" she asked. He saw that her face had grown suddenly very serious.

"Why not?" he replied.

"Because I am frightened, Marcos," she answered, shuddering, "because there is something terrible written on your hand."

"In what way?"

"Treachery, Marcos, and for a large sum of money!"

He snatched his hand angrily away, and to cover his embarrassment affected entire disbelief.

"You are indeed a fortune-teller! You will accuse me of having assassinated the President directly. And pray what else did you see?"

"I had better not tell you, you will only be angry with me."

"Angry with you! Never!"

"Marcos, I saw on your hand more than you dream. Hush, listen to me; you are contemplating flight."

"That is not a difficult thing to see. If things do not improve here, many of us will be driven into clearing out. You must be smarter than that, Juanita."

"Oh, but that is not all. I see that you have sent great treasure away to a far country, and that you intend to follow it."

"This is beautiful! What—what else?"

"That your professed love for me is only lip service, for you intend to desert me."

"That is about as true as the rest. Have you anything further?"

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"That your treasure amounts to over £200,000 of English money, and that it is directed to a—let me see,"—here she pretended to study his hand again,— "Sir Benjamin Plowden (bah! your English names!) who lives in the East India Avenue of your great smoky London. Is that true? Ah! I see it is."

There was a ring of triumph in her voice. She had played a doubtful card, and scored a victory. For the moment Veneda was totally unnerved; his face, pale before, was now snow-white; large beads of perspiration covered his forehead.

"How did you learn all that nonsense?" he stammered.

"Why, from your hand, of course," came the mocking reply. "And is it such nonsense? Marcos, Marcos, I have always said you were a clever man, but you must be cleverer still to deceive me. Woman's wit—you know the proverb. Will you have more? Shall I tell you, for instance, what Macklin and the Society would say of it, and what key guards your treasure-chamber?"

"By all means, if there is such a thing," he cried, his nervousness lifting his voice almost to a falsetto. Meanwhile his eyes seemed to be attempting to read her very soul. Perhaps his scrutiny relieved him, for the expression on his face changed.

"I knew you couldn't do it," he said quietly. "I return your compliment; you're very clever, but you must be cleverer still to deceive me."

"How do you know that I don't understand it?" she inquired, with just a suspicion of nervousness now in *her* voice. "Since I can tell so much, how do you know that I can't tell all?"

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"Because, my dear"—he had quite recovered himself by this time, and was bitterly regretting having betrayed his feelings so openly—"even if I had any such business on hand, I am certain you don't know what you pretend, otherwise you would have it in your eyes. Ah!"

His attention was attracted to a small writing-table standing in a corner of the room. The blotting-book lay upon it turned upside down. Seizing it, he fell to turning the leaves. One was missing.

"Ha! ha! my little sorceress!" he cried mockingly, "you are discovered. It is an old trick and a good one. I remember blotting the first two sides of the letter on a fresh page. To obtain your information, you have simply torn that out, and held it against the light. But the rest, the most important part, was not blotted at all. So you can do me no harm after all."

"Why should you think I wish to harm you?"

"I don't think you do; I only think you might. And you see, of £200,000, two hundred thousand pounds' worth of care must be taken. By the way, since you know so much, I doubt if it would be prudent to let you out of this house again."

Ignoring the threat entirely, she continued the conversation as if it had not been uttered.

"At least you might have trusted me, Marcos."

"Have I said that I do not?"

"You have not said so in so many words, but I know you don't. Besides, you are leaving Chili to-morrow night."

"How do you know that?"

"I forget, but it's true, isn't it, Marcos?—and you will take me with you, won't you? Even if you no longer love me, you will have pity on me? You will not leave me to their mercy? I am so tired of this life of spying and conspiracy, and I would be so faithful to you."

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Her voice trembled. He stopped his restless pacing up and down the room, and looked at her. As far as he could see there was only a great love for himself shining in her eyes. She looked wondrously beautiful. It was a temptation and a danger; yet perhaps, all things considered, it was the safest course. A second later he had made up his mind, and as he did so a corresponding light came into his eyes. It would have been hard to tell which was more in earnest. Resuming his seat beside her, he said—

"Juanita, I do love you, and I believe I can trust you; come what may, we will go together."

"My own dear love!"

He took her hand and gravely kissed it. The crisis was past.

Both felt they had scored a victory, but both felt it would require very little to overthrow it. Five minutes later she was speeding home unaccompanied, for she would not hear of his being seen in the streets with her. In the security of her own room she regarded herself in her glass, and as she did so she said half aloud—

"He did his very best to put me off the scent, but I beat him in the end. One thing is certain, he carries the piece of paper that is to authorize the payment of the money about with him, in a large locket fastened round his neck with a double chain. I felt it when my head rested on his breast. Two hundred thousand pounds—it's the greatest stake I ever played for. With that I should be a free woman again. Come what may, my Marcos, I'll never desert you till I have shared it with you or relieved you of it."

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When she had left him, Veneda threw up his window, and leant out into the night. The rain had ceased. He could see watch-fires gleaming all along the heights, and myriads of lights twinkling among the shipping in the harbour; but though he looked at them, I don't think he was conscious that he saw them. He was reviewing in his mind all he had passed through that evening, and wondering whether or not the balance stood in his favour.

From the consideration of his present position, his thoughts passed out across the open ocean to a mail-boat homeward bound. And so piercing was the gaze of his mind's eye, that it penetrated even through iron and timber to the vessel's bullion-room, where reposed a certain chest, with which his fortunes were not altogether unconnected. Then dropping the good ship behind it, as if she were standing still, on his fancy sped across the seas to the land he had not known for fifteen years. There in a smiling valley, nestling among beech woods, he found for himself a home, a life of honest independence, of love, of respect, and, above all things, of forgetfulness of Chili and the past! His imagination painted it for him with realistic touches, but would it ever come true? With Goethe he might very well have said, "When, how, and where? That is the question!"

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After a while he drew in his head, and shut the window. Then from round his neck he took a locket. Opening it, a curious slip of ragged paper fell to the floor. Picking it up, he gazed at it for a few seconds, and then replaced it, saying to himself—

"Boulger's squared—the *Island Queen* is ready, and with to-morrow night's tide I bid good-bye to Chili for ever and a day. They'll never think of looking for me in the South Pacific, and I'll work my way home by Australia and the East. Confound Juanita! I ought to have anticipated this trick of hers. It's the deuce and all, but there's no other way out of it, I must take her with me. It would be madness to leave her behind to act with the Albino and the Society against me; but before I get to the other side, if I don't hit out some plan to rid myself of her, my name's not Marmaduke Plowden!"

CHAPTER III.

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A STRANGER DAY.

Quite an hour before daybreak Veneda was awakened by sounds of excitement in the streets. Bitterly cold though the morning proved, almost every one was astir, listening for the cannonading which would proclaim the opening of the engagement on the heights. The booming of a few guns came with the breaking day, faintly at first, but growing louder as the light increased. Without doubt the long-expected battle had commenced.

Following the example of his neighbours, Veneda threw up his window and leant out to listen. Somehow or other, since his conversation with the English merchant in the Calle de Victoria the previous night, his confidence in a victory for the Government had been a little shaken; and now for the first time he began to experience twinges of real alarm for his own immediate safety. Supposing he should be arrested by the Congressionalist leaders for his treachery to them, where would his escape be then? In that case Boulger would not wait, and Juanita for her own safety would be certain to betray him. But he reflected that it was full early yet to be frightened, and moreover he had been in so many close things before, that one more or less could hardly matter.

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The behaviour of the people in the streets was peculiar. In their excitement men no longer showed evidences of partisanship; all the thoughts and anxieties of *Gobiernistas* and *Oppositores* alike were centred on the battle then proceeding. It was as though they were spectators of a

stage-play and nothing more. The time for individual animosity, they told themselves, would come later.

By breakfast-time the excitement had risen to fever heat. From the clearness with which the sounds could be distinguished, it was plain that the Government forces were being driven back, and this could have but one meaning,—the Opposition were advancing on Valparaiso. The noise grew louder every minute, and with its approach the turbulent element of the town began to make its presence felt in the streets. The peculiar ping of rifle-bullets sounded continually in the lower quarters; many business premises away from the main thoroughfares were looted; while in not one but several directions the smoke of incendiary fires rose on the clear morning air.

So certain had every one, by this time, become of the result of the fighting, that many Government supporters packed up their traps and quitted the town with as little ostentation as possible; either scurrying into the neighbouring mountains, or seeking refuge on board the foreign men-of-war at anchor in the harbour.

Towards ten o'clock the firing slackened off, and by half-past had ceased altogether. A victory had been won—but by whom? This question was in everybody's mouth.

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News, however, was not long forthcoming. In all directions terrified camp-followers—men, women, and children, on foot and on horseback—might have been seen making for the town as fast as their own legs or those of their beasts could carry them. As they hurried along they announced in loud voices the absolute defeat of the Government forces, exaggerating the details with every repetition of the story. After a short interval they were followed by the vanquished and flying troops themselves, who corroborated what the others had so authoritatively proclaimed. There could be no doubt that the Opposition had won a signal victory. The reign of terror was over! The hated Dictator, Balmaceda, hitherto regardless of what lives he sacrificed to gain his ends, was now not only powerless, but an outcast and a suppliant for his own.

Hard upon the heels of the fugitive troops, amid an outburst of wildest excitement, came the advance guard of the victorious army, with bands playing and colours waving. Bells clashed and jangled from every steeple, continual *vivas* rent the air, and crackers by hundreds were exploded in the streets. Every one wore the red ribbon of the Opposition, and every face (for active *Gobiernistas* were wise enough not to parade theirs) testified to the relief and joy with which the result was hailed. There could not have been a more popular termination to the struggle.

As soon as the result of the battle had become known, the Intendente had delivered up the town to the admirals of the foreign war-ships, who now in their turn handed it over to the Congressional leaders. The place had thus practically changed hands from the Republic to the Republic; from one class to the other and more popular section of the community.

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It may be imagined that Veneda took care to be well posted on all that occurred. With the entrance of the troops he saw the total destruction of his political hopes, and now his active mind was busily engaged working out the best possible means of securing his own safety, until the time should come for him to leave the country.

Reflecting that to all intents and purposes his life would depend on his personal appearance, he first turned his attention in that direction. In five minutes his close-cropped beard had disappeared; his heavy black moustache was twirled and twisted into quite a new and extraordinary shape; while his well-cut English clothes were discarded for a more Chilean garb, including a poncho and a broad-leafed sombrero. When thus equipped he paraded before his glass, he could not but admit that the effect was excellent. The odds were a thousand to one against any one recognizing in this typical Chilano the Marcos Veneda of half-an-hour before.

By the time he was dressed he had determined as to his next course of action. He saw that it would be impossible for him to remain where he was; therefore, until the hour for boarding the schooner should arrive, he must seek an asylum elsewhere. But before leaving the house many things had to be thought of. Glancing round the room with its host of familiar knick-knacks, he set himself to destroy what he did not desire should fall into other hands, concealing about his person such small articles of value or association as he wished to carry away. When this was accomplished he dropped a carefully-loaded revolver into the pocket of his poncho, and was ready to forsake the house.

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That he might not be observed leaving by the front door, he lifted the window and swung himself from it down into the patio. For a moment he stopped to listen, then hearing nothing suspicious, passed without further ado into the street. No one was to be seen.

Where to go, or what to do with himself (it was not yet two o'clock), he had not made up his mind. Strange to say, considering the danger it would involve him in, he felt an intense desire to see all that was to be seen, and to participate, himself, in the general excitement. Of the latter there was no lack; the town was full of disbanded soldiery, and serious rioting had already occurred. The foreign war-ships had landed forces to protect foreign life, but in the lower quarters the mob ruled paramount.

So complete was his disguise that Veneda found himself, on more than one occasion, standing side by side with former acquaintances, unmolested and unrecognized. The knowledge of this security gave him fresh courage, and he followed the course of the day's events with additional interest and vigour. Yet a danger he had never anticipated was in store for him.

Leaving the Calle de Victoria, he passed down a side street in the direction of the harbour, but before he had proceeded fifty yards a sound he knew only too well greeted his ears; it was the noise of a crowd in hot pursuit of something or somebody.

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Not wishing to run the risk of being mistaken for their quarry, he cast about him for a loophole of escape. But none presented itself. While he was looking, footsteps sounded close behind him. To his astonishment the runner was none other than John Macklin the Albino, chairman of the Society, his face livid with terror, and his breath coming from him in great spasmodic jerks. His clothes were in rags, and covered with a filth which reached even to his hair; his hat was gone, and long purple weals streaked his dainty cheeks. The agony expressed in his eyes lent an extraordinary effect to his face.

"Save me, save me!" he gasped, falling at Veneda's feet. "In the merciful name of God, I beseech you to save me!"

For the reason that Macklin did not recognize him, nothing would have been easier than for the other to have cast him off, and for the space of three breaths he was half inclined to do it. Then, for some reason which he was never afterwards able to explain (it must be understood that the dwarfs death would in a great measure have rescued him from his very awkward predicament), he determined to do his best to help him. It was a foolish resolution, but it was only on a par with the man's extraordinarily complex character.

The noise of the mob, like that of hounds in full cry, was drawing closer; any second might bring them into view. Turning to the terrified creature beside him, he cried—

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"I'll do my best for you. Pick up your heels and run."

Running appeared the last thing the Albino, in his present exhausted condition, would be capable of, but he nevertheless followed in the other's wake, panting horribly, and throwing his long arms about with windmill-like gesticulations. As they started the mob burst into view, and a second later a shot whisked in unpleasant proximity to Veneda's head. There is something chilling in the whine of a rifle-bullet, and as he heard it he began to repent having taken any share in the Albino's private concerns. Without turning his head, he cried—

"Faster, faster, round the next corner, and then follow me."

This was, however, easier said than done; the little man's strength, already taxed beyond straining pitch, was quite unequal to a fresh demand. He began to lag behind, and Veneda saw that if he reached the shelter of the street corner, about fifty yards distant, it would be as much as he could possibly accomplish.

Not a second was to be lost; their pursuers were barely more than a hundred and fifty yards behind. Stopping, he turned, and as his companion approached him, stooped and took him in his arms, throwing him up on to his shoulder as if his weight were the merest trifle. Then he resumed his flight.

Reaching the corner he flew round it, thankful to find no one in sight, and made for a row of deserted houses across the way. Into the patio of the third of these he dashed, and not until then did he place his burden on the ground.

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"I can't carry you any further; we must hide!" he cried, vigorously attacking a door which opened on to the courtyard; "our lives depend upon getting into this house. Help me, help me!"

The Albino required no second bidding, and between them they burst in the door. They were only just in time, for as the lock gave way they heard the vanguard of the mob come howling round the corner. Veneda knew that when they could not see their game before them, it would be only a question of seconds before they would commence their search of the neighbourhood. Experience had taught him that a mob does not allow itself to be robbed of its prey without a struggle.

Once inside the house he led the way up-stairs. Unlike most Chilian residences, it was of three storeys, and built of stone—a bad speculation on the part of an English builder. Not until they had ascended to the garrets did they pause to listen. An angry murmur came up to them from the street, and when he heard it Veneda turned to his companion, who was lying on the floor endeavouring to regain his breath, and said—

"That means that they've tracked us down. How we're going to give them the slip now is more than I can see."

As he spoke, a crash came from the lower regions.

"That's the front door," he continued calmly. "We must be moving on again. Are you ready?"

The Albino's only answer was to spring to his feet.

Being already as high up as they could get without crawling on to the roof, where next to go became the question. A noise of voices told them that their pursuers were within the house itself. They were caught like rats in a trap! Apart from any other consideration, it would, in all probability, be a most unpleasant death they would die; and Veneda reflected that after so many narrow escapes it would be humiliating to perish at the hands of a lawless mob in somebody else's quarrel.

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While these thoughts were flashing through his brain he was looking about him for some means

of exit, but save for the door they had entered by, and the window which looked out at the back over some lower roofs, nothing worthy of his consideration presented itself. The door was clearly impracticable, unless they desired to meet their pursuers on the stairs, and as to the window, there was a drop of fully fifteen feet from it on to the nearest roof, and at least twenty more on to the stones of the courtyard. By this time the foremost of the mob were in the room beneath them.

A heavy perspiration broke out on Veneda's forehead; the Albino shrank into a corner, and covered his face with his hands. But they could not meet their death without a struggle, so, come what might, they must try the window. Crossing to it Veneda threw it open, at the same time beckoning the dwarf to his side.

"Now," he said, "there is nothing for it but to get out on the roof, and crawl along the housetops till we can find a place to get down. Don't stand whimpering there, but pay attention to what I say. I'll swing myself up first, and when I'm ready I'll do my best to pull you after me. Stand by, or I swear I'll leave you to your fate!"

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It was a useless warning; the Albino was ready to risk anything, even a tumble into the courtyard, rather than to allow himself to fall into the hands of those who were now on the staircase leading to their room.

With all the speed he could command Veneda crawled backwards out of the narrow window, and clutched the thin guttering of the roof above. What he was about to attempt was not only a difficult, but a horribly dangerous feat, for there was literally nothing to catch hold of that would permit of a grip. It was an athletic test that would have tried the nerve and endurance of the most accomplished gymnast. Bit by bit, with infinite pain, he drew himself up, till his shoulders were above the guttering. The muscles of his arms appeared as if they must snap under the strain they were called upon to endure. The suspense was awful; but if it seemed long to Veneda before he was lying stretched on the roof, what an eternity must it have been to the miserable Albino crouched in the room below!

Then the other's voice reached him, saying—

"Crawl backwards out of the window, and give me your hands. Be quick! I can't stay like this long!"

The shouts of the mob and the trampling on the staircase stimulated him. Crawling out of the window as he was ordered, he stretched his long arms upwards. His hands were clutched from above; then he felt himself lifted clear of the sill, and next moment he was swaying out into mid air. If the strain on Veneda's muscles had been great when he pulled himself up on to the roof, how much greater was it now that he had not only to retain his own position, but to lift this other man as well! The Albino looked up into his face and saw the veins standing out upon it as large as macaroni stems, and strange though it may appear, it was only then that he recognized his deliverer. A minute later he was stretched on the roof-top, just as the leaders of the mob entered the room they had so lately quitted.

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It was a long time before either spoke. Then the Albino, leaning towards his preserver, whispered —

"Marcos, I owe you my life. I reckon I won't forget what you've done for me to-day."

"You had a close shave of it. What devil's game were you up to that they should chase you?"

"I met them in the Calle de Victoria, and some one cried 'Gobiernista'; next moment they started after me like bloodhounds. If I hadn't met you, I'd have been a dead man!"

Perhaps Veneda did not hear him. At any rate he made no reply. He was listening to the sounds in the street, and wondering, now that the mob found themselves outwitted, what their next move would be.

He was not to be kept long in suspense. That operations of some kind were being conducted he guessed from the sudden silence. Then a cry of "Fire!" went up, and next moment smoke burst from either end of the row. He understood exactly: not being able to find them, the mob intended to burn them out!

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From the two farthest houses the flames spread with awful rapidity, and as they saw it their tormentors howled and shrieked with delight. Fortunately the house, on the rearmost roof of which Veneda and the Albino lay, was the centre one, and for this reason they would have some time to wait before they could experience any actual danger.

It may be imagined with what interest they watched the approaching flames, speculating how soon they would be obliged to move again. The heat was over-powering; but the conflagration was not speedy enough for the miscreants below, who thereupon set fire to the lower regions of the middle house.

This, Veneda told himself, was becoming too much of a good thing. The tiles were every moment growing hotter and hotter, and in a few minutes it would be impossible to remain upon them. The dense, choking smoke enveloped them in clouds.

With an eye ever on the look-out, he saw that the only cool spot was a tiny position on a parapet to their left, as yet a good distance from the flames. He moved towards it, thinking he had done quite enough for his companion. There was not room for more than one upon the place, and he

secured it first.

Presently, overcome with heat and despair, the wretched Albino crawled along the roof, and endeavoured to find a foothold on it also. Veneda called upon him to go back, but he refused. It was impossible for both to remain—one must go, and a battle began for the position.

Partly owing to the situation of the outhouses below, partly to the fact that the mob was watching events from the street front, but more to the dense smoke which enveloped them, their struggle was unnoticed. It was of but short duration. How could one of the Albino's size hope to contend with a man so muscular as Veneda! For a few brief seconds they were locked in each other's arms; then Veneda's right hand seized upon the other's throat, and began to press his head further and further back. At last, to save himself from a broken neck, the Albino let go his hold, and fell with a yell from the roof into the smoke below. But though he had not succeeded in his attempt to remain upon the wall, he did not allow his companion to occupy it either, for as he fell he made a last feeble clutch at Veneda's legs. Slight though it was, it was sufficient to disturb the other's balance. He tottered, swayed, endeavoured to save himself, failed in the attempt, and finally fell, as his companion had done before him, into the Unknown. Such was the violence of his fall, that when he reached the bottom he lay stunned for some time.

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On recovering his senses he found himself lying in the hollow between the roofs of the two outhouses before mentioned. Save for the spluttering flames of the smouldering *débris*, it was quite dark. The crowd had dispersed, and though he looked carefully about him, nothing was to be seen of the Albino. Whether he had fallen into the courtyard and been killed or captured by the mob, he could not of course tell, but at any rate he was relieved to find that he had departed elsewhere.

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Having made sure of this, he rose and convinced himself that no bones were broken. He had experienced a miraculous escape, and he argued that it was a good omen for what lay before him. Clambering over the side of the roof, he lowered himself to the ground, and then skirting the ruins of the houses, proceeded into the street.

CHAPTER IV.

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THE ALBINO IS DISAPPOINTED.

When the Albino regained his senses, on the other side of the small outhouse, within five feet of where Veneda lay, his first idea was to find out if he had received any injury from his fall from the roof, and next to discover what had become of the man who had occasioned it.

He found that beyond a severe shaking and a few burns, he had sustained but trifling hurt, perhaps for the reason that by clutching at the parapet he had in some measure broken his fall. But though he searched diligently all round the patio, and even among the ruins of the houses hard by, not a trace of his late antagonist could he discover.

What a narrow escape had been his he realized when he looked about him, for on every side were heaped smouldering *débris* of the dwellings, while the conflagration was still proceeding, with unabated violence, only a few steps further along the street. Why he had not been killed by falling timber, found and despatched by the mob, or burnt up by the flames as he lay unconscious, he could not for the life of him understand.

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The street being quiet, he settled it in his own mind that the mob had gone elsewhere, believing their prey to have perished. So giving himself a final shake to make quite certain that all was sound, he waited his opportunity, and, when no one was passing, struck out in the direction of the Calle de San Pedro. In spite of his recent adventures he had not forgotten his appointment with Vargas at the house of the fugitive English banker; and, as he hurried along, he reflected with a chuckle that if, as in all human probability was the case, Veneda had perished with the falling house, then would there be one less with whom to divide the spoil. He wished, however, that he had seen the body. That, he told himself, would have been altogether more satisfactory, for he knew Vargas and Nunez well enough to be aware that they would not accept his statement for truth, unless he could bring substantial proof of its authenticity.

As he turned into the Calle de San Pedro, a man crossed over the road and joined him. It was Pablos Vargas. Without a word they proceeded to the house, a ramshackle, old adobe structure of one storey, with a broad verandah running round three sides, and a commodious patio on the fourth, this latter protected by a heavy gate.

As the conspirators approached it they were joined by two other men from the premises on either side.

"Well, Miguel," said the Albino, addressing himself to the taller of the twain, "what have you to report? He has not escaped you?"

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"No, señor. We have not seen a sign of him this week past, and we've watched day and night."

"Well, if he's gone you may pack your kits, and clear out of this country for ever. I promise you, you won't be able to live in it with me. You can go."

"We want our money," remarked the man who had not yet spoken.

"What? Want your money, do you, you longshore beach-comber—want your money before we've seen how you've done your work! Clear out of this. You'll be paid at the proper place, at ten."

"These are no times for promises. We want our money now," reiterated the man; "and what's more, we're going to have it!"

The Albino was not at all impressed by the man's determined attitude. Taking a step towards him, he whispered a sentence in his ear, with the result that next moment the fellow was scuttling down the street like one possessed, his companion after him.

Macklin turned to Vargas with a grin.

"There seems to be something in the old word after all. Now come; we've got our work cut out."

As he spoke he produced a key, and opened the door of the dwelling before which they stood, and which was to the right of that they designed to visit. Entering, they proceeded along the passage to the small yard at the back. Once there only a low wall separated them from the other house. With an agility surprising in one so deformed, the Albino mounted it, and dropped on to the other side; Vargas followed him, and together they approached a window. Opening this, they crept through it into the dwelling; then, soft as cats, passed across the room towards the central passage. At a signal from Macklin, Vargas produced and lit a candle.

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Having before they started made themselves familiar with that part of the house which contained the treasure of which they were in search, they were able to approach it without hesitation or delay. On reaching the room they paused to listen, at the same time taking the precaution of examining their arms. Then, stealthily opening the door, they entered, the Albino first and Vargas in the rear, shading the candle with his hand.

A half-starved, decrepit old man was pacing up and down at the further end. On seeing them he stopped his walk, and advanced towards them with a courtly bow.

"You are very welcome," he began in English. "I've been expecting you this week past. You must excuse the unprepared state of my surroundings; but I've only moved in here while my Kensington house is being redecorated. You will stay and take dinner with me, of course?"

"What does he say?" asked Vargas, who had no knowledge of English.

"He's mad!—stark, staring mad!" replied the Albino.

"Won't you sit down?" continued their host. "I will ring and have the wine put in ice. By the way, I don't think you told me your business; my memory is not what it was. I have had troubles—serious troubles."

"That's enough of that, my friend," Macklin interposed "Confound your memory! We want that money—the Two Hundred and Fifty Thousand you swindled the Kamtchatka Bank out of. If you want to save your skin, you'd better own up where it is, and save any bother."

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The ex-banker continued to smile sweetly.

"Ah! there's a very good story connected with that. It's going the round of the clubs now. Lord Burgoo, our chairman, asked me about it this afternoon in Piccadilly. You must know that I took it out to Chili to invest on the Bank's behalf. One evening, I was sitting in my room in the Calle de San Pedro, when a singularly handsome man called to see me. 'Mr. Bradshaw,' said he, 'I'm sorry to trouble you, but I've come to play you a game of cards for that money.' I had no objection, of course, so down we sat. Eventually he won, and I paid him all that was left of the £250,000. It was a good stake, wasn't it?"

"You lie!" shrieked the Albino, dashing at him and clutching him by the throat. "That be hanged for a tale. It's only one of your damned dodges to put us off the scent. Where is it? Tell me, or I'll throttle you!"

"I assure you it's the truth," gasped the unfortunate banker, half strangled. "I will even tell you his name."

The Albino withdrew his hand.

"Now, what was it? Quick!"

"Let me think. I fancy it began with V—Veneda, or some such name. Of course I did not ask, but he allowed it to slip from him in his excitement. He was a most gentlemanly person, and interested me exceedingly."

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"Nonsense! I won't believe it; he dared not do it. But, Marcos Veneda, you thieving traitorous hound, by God, if this be true it will prove the worst day's work you've ever done in your life."

Then in Spanish he explained what had happened to Vargas, whose rage was absurdly theatrical. He danced and swore, tore his hair and ground his teeth in an ecstasy of passion.

"Stop that nonsense," said the Albino. "We must search the house as quickly as possible, and if it's not here, find Veneda without a moment's delay. Now we see why he wanted us to spare him. It strikes me we've been sold, and badly too."

Without further ado they set to work. But they might have spared themselves the trouble. The money was undoubtedly gone—the *cache* had been rifled, and the treasure stolen. The Albino's rage surpassed description; he vowed such vengeance against the traitor that even Vargas was overwhelmed with terror. Suddenly they looked round for the banker. He was not to be seen. Taking advantage of their absence in another room, he had passed into the yard and quietly quitted the house.

"Never mind him," said Macklin, "he's no use to us now. We must collect every man we can lay our hands on, and search the town until we find Veneda. If he escapes, I'll be the death of somebody."

CHAPTER V.

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THE ESCAPE FROM CHILI.

It was nearly seven o'clock when Veneda bade farewell to the ruins of the house, in connection with which he had undergone such a variety of experiences; and, as I have already said, at half-past he had arranged to effect his escape from Chili. Now, though he was aware that there was no possible chance of his being able to get out of it, he was nevertheless much concerned about the wisdom of taking Juanita with him. He could not help seeing that by including a woman in his plans he was hampering his own freedom of action, and thus imperilling his one chance of safety; but on the other hand he could hit out no way of disposing of her, and since she possessed a large portion of his secret, it would be the most criminal folly possible to leave her behind to join the ranks of those who, he felt convinced, would ultimately pursue him from Chili. There were, besides, other and more cogent reasons against this latter course.

Though it was not a great distance to her abode, it took him some time to reach it. He had no desire to attract attention by any undue hurry; and for the same reason, when he did arrive at the house he made no attempt to gain admittance until he had absolutely convinced himself that he had not been followed. Then, crossing the patio, he knocked.

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Juanita herself opened the door. When she realized who the visitor was she uttered a little cry of welcome, and led the way into an inner room, carefully closing the door behind them.

"Marcos," she began, lifting her clasped hands to him, "you really meant what you said last night? You are here to take me away with you?"

"Did you think I should break my promise?" he answered almost angrily, his disappointment at finding her unprepared getting the better of him. "Why are you not ready? Every second is of the utmost importance to us. As it is, we shall only just catch the tide."

"Wait only a moment and I will be with you; just one little moment."

She fled the room, and for five minutes he was left to his own thoughts. They were not pleasant, a consuming impatience was upon him. He knew that his very life depended upon the next half-hour, and now it looked as if he were about to lose everything because a woman had misunderstood a plain speech. Every moment found him more and more angry. At length, unable to control himself any longer, he was in the act of going to look for her, when a heavy footstep approached the room. The door was thrown open and a man entered, clad after the same fashion as himself. The behaviour of this individual was not conciliatory. Casting a quick look at Veneda standing by the window, he said gruffly—

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"Your business here, *senor*?"

"I am waiting for a friend."

"The *Senora* Juanita perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"Then you will wait a long time, for she has gone."

Veneda almost shouted in his surprise. In a second all sorts of treachery had flashed through his brain.

"Gone!" he cried. "What the devil do you mean? Where's she gone?"

"Who knows?" the other replied airily, giving his narrow shoulders a slight shrug. "I allow it's her own business where she goes, not mine, thank God."

In three strides Veneda was beside him, and had clapped a revolver to his head.

"Look here, my uncivil friend," he said, "I don't want to make trouble in this house for my own sake, but if you don't tell me what you know, I swear I'll blow your brains out where you stand. That's cold-drawn biz, I reckon."

The man was silent for a moment, then a nervous little laugh came from under the sombrero.

"Marcos, do you think I am well enough disguised?"

It was Juanita!

Veneda could scarcely credit his senses, the deception was so perfect. But his admiration for her acting did not prevent his drawing her towards the door, whispering as he did so—

"It's wonderful! No one could possibly recognize you in than get-up. Now we must fairly jump for the harbour, or we'll be too late." [Pg 75]

Closing the front door on another incident in their lives they set off towards the port. And what a night it was! All day long the city had been the scene of constant rioting, but now that darkness had fallen to cloak their misdeeds, the mob had grown proportionately bolder. From simple exuberance of spirits and foolish mischief, their behaviour had become that of fiends. Houses had been and were still being looted in every street; incendiary fires pierced the sky in all directions; and the crack of rifles, with the whine of bullets, sounded almost without cessation. Scarcely a street, moreover, but was strewn with the bodies of their victims, the greater portion of which were women.

Juanita's presence of mind was little short of marvellous; terrifying though the sights she was constantly compelled to witness must have been to her, only once did she betray a sign of fear. Leaving the street in which her house was situated, they passed by a narrow alley into another, which in its turn led them into an open square. This it was unfortunately necessary that they should cross, in order to reach a thoroughfare leading to the wharves. No sooner had they entered it than Veneda saw what a fatal mistake he had made. One glance told him that it was filled with the lowest scum of the Chilian mob, frenzied with debauchery and incendiarism. On the far side a row of houses blazed into the sky, while on that nearest to them a dense crowd of men and women, denizens of the most infamous quarters, were dancing the Cueca, or national dance, with a wildness absolutely indescribable. Twice while he watched, Veneda saw men draw revolvers, and shoot down without any reason save wanton cruelty the wretched women who leapt and gesticulated opposite them. [Pg 76]

These sights were too much for Juanita. She tottered, and would have fallen in a faint, had not Veneda passed his arm beneath her poncho and sustained her. Almost beside himself with despair, he dragged her into a dark alley, and bade her sit down and rest until she felt able to proceed. Then they resumed their walk at increased speed. Time was more precious to them now than money; they could risk no more delays. It seemed an eternity since they had set out together!

But there was not much more before them. Turning a corner the cold sea breeze smote upon their faces, and a moment later the dark waters of the bay confronted them. Had they had time, and been so inclined, they might have stopped to offer up a prayer of thankfulness for their escape; but as it was they contented themselves with looking anxiously for something they expected to find awaiting them. Seeing nothing, Veneda gave a peculiar whistle, which, to his evident relief, was instantly answered from a mass of deep shadow to their left. A second later a ship's long-boat came into the starlight, and pulled towards the landing-place, the man steering standing up and peering towards them as if to make certain of their identity.

"Who are you?" he took care to ask before he brought the boat up to the steps, "and what do you want?" [Pg 77]

"My name's Veneda," was the reply, "and I want a boat from the *Island Queen*."

Evidently this answer was deemed satisfactory, for the same voice replied—

"One moment, sir, and I'll bring her alongside. I've been waiting for you this hour past; the tide is serving, and the old man will murder me for being so long."

When the man in the bows had hooked on, Veneda escorted Juanita down the steps, and signed her to enter the boat. But this the person in command was disinclined to permit.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, civilly but firmly, "my instructions were to bring you off alone, and I cannot include any one else."

"Oh, that's all right, my good fellow, this gentleman is a personal friend, and I have arranged to take him on board with me."

"I'm very sorry, sir, but I cannot exceed my instructions; will you be good enough to step in yourself? There's no time to waste if we want to catch this tide."

"But I tell you my friend must accompany me," Veneda answered, at the same time stepping into the boat himself; "I will be responsible to the captain."

"No, sir, not another word, I cannot do it. My instructions were most explicit—one gentleman, and only one! Jackson, shove off!"

"Ah! I see how it is. One gentleman—exactly—but nothing was said about my wife."

The mate, for such it turned out later he was appeared completely mystified.

"Your wife! Where is she?" [Pg 78]

"This lady is my wife," said Veneda, pointing to Juanita standing on the steps. "It was impossible for me to bring her through the town on a night like this in her own dress, so to ensure her safety I was compelled to make her wear a suit of mine. Juanita, my dear, convince this gentleman that you are only masquerading."

Her voice sounded very sweet and womanly as she said in English—

"Surely, sir, you will believe what my husband says?"

The mate scratched his head. He was in a dilemma, and he couldn't see his way out of it. At last he made up his mind.

"Well, sir, I'll risk it any way. Will you be good enough to step in, ma'am? I'm sorry to have made you wait, but the fault's with the captain for saying nothing about your coming."

Entering the boat, she took her seat opposite Veneda, and they pushed off. Before they had way on her, the sounds of a man running were heard upon the wharf, and next moment a strange figure came into view and bounded down the steps. It was none other than the Albino, under the influence of extraordinary rage; his long white hair floated in the wind, his arms worked with frantic gesticulations, and his voice shook with the violence of his passion. Fortunately for the fugitives he spoke in Spanish, a language with which neither the mate nor any of the boat's crew were familiar. He had caught sight of Veneda, and it was at him that his torrent of abuse was directed.

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"Marcos Veneda," he cried, shaking his fist at the retreating boat, "thief! traitor! coward!—come back—come back, and give me what you've stolen from me!"

But his wrath was vain; the boat by this time was fifty yards from the steps, and under the strong arms of her crew was every moment increasing the distance.

He was not, however, to be baulked; securing another, he was soon in hot pursuit, rowing as though his very life, or rather £200,000, depended on it.

The *Island Queen* lay a good distance out, and when the boat containing Veneda and Juanita came alongside, Captain Boulger was on deck. Hastening to the gangway to receive his passenger, he was not a little surprised to see two.

"I'm right glad to see you at last, Mr. Veneda," he said. "But I can't say I counted on any one else accompanying you."

Veneda was prepared for this, and he beckoned the captain on one side. A minute later he rejoined Juanita with the information that the difficulty was satisfactorily settled. The mate went forward to attend to the raising of the anchor, and by the time the Albino's boat was within hailing distance, the schooner had got way on her, and was drawing quickly out of the harbour.

To say that that gentleman, when he realized his enemy was escaping him, was angry, would be to convey a very false impression of his state. He stood up in his boat, foaming at the mouth, unable to speak, and shaking his fist wildly at the vessel till she had passed out of sight. But, though he was so overcome with rage, he had not failed to notice the name painted in white letters across the stern—"Island Queen, Tahiti."

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It was some time before he felt able to pull ashore. But when he did so, he said solemnly to himself—

"Marcos Veneda, I don't mind owning you're a very clever fellow; you seem, however, to have forgotten one thing. You've broken faith with one of the strongest organizations in the world. If it costs that Society every cent it's worth, if it has to chase you round the world, it will get the money back, and be even with you for this bit of treachery!"

CHAPTER VI.

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THE 'ISLAND QUEEN.'

Fortunately for the success of the escape from Valparaiso, the wind blew almost a hurricane from the schooner's most favourable quarter, and, as Captain Boulger was careful to impress upon his passengers, "the *Island Queen* hadn't her equal in the whole of the South Pacific for foot." (She was his own property, and for that reason, perhaps, he was rather inclined to over-estimate her capabilities.) In the present instance, however, she was called upon to put forward all her good qualities, for in spite of the large sum it had cost Veneda to charter him, the captain was fully aware of the risk he had taken upon himself, and he had therefore no desire that anything should occur to impede or delay his departure. As far as his own powers went he had small fear, for he was in every way a capable seaman; but he knew that it required not only considerable skill, but a fair amount of luck besides, to manœuvre successfully out of such an admittedly awkward harbour on a dark night.

Regarded in cold blood, the hairbreadth escapes of that evening read almost like a nightmare. Twice the schooner came unpleasantly near colliding with anchored vessels, and once they felt

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certain they had attracted the notice of a Congressional cruiser; for a voice hailed them out of the darkness as they swept past, and receiving no answer gave utterance to a succession of orders, which were followed by the shrill chirruping of a bosun's pipe. But though every moment they expected to see the flash of a gun, nothing occurred, and in half-an-hour they were clear of the land, steering a direct course across the Pacific for Tahiti, *viâ* Pitcairn Island.

Throughout the exit Veneda and Juanita remained side by side on deck, anxiously watching events. The experiences they had lately passed through supplied them with plenty to think about, while the repeated close things they were then undergoing served to remind them that they must not be in too great a hurry to believe themselves safe. Though they might count themselves almost out of the frying-pan, there was still the fire yawning to receive them, and both agreed it would be worse than death to be captured and taken back just when safety seemed within their reach.

With the recollection of the dangers they had passed through came the remembrance of the Albino on the wharf, and his exhibition of futile rage. A smile crossed Veneda's face as he recalled the scene, but it was instantly obliterated and succeeded by a scowl as he reflected that, in order to have been there at all, the dwarf must in some measure have become cognizant of their plans; and in that case it would not be beyond the bounds of possibility to suppose him aware of their destination. The outcome of these thoughts was a serious reflection. Could Juanita be in league with his enemy? He asked himself this question with a good deal of anxiety. That they had had dealings together in the past he was perfectly aware; what therefore more probable than that in such a gigantic enterprise as the present, where such a fortune was concerned, she should deem it the safest policy to stand in with both parties, and if possible to hoodwink and outwit both? With these thoughts in his mind he glanced at her as she stood clinging to the taffrail by his side, her fine figure swaying to every motion of the ship. No; he would not believe it. He told himself that, as far as beauty went, she was a queen among women, and that whatever happened he must not let her suspect he was anything but devotedly attached to her. Meanwhile he would set his brains to work to devise some scheme by which he might rid himself of her.

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By this time only a few twinkling lights remained to them of Valparaiso. The loud churning of the water under her nose, and the boiling froth in her wake, evidenced the fact that the schooner was putting her best foot foremost. The breeze whistled merrily, and from the appearance of the sky there was every prospect of its continuing. Overhead the stars shone as only tropic stars can, and their myriad radiances were reflected in the coal-black water, till it had all the appearance of an ebony floor powdered with gold-dust. But they would not be reflected there long, for the sea was not now what it had been inside the bay. A heavy swell had set in, and the little vessel was beginning to roll unpleasantly; so much so, that once or twice Veneda had to clutch Juanita to save her from falling. Standing side by side, they watched the last signs of Chili vanish beneath the waves. As the land disappeared a sudden gust swept Juanita's broad-brimmed hat from her head away into the swirling darkness.

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"Come, Juanita," Veneda said, slipping his arm through hers with the first real sign of protectorship he had shown, "this is no place for you; let me help you below."

But it was easier to talk of going below than actually to get there; for the schooner was heeling over at an angle that made walking almost impossible. Eventually, however, with the assistance of the mate, who had taken charge, to allow the skipper to obtain his supper, it was accomplished, and the shelter of the companion reached.

As they entered the cuddy, Captain Boulger emerged from his cabin, and with a bow made his passengers welcome. He was a tall man, thin as a lath, with a long, hatchet-shaped face, to which an idea of additional length was imparted by a carefully-trimmed goatee beard. His eyes, a peculiar shade of grey, peered at one from beneath enormous bushy eyebrows. His voice was deep and rumbling, his utterance slow and pedantic, and when he could think of nothing to say or was absorbed in anything, it was his habit to whistle quaint almost forgotten hymn-tunes, of which he had managed to acquire a wonderful collection.

Juanita was too much a woman of the world to have failed to note his weak point, and bearing in mind the peculiar nature of her position on board the schooner, and the need she might some day stand in of a friend, she resolved to address herself to his subjugation without unnecessary delay. On his side, in spite of her manly attire, he could not but admit her attractions, and when she complimented him on the sailing qualities of the *Island Queen*, she had laid the foundation of his capture.

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On the skipper's return to the deck, the mate, whose name by the way was Crawshaw (a Hampshire man he called himself, though he confessed to never having been in England in his life), descended in search of supper. He was a nice-looking young fellow, well set up, very muscular, and tanned by constant exposure the colour of mahogany. Seeing Veneda and Juanita at the table he doffed his cap politely, at the same time jerking out an embarrassed "Good-evening," as though he had not seen them five minutes previously.

"It seems to be freshening up," Veneda remarked, for the sake of saying something. "The schooner rides easier than I would have expected considering what she's carrying. By the way, have you such a thing as a cabin-boy aboard?"

Jamming an enormous piece of salt junk into his mouth, Crawshaw rose to his feet, and, without a word, vanished up the companion-ladder, to reappear a few minutes later with a shock-headed,

shambling urchin, of about sixteen years of age. Cuffing him towards Veneda, he said sheepishly, as though ashamed of possessing so much knowledge—

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"His name's Nicodemus,—'Old Nick' they call him forrard; he knows all about everything, and he's a son of a gun for laziness. Can I make him do anything for you?"

Veneda explained that he desired to see and arrange their respective cabins. Whereupon Crawshaw resumed his cuffing of the boy, remarking—

"Now, you young swab, turn to and get those berths cleaned out, or I'll break every second rib in your body; d'ye hear me now?"

The *Island Queen* boasted four cabins aft, the dimensions of which were about half those of the smallest pattern prison-cells, and were evidently intended to contain human beings of less than the average size. The captain had his furthest aft on the starboard side, the mate that nearest the companion on the port. Juanita had therefore one on either hand to choose from. She ultimately decided upon that adjoining the skipper's; Veneda taking the berth next to Crawshaw. It was a fortunate thing for both of them, but especially for Juanita, who otherwise would have been compelled to make the whole voyage to Tahiti in man's attire, that Veneda had been able to have a small quantity of luggage conveyed on board. By the time her cabin was prepared, and her comfort as far as possible assured, it was nearly eleven o'clock, and she expressed herself ready for bed. Bidding her "good-night," Veneda lit a cigar in the cuddy and returned to the deck.

It was a perfect night, with hardly a cloud visible in the whole length and breadth of the sky. The wind still blew fresh and strong, and now and again sharp dashes of spray rattled on the deck like hail. As she had everything in her favour, the schooner's motion was comparatively steady. Looking about him, Veneda spied the captain leaning against the taffrail; on crossing, he found him whistling "The Old Hundredth" with exceptional fervour.

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"A fine night, Captain Boulger," he said, proffering a cigar; "if this weather continues, we shan't be long picking up Tahiti."

"Not if it does," the skipper replied, taking a squint aloft at the bellying canvas; "but don't you reckon we're always going to be as lucky as this. It's not all plain sailing across these waters, especially at this time of year, I can tell you."

"Well, at any rate I must congratulate you on the way you got us out of the harbour; it was a fine bit of seamanship."

"It's all very well for you to say so, Mr. Veneda," the skipper continued, lugubriously. "But what about the next time I want to go into Valparaiso; d'you think they won't remember me for this? I'll be boycotted for ever."

"Well, and if you are, you've been well paid for the unpleasantness, my friend, so we'll hear no more on that score."

"And this lady, your wife you make her. Of course I don't say anything about that. But nothing was ever mentioned about females in the contrac'. How much is it to be for her?"

"Half as much as for myself; I thought we were agreed upon that."

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"Well, well, I suppose it must be so, but in my opinion it's dirt cheap at the money. And, look here, Mr. Veneda, my mate tells me something about a grey-haired chap who wanted to come off too. Now what about him?"

"Never you mind about him, he won't trouble you. We've done with him for ever."

"Don't you be too sure of that; if he wants you so badly that he had to pull off after you, he's not going to let you slip so easily; and what's more, if he knows the name of your boat, he'll nail you by cable in Tahiti as soon as winkin'. There are more ways of killing a cat than choking him with butter, Mr. Veneda."

"I don't doubt it, but as he doesn't know the name of the boat, by your own argument I'm quite safe," Veneda said, throwing the stump of his cigar overboard into the curdling wake.

"Well, all I can say is, if he don't know it, he don't deserve to."

"But how the deuce could he know it?"

"Why, simply because, as I say, he followed you off," said the skipper, with the superiority of a man who makes a statement knowing his facts to be all right, "and because, just as we'd got way on her, he came alongside and tried to hook on. If she hadn't been going too fast for him, he'd 'a been aboard; as it was he had to slip astern."

"And you think he read her name?" Veneda muttered hoarsely.

"O' course he did. Why, he couldn't have helped it if he had eyes in his head and knew his letters."

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This unexpected news so staggered Veneda that for a moment it deprived him of speech. He began to experience an awful dread, not of the discovery of the means whereby he had obtained his fortune, but of the disclosure of the precious secret which guarded it. Instinctively he felt for the locket he wore round his neck, and in which reposed the slip of paper Juanita was so anxious

to obtain.

Crawling along the sloping deck to the companion, he proceeded to his berth below. A swinging lamp lit the saloon, and in a gilt mirror upon the bulkhead he caught sight of his own face. He was startled beyond measure at its pallor.

"This won't do," he told himself as he undressed; "it's full early to be frightened; besides, who knows? He was so excited that it's just within the bounds of possibility he may not have read her name."

But do what he would he could not divest his mind of the thought that the Albino was aware of his plans. He had had good reason in the past to know that the dwarf really ruled the Society of which they were both members, and remembering his vindictive nature, he felt certain that neither pains nor money would be spared to ensure revenge for this last and most glaring piece of treachery. Consideration of these matters kept him tumbling and tossing in his bunk till long after midnight, to the accompaniment of groaning timbers, skurrying rats, and the crash of seas against the slender hull. When sleep did overtake him, his dreams were troubled; he imagined himself being hunted round the world by the Albino, who jumped after him across oceans, and from continent to continent, and at last ran him to earth in the big hall of his old familiar English school.

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He was in the act of giving him the locket to square matters when he awoke to find a flood of bright sunshine streaming in through the dingy little disc that served him as a porthole. His joy at finding it was only a dream was intense, and while under the influence of that relief he dressed and went on deck, to find the captain once more on watch and the crew busily engaged in washing down.

The fresh breeze of the night before still continued, and if the foam at either bow, or the swirling water under the counter could be taken as evidence, the *Island Queen* was making the most of it. The sky was as blue and the sea as green as only Pacific skies and seas can be, and against it the taper masts, the hard-strained rigging, and the swelling sails, white as snow in the brilliant sunshine, made up a picture that found a responsive note in the relief which filled Veneda's heart. A cheerful smoke issued from the galley, at the door of which the shock-headed boy, "Old Nick," was engaged cleaning knives. Perhaps as the effect of the lovely morning, the captain showed himself a little more affable than he had been on the previous night. He nodded familiarly to his passenger, and prefaced his conversation by inquiring, with a peculiar sort of courtesy, after his wife's health. Further conversation on that subject, however, was put a stop to by the appearance of the lady herself, once more clad in the garments of her sex.

As she emerged from the companion, Veneda hastened forward to receive her, and when she had recognized the captain's presence they fell to promenading the deck together. Fortunately she was an excellent sailor, and the bright fresh morning and the brisk breeze brought a colour into her cheeks that made her, so Veneda could not help owing to himself, more than usually lovely. For half a moment he wondered why he should not trust her, and the temptation came upon him to forget his original intentions and to embody this splendid creature in his plans for the future. She was fitted to adorn any station in life, he told himself. But then, certain episodes in her past history obtruded themselves upon his recollection, and he was compelled to admit that such a thing must not be dreamt of for an instant.

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But if a life's partnership were impossible, it was at least very pleasant to skim over summer seas in the company of one so evidently intended by nature to be all that was charming and agreeable to man. And indeed Juanita exerted herself prodigiously to please, so much so, that before they had been a week upon the voyage Veneda had once more entertained serious thoughts of casting his previous apprehensions to the winds and risking everything. Her behaviour was certainly calculated to disarm suspicion. Never, by even as much as a hint, did she lead him to suppose that she was in any way desirous of learning his secret. Her trust in him was the only thing self-evident, and even this she was too clever to exaggerate. Only once did she refer, and that indirectly, to the treasure which was the sole inducement of their flight, and I have often thought that that conversation was as strange as anything connected with that extraordinary voyage.

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It originated in this way. They were leaning over the taffrail, watching for the rising of the moon. The schooner, racing along over the curling seas under reefed canvas, seemed like a thing of life. Her canvas towered aloft into the ghostly darkness, and the wind in the rigging and the drum of the seas against the hull were the only things that could be heard. The mate, Crawshaw, patrolled the opposite side of the deck with the regularity of a pendulum.

Juanita had been peculiarly quiet all the evening, out of which state Veneda had in vain tried to rally her.

"Marcos," she said suddenly in Spanish, nestling closer to his side, "does it ever occur to you to wish you had left me behind in Valparaiso?"

"Why, what on earth makes you ask such a question?" he replied. "Do you think I should grow tired of you so soon?"

"So soon!" she answered, looking up into his face. "You have had me with you a fortnight now, and there is not much variety on board a boat the size of the *Island Queen*. I should not be at all surprised if you said you were tired of my company."

"Well, I am not. So that settles it, doesn't it?"

"Marcos, why did you not let us go to England in a mail-boat? It would surely have been quicker and safer?"

"Because in that case Macklin could not help but have discovered our departure, and we should have been followed, if not murdered—that's why."

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"And now?"

"Now no one knows our whereabouts; we can choose our own route when we leave Tahiti."

"And which way will it be, Marcos?"

"I have not decided yet."

She was silent for a minute or two. Then she said slowly, still keeping her eyes fixed on him—

"I think I understand. You have decided, but you dare not trust me."

His first and most natural impulse was to deny the accusation. But on second thoughts he adopted another course.

"You are quite right," he said with a laugh, "I certainly do not trust you. And what is perhaps more to the point, I don't intend to. All things considered, I don't think you have the right to blame me."

With a little laugh, and without a sign of vexation in her tone, she answered, "Perhaps you're right. At any rate, you're wiser than I am in such matters."

Then taking his arm, they returned to their constitutional up and down the deck, just as if nothing out of the common had occurred.

And so day by day sped by, glorious weather, smooth seas, blue skies, and fair winds accompanying them. It was more like a pleasure trip than a flight for life. Captain Boulger improved upon acquaintance, and even the mate, Crawshaw, rubbed off some of his angles as they grew to know him better.

Three weeks almost to a day after dropping Pitcairn behind them, they were on the fringe of the Society Islands; and at Papeete the captain proposed to touch, to obtain supplies. His passengers, he knew, though grudging the delay, would not be sorry for an opportunity to stretch their legs; for the size of the schooner did not, necessarily, permit much pedestrian exercise.

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One morning, coming on deck, Crawshaw called Veneda to his side, and pointed to a low smudge showing faintly on the horizon.

"What is it?" the other asked.

"Tahiti," was the reply, and with the word, like the opening of a mill-slucce, Veneda's old anxieties rushed back upon him. In an hour or two he would know whether or not the Albino was aware of his destination.

By breakfast-time they were closing up on it. The high mountain peaks had risen well above the horizon, and from being a simple blotch upon the clear-cut sea-line, the land had developed a decided personality of its own. An hour later they were close enough to it to be able to plainly distinguish objects on shore, and were prepared to catch the first view of Papeete.

By midday they were abreast of the entrance to Papeete harbour, looking across the reef with its thundering surf to where the quaint little town lay nestling among the trees. As soon as they were sighted the pilot put off, and upon his gaining the deck the work of entering the harbour was proceeded with. Once they were inside and at a standstill, Veneda and Juanita departed ashore in search of luncheon. It was a new sensation for them to wander about together as strangers in a strange place, and Veneda watched to see what effect it would have upon his companion. She had lost something of her vivacity, and was inclined to be more wrapt up in her own thoughts than was usual with her.

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Those who know Tahiti will know Charons (or the hostelry disguised under that name), and those who know Charons will remember Alphonse, the most obsequious of *garçons*, with his accumulated knowledge of traders and their schooners, missionaries, pilots, copra merchants, and all manner of strange beings and things appertaining to those delightful seas. Therefore, when I say that Veneda and Juanita were fortunate enough to secure the corner table in the big room, and the services of that indefatigable person, I am, as you will agree, ensuring them the pleasantest of times. With palates improved by the simple fare of the *Island Queen*, they investigated every course, enjoyed some excellent wine, trifled with dessert, and when they had drunk their coffee, proceeded to stretch their legs along the beautiful Broom Road.

It was a most luxurious day; a soft breeze played in fitful gusts among the tropic foliage, bearing upon its breast a thousand gentle, and to our travellers unaccustomed, odours. There was only one blot upon it; since his last glass of champagne, Veneda felt strangely sleepy, so much so, that when they had walked but a little way he expressed a wish to be allowed to sit down and admire the view. Nothing loth, Juanita consented, so down they sat awhile, talking, and gazing upon the panorama of sea and islands stretched before them. Her voice sounded wonderfully soothing as

he listened, and bit by bit he found this mysterious desire for sleep overcoming him. His head gradually sought a pillow by her side, his eyes closed, and in less than five minutes he was unconscious.

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Now Juanita, who had by no means been unmindful of his state (nor am I prepared to authoritatively state that she had not, in some measure, been the occasion of it), was too precipitate for her own safety. Such was her impatience that, without waiting to make certain that he was sound asleep, she must needs commence her search for the mysterious locket round his neck, which contained, she was convinced, the paper she was so desperately anxious to obtain. Perhaps in her hurry her touch was too rough, or Veneda was not so much overpowered with slumber as she imagined; at any rate, just as she had the precious locket in her hand, and was about to broach its contents, his eyes opened, and his hands closed on hers. Awkward as the situation was, her presence of mind never deserted her, and she prepared to laugh it off with the excuse she had prepared beforehand.

"Ah! my Marcos," she said jestingly, "it is well that you woke; for I am going to be furiously jealous. And pray what fair lady's portrait do you wear round your neck?"

For the moment Veneda was too amazed at her coolness to reply; then he replaced the locket, and assuming a pensive air, said—

"You may be as jealous of her as you please. That is my poor mother's miniature; the only remembrance I have of her. I will show it to you this evening, if you would care to see it. Now we must be getting back to the schooner."

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His explanation was so simple and sincere that she was baffled completely. If he were telling the truth her surmises must be all wrong; if not, she had put him on his guard for the future.

But though he allowed no sign to escape him to show that he understood her attempt, he was none the less concerned about it.

"I was more than a fool," he said to himself when he was alone in his cabin, "to imagine that she could be anything but what I had always thought her. However, Madame Juanita, the game is by no means finished yet. There is an old saying that those laugh best who laugh last. We shall see."

Next morning at daylight the *Island Queen* bade farewell to Tahiti.

As soon as it was open, a stranger, who had arrived in the island from South America the previous week, sought the telegraph office, and placed the following message upon the counter—

*"John Macklin,
General Post Office,
Sydney, N. S. W.*

"*Island Queen* sailed this morning. Destination Thursday Island. Both on board."

CHAPTER VII.

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THE MAN'S DEATH.

When, after leaving Papeete, Veneda came to consider the facts connected with his excursion ashore, he could not help seeing two things very clearly. In the first place, he was quite convinced in his own mind that, to obtain the information she wanted, Juanita had drugged the champagne he had drunk at lunch; but in the second, though he was loth to let her treachery pass unpunished, he could not but tell himself that it would be a most foolish proceeding on his part to allow her to suspect that he considered it of sufficient importance to make a fuss about. To confess annoyance would be to admit that the locket contained what she was in search of, and this he was, naturally, most anxious not to do. One thing was very certain, the situation was becoming more and more complicated every day; for each twenty-four hours was bringing them nearer to civilization, and once there the difficulties of his position would be intensified a hundred-fold. If Juanita were really in collusion with the Albino, it was most imperative that she should be outwitted, and that within the next fortnight. But though he racked his brains day and night for a scheme, he could not hit upon one that was in any way likely to prove successful.

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Their course now lay almost due west, and though they had land on every side, it was far from likely that they would touch anywhere until they reached Thursday Island, where Captain Boulger's contract ended. It was Veneda's intention to leave the schooner at that place, and to intercept a British India mail-boat homeward bound.

If the voyage had been enjoyable before, it became doubly so now; warm, sunny days, bright blue skies, sapphire seas, and the most exquisite island scenery in the world kept them company continually. The Society group lay far behind them; the Navigators were on the starboard bow; while Hope, Keppel and Tafahi, or Boscawen peered up, surf-girt, away to port. Had it not been for the friction which suddenly occurred between the captain and Veneda, it would have been like a little heaven on shipboard. But if the captain and his chief passenger could not agree, the same could not be said of the two passengers themselves, whose behaviour towards each other grew

more and more affectionate as the owner of the schooner's animosity deepened.

All past troubles and doubts seemed as much forgotten as though they had never existed. They arranged their future with untrammelled freedom, and even went so far as to discuss what they should do with the money when they had possession of it. Juanita's suspicions were completely allayed. Though she devoted considerable thought to the matter, she was as far from understanding it as ever. She could only attribute the change to the fact that her companion had at last really fallen under the spell of her fascinations.

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But on the evening of the day upon which they sighted Fortuna, or Horne Island, as it is more usually called, an awful and unexpected event occurred, which was destined to bring about as complete a revolution in their plans as even Veneda could wish.

The breeze, which had been very uncertain throughout the afternoon, at night dropped to the faintest zephyr. The peacefulness of the evening was awe-inspiring; the ocean lay smooth as a sheet of glass, rising and falling like the breast of a sleeping child. The sails hung limp and listless, and the man at the wheel, one Schlank, a big, burly, taciturn German, had barely enough work upon his hands to keep him awake. The mate was in charge of the deck, the captain and passengers being below at tea.

According to Crawshaw's account he had gone forward to give an order to the cook, and when he returned it was to discover the German away from the wheel, rolling to and fro upon the deck, retching in a terrible manner, and nearly black in the face. Not knowing what to make of it, he called a couple of hands aft and bade them carry the unfortunate man to his bunk, while he himself hailed the captain through the skylight, and took possession of the wheel.

When Boulger reached the deck he hastened forward to examine, the man himself, but he was too late—*Schlank was dead!*

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What the nature of the disease was, which had carried him off, no one could tell, but that its effects were deadly in the extreme was evidenced by the suddenness with which it worked its purpose; for, according to his shipmates' account, the man was in the best of health when he went aft to the wheel an hour before.

This sad occurrence, as might be expected, threw a gloom over the entire ship, and both Juanita and Veneda felt little touches of nervousness when they allowed their minds to dwell upon it. Lest any infection should be caught from the body, the captain gave orders that it should be committed to the deep as soon as a hammock and the necessary preparations could be made.

Next morning, to every one's consternation, news came aft that Jacob Norris, another hand, had been struck down by the same mysterious complaint. The symptoms were identical with Schlank's case, and it appeared as if no remedy could be found in the ship's meagre medicine-chest to either alleviate the pain or to avert the disastrous consequences. Within an hour of being taken ill the second man was dead and overboard!

Then an awful terror took possession of everybody, and ominous mutterings of "Cholera" and "Yellow Jack" passed from mouth to mouth. Hitherto the disease seemed to have confined itself to the fore-castle, but it was not to remain there long, for in the middle of his afternoon watch Crawshaw the mate was attacked. Veneda, who happened to be on deck at the time, saw him drop and ran to his assistance. Picking him up he carried him forward and laid him on the hatch, at the same time sending a hand to rouse the captain. The poor fellow's agony was heart-rending, and in spite of all the remedies tried he too succumbed within the hour.

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After this the consternation aboard the *Island Queen* may be better imagined than described. Every one went in fear and trembling, for no one knew who might not be the next attacked.

About nine o'clock that evening Juanita and Veneda were on deck. As on the preceding night, a wonderful stillness reigned. In the east the stars were beginning to pale, preparatory to the rising of the moon. The bo'sun, who had succeeded to poor Crawshaw's watch, was pacing to and fro near the binnacle, casting an eye ever and anon aloft and around him, as if in anticipation of a breath of wind.

Veneda and Juanita promenaded for awhile, and then crossed to the taffrail, against which they leant, conversing in low tones. In spite of the terrors of the day Veneda was in unusually good spirits. He rallied Juanita upon her quietness, and once more broached the subject of their future. Speaking softly so that the man at the wheel should not overhear them, he said—

"Juanita, my darling, our voyage is nearly ended; are you satisfied?"

She was quick to reply, and her voice had almost a tremor in it.

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"More than satisfied, Marcos, if you love me as you say."

"Are you sure, Juanita? Think before you answer. Would you be content to take me for what I am?—to risk poverty with me if that fortune should be gone when we get to London?"

She hardly knew how to reply. Was this a trap? she asked herself. Slipping her hand over his with a gentle pressure, she said—

"Quite content, if you love me as I must be loved. But why do you speak as if our money should be gone?"

"Because nothing is safe. I think it is—you think it is; but if you found out my secret, why shouldn't the Albino have boxed it out and anticipated us, eh?"

In reality he was not thinking anything of the kind; he was telling himself that the peculiar note in her voice when she referred to the money was not quite what it should have been at the moment of his declaration of love. In spite of her cleverness, it evidenced what lay uppermost in her mind. But he was not going to betray that he had noticed anything.

While they talked the moon rose, and lent a wondrous beauty to the night, sweeping the stars from the sky as if by magic, and turning the sombre water into the likeness of a silver sea. The white and idle canvas threw strange shadows upon the decks, and with the moon's coming a light breeze stole across the surface of the deep, so that the schooner began to draw a little faster through the water. The bo'sun turned on his heel, and came aft to where the other two were standing.

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"Nice evenin'," he said, by way of introduction; "the moon there makes it real pleasant on deck, don't it? You'll excuse me, sir, but maybe you don't happen to have a chew of tobacco about you?"

Veneda gave him a piece, at the same time asking if there was any further sign of sickness forrard. The bos'un did not think so, and casting an eye aloft at the canvas now beginning to fill, and then at the compass card, prepared to air his theory of the malady.

"It's my belief," he said, expectorating vigorously over the side, "that it's no more nor less than pison,—fish-pisoning, I reckon it. Don't you tell me that cholera or Yellow Jack's a-join' to come aboard this while out o' port—not it! Now, I mind a case once, where a schooner's crew mutinied ten days out from Sydney, their tucker not bein' good enough for 'em forrard. What must they do, when they'd got rid of the old man and the mate overboard, but break open the lazarette, and set to work on all the tinned fish they could lay their hands on!"

"What was the result?" Veneda asked carelessly.

"Why, that inside of three hours every mother's son o' that blamed crew was lyin' a-rollin' an' a-kickin' about the deck o' that schooner, turnin' black in the face, and lookin' for all the world as if they had swallowed half-a-pint o' pison apiece. When they was picked up by a man-o'-war, there was only one on 'em left to tell the tale, and he wouldn't ha' been there but for not bein' hungry that night, having started on cuddy bread, which is good an' fillin' at the price."

"And what makes you think," asked Juanita, "that the men on this ship have been poisoned? Have they eaten such fish as you describe?"

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"Well now, there you have me, ma'am; I don't know as they have, but maybe it ain't fish this time, maybe it's somethin' else just as bad. For my part, I——"

At this moment the captain appeared on deck to relieve the bos'un, who, bidding them "good-night," went forrard. Veneda had grown suddenly silent, and when he had ensconced Juanita in a sheltered spot (for the wind was beginning to freshen), fell to pacing the deck as if he had something upon his mind. Once he stopped and spoke in a low voice to the captain; then he resumed his tramp, pausing now and again to lean against the bulwark and scan the moon-lit sea. About four bells (ten o'clock), Juanita declared her intention of going below, and he assisted her down the gangway. As he bade her good-night, she was struck by the change that had come over his face; he was deathly pale, and his eyes had a look that was very foreign to their usual state.

"Marcos," she said anxiously, steadying herself against the cuddy table, "there's something the matter with you; for heaven's sake take medicine at once; your face frightens me. Don't delay an instant! Oh! if anything should happen to you now!"

He laughed, and said huskily—

"Do you think you would care, my beauty? I rather doubt it." (Here he caught sight of his face in the glass.) "My God, but my face is bad though. I'll go and consult the skipper."

He turned towards the companion, but he was unable to reach it. He tottered, stretched his hands out feebly for the bulkhead, missed it, and fell prone upon the cuddy floor. With a scream Juanita sprang past him, and dashed up on deck. The skipper was beside the binnacle.

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"Oh, captain!" she cried, "come quickly; he's dying, he's dying!"

It did not take the captain long to understand to whom she referred; the words were hardly uttered before he had passed the order for the bos'un to come aft and take charge, and was down in the cuddy, kneeling beside the sick man. The mysterious disease had found another victim.

Veneda's face was distorted almost beyond recognition; his limbs were strangely twisted and cramped; his breath came in great gasps; only his skin retained its extraordinary pallor. Juanita understood the captain to say that the symptoms were the same as in each of the previous cases.

Between them they carried him to his bunk.

"Now, ma'am," said Boulger, turning to Juanita, "I'm sorry, but I'll just have to trouble you to go to your own berth for a while. I can't have you running any risks here. Mr. Veneda's quite safe in my hands, and I'll let you know from time to time how he gets on."

But this was not in the least to her taste. She was not prepared to let any one else pry into her

private concerns.

"Oh, Captain Boulger," she began, throwing all the sweetness she could muster into her voice and looks, "it's inhuman to think that I can remain away from him; you cannot expect it; let me help you with him. I'll be as patient and quick as possible, and I've had some experience in nursing—I really have."

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"No, no, ma'am, I'd like to, but I can't allow it," Boulger replied, "it wouldn't be fair to ask me. What this devilish disease may be is more than I can tell, but as it's certain there's infection in it, I can't let any risks be run. Now, do go; you're only hindering me, and I must be looking after him, poor chap; he wants all the attention I can give him."

After this there was nothing for her but to submit, and I must do her the justice to admit that she did it with as good grace as possible.

In the security of her cabin a vague terror seized her. What if Veneda should die, and the locket be cast into the sea with him? The thought almost took her breath away. Come what might, she must have a few moments alone with the sick man, or, in the event of his death, with his body.

True to his word, at regular intervals, hour after hour, the skipper presented himself at her door with the latest bulletins of his patient's condition. "Just a leetle better"—"Just so so"—"Not much change"—"Seems a bit weaker"—"Another awful attack," was the order in which they ran. On hearing the last she broke down completely, and for some reason which I am unable to explain, fell to sobbing as if her heart would break.

Suddenly a strange craving came over her, and rising from her bunk she procured and propped her crucifix against the tiny wash-hand basin, and kneeling on the sloping floor before it, endeavoured to frame a prayer for the passing of the man's soul. Her long black hair hung in glorious profusion about her shoulders; tears streamed down her pallid cheeks; and her lips continually faltered over the words she tried to utter. When she had finished, her spirits recovered, and crawling back into her bed, she fell asleep.

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It was long after daybreak before she awoke. The sun was shining brightly through the porthole above her bunk, and from the angle at which the schooner was lying, she knew a fresh breeze must be blowing.

Urged by a great anxiety to learn the latest news of Veneda's state, she dressed with all the haste she could command, and passed into the cuddy. As she entered it, the captain emerged from the berth opposite and greeted her with a mournful face. She divined the worst.

"You're going to tell me that he is dead," she said, clutching at the table.

"Ma'am, it's a thing which must come sooner or later to all of us. I won't deceive you—he is dead—passed away in the hope of a glorious resurrection, twelve minutes afore three bells in this morning's watch. Now, don't take on about it too much, there's a good girl, for he's better as he is than suffering the agonies he went through all night. You couldn't wish it, I know."

"Dead! dead!" was all she could say. It seemed impossible that it could be true. The news stunned her. Though she had expected and dreaded the worst, she had no idea that it would have come so soon. What should she do now? In spite of her consternation, her own position was always uppermost in her mind. It behoved her to play her cards carefully, or she might lose everything. Assuming a look of hopeless grief, unable to find relief in tears, she faltered—

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"Take me to him."

Without another word Boulger led the way across to the cabin, and opened the door. She prepared to enter, but he would not permit it.

"No, ma'am," he said kindly, but with determination, "as I said last night, you cannot go in; this ship's mine, and while there's infection aboard, I'm not the man to run risks. But seeing he's your husband—and I'm real grieved for you—I'll stretch a point, and let you see him from here. But I dare not pass you in."

So saying, he went in himself, and approached the figure lying stiff and stark under a blanket in the bunk. Pulling the covering aside, he allowed Juanita a view of the drawn and pallid face beneath. A terrible change had come over the man, and accustomed though she was to what are called horrible sights, she was compelled to avert her eyes. Seeing this, Boulger re-drew the blanket, and came out of the cabin, securely locking the door behind him. Then, with a fatherly air, he placed his arm around the woman's waist and led her on deck, whistling the *Dead March* softly as they went.

In the bright sunshine the horrors of the cabin were for a time dispelled from her memory. It was a glorious morning. The wind, which on the previous night had been so weak, now blew with invigorating freshness. The schooner, under a press of sail, was ploughing her way through the green water as if conscious of her strength, turning the sea away in two snowy furrows from either bow. Dotted about on either hand were numerous small islands; and thinking it might distract her thoughts, the skipper named them to her.

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Ahead, across the curling seas, and not more than eight miles distant, rose the mountains of Vanua Lava, the largest island of the Banks Group. A few clouds rested gracefully on the topmost peaks, and so clear was the air that it was already just possible to make out the native villages

ashore. Suddenly an idea leapt into Juanita's brain; a brilliant inspiration that she wondered had not occurred to her before. Turning to the captain, who stood beside her, and who was inwardly wondering at the vivacity of her expression, she said—

"Captain, there is one thing I should like you to get for me—I know you will not deny it—a locket he wears round his neck."

"No, ma'am; I'm real sorry, but that I can't do. He asked particularly that it should be buried with him. It's his mother's portrait, and we mustn't go against that."

Juanita could have cried with vexation. But she dared not show it. She had still another card to play.

"Where will you bury him? Not at sea, captain; oh, not at sea!"

"And pray why not at sea, ma'am?" the captain replied, pulling himself up short in a rendering of "Rock of Ages,"—"many a good man has been buried at sea."

"Of course, I know that," she sobbed; "but oh, I cannot bear to think of his poor body tossing about for all time under those cruel waves, the prey of every shark and fish! Oh! no, no, I beseech you, do not let it be at sea."

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Her grief was so sincere that the captain was visibly affected.

"What would you have me do then, my dear ma'am?" he asked tenderly, thinking he would go a long way towards obliging her if she always pleaded like that.

"Why not bury him on land?" she asked, turning her tear-laden eyes towards the island they were approaching; "surely it would not be so very difficult?"

"Well," replied the captain, after a moment's consideration, "if you're so set upon it, I don't know but what it can't be done; we'll see, at any rate. Now you just come along down and have a bit of breakfast. It'll cheer you up more than anything."

When they returned to the deck the island was abeam. The captain occupied himself with a careful study of authorities, and then selecting a spot, hove the schooner to off a thickly-wooded bluff. Sounds of carpentering came from forrard, and Boulger, who had quite constituted himself Juanita's protector, took care that she should not go too near lest she should see the work which occasioned it.

It was well into the afternoon before the arrangements for the funeral, including the digging of the grave ashore, were completed. As soon as all was ready the captain informed Juanita, who thereupon prepared herself to accompany the party.

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When the long-boat was swung overboard and brought alongside, sounds of scrambling feet came up the companion-ladder, and next moment the captain, carpenter, and two of the crew appeared, bearing the rough coffin which the carpenter had managed to knock together. With some difficulty it was lowered into the boat, and then, the captain steering, Juanita sitting beside him, and two of the hands pulling, they set out for the shore.

Unlike most approaches to the island, the deep water extended right up; consequently the boat was able to discharge its burden on the beach without much difficulty. Having landed, they marched to the grave, situated beneath a grove of cocoa-nut trees, some hundred yards from the shore. The captain, whom Nature seemed to have designed for the work, delivered a short but impressive address, and then the remains of Marcos Veneda were committed to the ground.

To Juanita it was all a whirl. She could not realize that the man had passed out of her life—that he whom she had admired for his strength in Chili was now an inanimate substance on Vanua Lava. The whole thing had been so sudden that she had had no time to prepare herself for the shock. Yesterday he was triumphant in all the consciousness of living; to-day he was only a memory, a part of the mysterious, irreclaimable Past!

The funeral over they returned to the schooner, which at sundown weighed anchor, and resumed her voyage to Thursday Island. It certainly seemed as if Veneda was to be the last victim of the malady, for not another soul was attacked.

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The following morning, after breakfast, the captain escorted Juanita to the vacant cabin, and handed her the dead man's goods and chattels. With a well-simulated air of grief she bore them to her own berth, in order to examine them. They made only a small parcel, but hunt through them as she would, no sign of either letter or locket could she find. The contents were simple in the extreme—a few clothes, a pocket-book containing twenty pounds in English gold, a tattered Horace, a knife, a ring, and a few little personal odds and ends, completed the total. Waiting her opportunity, she again approached the captain on the subject of the locket, but he had only the same answer for her.

"What he had on him, ma'am," he solemnly declared, "I reckoned was his own property, and left there; so the locket you speak of is under three foot of earth now, back there in Vanua Lava; meaning no disrespect to you, ma'am."

This was all the information Juanita could gather on the subject. Nor did she press the matter further. Fortunately her own immediate comfort was provided for by the twenty pounds, of which she assumed undisputed possession. Had it not been for this she would have found herself placed

in a very awkward situation.

The rest of the voyage needs little chronicling; suffice it that ten days later the schooner dropped her anchor off Thursday Island, her eventful journey completed.

When Captain Boulger bade Juanita farewell, he asked if she had formed any definite plans regarding her future. She hesitated before replying, but finally said that she thought of remaining in the island until she had communicated with her friends. He felt a touch of pity for her loneliness, and proffered any assistance within his power. She, however, declined it with thanks, and a day later the *Island Queen* departed on her return voyage to Tahiti.

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The same night, the Thursday Island telegraph operator was in the act of closing his office, when the following mysterious message was handed in—

"To John Macklin,
Sydney.

"Schooner arrived. Man dead. Woman remains here."

PART II.

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CHAPTER I.

JOHN RAMSAY TAKES UP THE TALE.

It seems that when I induced my cousin by marriage, Luke Sanctuary, to write the first part of this history, I pledged myself to continue the work at the point where I became personally interested in it. That time, he tells me, has now arrived, and so it comes to pass that I find myself sitting before a blank sheet of paper, holding a brand-new pen in my hand, and wondering how on earth I'm going to set down all the extraordinary things I have to tell.

One assertion I can safely make, and that is that this is the first time I have ever undertaken such a contract. For writing was always a trouble to me; and now I come to think of it, it was that very hatred of penmanship which resulted in my being concerned in what I shall always call that "Chilian Mystery." For, had I proved an apt writer, I should in all probability have made a good clerk; and had I turned out a good clerk, I should never have become a sailor; and to continue the argument *ad infinitum*, had I not become a sailor, I should certainly never have known anything of the story my cousin has begun, and which I am now called upon to continue.

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As I am perhaps the chief actor in the latter part of this history, and as in matters of this sort it is always best, according to my way of thinking, to begin at the very beginning, I may perhaps be excused if I briefly narrate the principal events of my life which led up to my connection with it.

To begin with, let me remark that I was born in the village of Coombe, near Salisbury, in the county of Wiltshire, where my father was a country doctor. He, poor man, had the misfortune to be peculiarly devoted to his profession, so much so, that it was neither more nor less than sheer overwork which occasioned his untimely end.

That sad event occurred within a week of my seventh birthday. And with the remembrance of his funeral, a peculiarly sombre picture rises before my mind's eye. I see a dreary autumnal day; thick mists upon the hill-tops, dripping trees, and a still more dismal procession, winding its way along the high-road, unrelieved by any touch of colour. And, incongruously enough, the whole recollection is heightened by the remembrance of a pair of black cloth breeches worn by me on that melancholy occasion for the first time. By such small and seemingly unimportant things are great events impressed upon our memories.

Perhaps after my father's death I proved myself a handful to manage; perhaps my mother really thought it the best thing for me. At any rate, a boarding-school was chosen for me at Plymouth, to which she herself reluctantly conducted me. Being her only child, and having hitherto been accustomed to get my own way at all times and seasons, this maternal abandonment was a proceeding I could not appreciate. I evinced, I believe, a decided objection to saying farewell to her, and I know I found only inadequate consolation in either the ancient dame who kept the school (who promised my parent to be a mother to me, and for that reason perhaps caned me soundly before I had been twenty-four hours under her charge), the house, or my school-fellows, who figure in my memory as the most objectionable set of young ruffians with whom I had ever come into contact.

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For three years I continued a pupil of this "Seminary for the Sons of Gentlemen," and should perhaps have remained longer had I not experienced the misfortune of being expelled, for laying a fellow-scholar's head open with a drawing-board; a precocity at ten years which was plainly held to foreshadow my certain ultimate arrival at the condemned cell and the gallows. After that, from the age of ten until fifteen, I drifted from school to school, deriving but small benefit from

any one of them, and every term bringing my dear mother's grey hairs (as she would persist in putting it) nearer and nearer to the grave, by reason of the unsatisfactory nature of my reports.

At fifteen, being a well-set-up stripling for my years, and like to fall into all sorts of errors as to my proper importance in life, if allowed to remain any longer with boys younger than myself, I was taken away and carried to London, in order that my mother might consult with an old friend as to my future. How well I remember that journey, and the novelty of seeing London for the first time!

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Arriving at Waterloo, we drove to Notting Hill, and next morning went by omnibus into the city to discover Sir Benjamin Plowden in the East India Avenue.

Never, if I live to be a hundred, shall I forget my first impression of that office, and the unaccustomed and humiliating feeling which stole over me as I crossed the threshold behind my mother, to await an audience with this mysterious Sir Benjamin. It was one thing, I discovered, to be the cock of a small country school, and quite another to be an applicant for a junior clerkship, at a salary of five shillings a week, in a London merchant's office.

At the end of five minutes a liveried servant entered the waiting-room, and informed us that "Sir Benjamin would see us now, if we'd be good enough to step this way." Thereupon my mother gathered up her *impedimenta*, including a reticule, a small black handbag, an umbrella, a shawl, a paper bag of sponge-cakes, and her spectacle-case, and toddled down the passage after him, leaving me to follow in her wake, my heart the while thumping like a flail against my ribs.

Ever since that morning, when I desire to realize a man in every way embodying my idea of what a merchant prince should be, I recall my first impression of Sir Benjamin. At the date of our visit he was on the hither side of fifty, of medium height, stout and bald, with curly white whiskers, a shaven chin and upper lip, very rosy as to his complexion, dignified in his bearing, and given to saying "Hum, ha!" on all possible occasions.

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He received my mother with cordiality, and even went so far as to recognize my presence with an expressive speech,—“So this is your boy,—a big fellow,—like his father about the mouth,—too old to be idling about country towns, getting into mischief, and deriving a false idea of his own importance. Hum, ha!” After which I was left to my own thoughts, while they entered upon an animated discussion for perhaps the space of half-an-hour.

At the end of this time he rose—I think, as a hint to my mother—and rang the bell. It was answered by the same dignified man-servant who had ushered us into his presence; whereupon Sir Benjamin bade us farewell, promising to communicate with my mother on the subject they had been discussing at an early date; and we were escorted out. I, for one, was not sorry that the interview was over.

Leaving the Avenue, we visited the British Museum, by way of counteracting the two serious impressions forced upon my mind by the ordeal we had just undergone, I suppose; and here my mother, in the middle of the Egyptian Department, surrounded by evidences of an extinct civilization, gravely prophesied the eminence to which I should some day attain, if only Sir Benjamin could be induced to take an interest in me.

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As if in answer to her words, two days later I was the recipient of a letter signed by Sir Benjamin himself, in which it was stated that a position had been found for me in his own office, at a salary of ten shillings a week. I must leave you to picture my sensations. Surely no possessor of an autograph letter from the throne itself could have been prouder than I that day. As for my mother, she argued confidently that my Future (with a capital F) had undoubtedly commenced. And, between ourselves, I certainly think it had.

It is not necessary, for the understanding of the story I have to tell, that I should enter upon a recital of my life in the East India Avenue; let it suffice, that it did not come up to the expectations I had formed regarding it. The hours were long, the supervision was constant and irksome, the superiority of the other clerks humiliating, while the personal attention and affability which my dear mother had led me to expect from Sir Benjamin was not only not forthcoming, but showed no signs of making its appearance at any time within the next half-century.

However, there were many compensations to balance these petty annoyances, and chief among them I reckoned that of carrying letters and papers to the docks, where the ships which brought Sir Benjamin's merchandise from far countries discharged their cargoes.

Nothing gave me greater happiness than these little excursions, and when I had fulfilled my errand, it was my invariable custom to enter upon an investigation on my own account, wandering all over the mysterious vessels, asking questions innumerable about the strange places they visited, and, I have no doubt now, making myself a complete and insufferable nuisance generally. Perhaps that was why, throughout my sailing career, I had always a sneaking sympathy with boys who boarded us, and asked permission to look round. At any rate, I am convinced that those journeys were what made me believe I had at last hit upon my vocation in life; for I know that every time I passed outwards through the dock-gates, I renewed my vow that before many years were over I would become a sailor, and the commander of just such another ship as that I had lately overhauled.

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This sort of life continued with but slight variation until I was on the verge of seventeen, when I

made a firm resolve to assert myself, and embark upon the calling I had marked out for my own. My mother was prepared in some manner for the blow, for she certainly could not have failed to notice the way my inclinations tended; so when I broached the subject she offered no objections, only sighed somewhat sadly, and said "she was afraid a time would come when I should repent it." Little did the poor soul know to what a fatal prophecy she was giving utterance.

A day later, for the second and last time in her life, she visited Sir Benjamin, and the following morning I was summoned to his presence.

"Your mother tells me you wish to leave my employ to become a sailor," he began, when I had closed the door behind me and approached his table. "Now you know your own business best, but remember it's a hard life, more kicks than halfpence; and what is worse, I can assure you that when you have once taken to it, you'll never be fit for anything else again. You have thought it over, I suppose?"

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I modestly replied that I had devoted a good deal of consideration to the matter, and would have gone on to say that I wished for nothing better had he not interrupted me.

"Very good; I've promised your mother to do the best I can for you, so you'll be apprenticed to the Yellow Diamond Line as soon as I can see about it. You'll probably be surprised to hear that I think you're a fool, but I suppose in this world there must be a proportion of fools to balance the wise men, or we'd all come to grief. Hum, ha!"

He was true to his promise, for the following week I received a notification to attend at the head office of the Yellow Diamond Line of clipper ships. Here I complied with the formalities, signed the necessary papers, and had the satisfaction of leaving the Company's office to all intents and purposes a member of the nautical profession. It was arranged that I should desert Sir Benjamin's employment at the end of the month, and after that I was confident my real career would commence. It is, I think, one of the most wonderful things in our poor human nature, that we should always look forward to the future with so much confidence, PROportionately the more when we have perhaps the least justification for it. For my own part, when I left the Company's office I would not have changed places with the Prime Minister himself; yet such is the perversity of fate that, not six hours from the time of my signing the papers, I would have given anything I possessed to have been allowed to forfeit my premium and to remain ashore. This is how it came about.

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Sir Benjamin was laid up with an attack of gout, and it became necessary to obtain his signature to some important letters. About four o'clock in the afternoon, therefore, the chief clerk sent for me, and giving into my care a small despatch-bag, bade me take a cab, and drive with it to Sir Benjamin's residence in Holland Park. Nothing loth, off I set.

The East India merchant's home was a most imposing place, and it was with some little awe that I rang the great front-door bell, and requested the dignified butler to inform me if I could see his master. Saying he would find out, he ushered me into a small room off the hall, to which he presently returned with the request that I would accompany him up-stairs.

I found my employer propped up in a chair near the fire, nursing his swaddled leg. Beside him was seated a young lady I had never seen before, but of whom I had often heard my mother speak,—his daughter Maud.

When I entered she was for leaving us, but this Sir Benjamin would not permit. Having received the papers from my hands, he turned to her and said (and I regarded it as a mark of unusual condescension)—

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"My dear, let me introduce Mr. John Ramsay to you; a young gentleman who is forsaking the East India Avenue to distinguish himself by falling off the topsail-yard. Mr. Ramsay, my daughter!"

Then he settled himself down to the papers I had brought, and I was left free for conversation with his daughter.

As a rule I am considered bashful with strangers, but such was Maud Plowden's wonderful knack of setting people at their ease, that I would defy any man to remain shy very long in her company. I do not mean to infer by this that she was an extraordinarily beautiful girl, for though I have heard people go into ecstasies about that, her charm lay not so much in her face as in her voice and manner. Of one thing at least I am quite certain, had I a secret I was desirous of obtaining from a man, I would rather trust Maud to coax it from him than the most beautiful or dangerous woman in existence.

When ten minutes later I re-took my seat in the cab, I was in love for the first time in my life. And then it was that I began to regret not having been content to remain quietly in Sir Benjamin's office, where I might have found other opportunities of improving my acquaintance with his charming daughter. It was certainly the irony of fate, that when I wanted to embrace the nautical profession, no opportunity was vouchsafed me; but when I did not want to take to it, I had no option but to do so.

It is not my intention, even had I the space, to narrate all that befell me before my departure on my first voyage, but will content myself by remarking that not only did my uniform almost satisfy me, but that on my first day of wearing it (and you may be sure, like most youths, I seized the opportunity as soon as it presented itself), who should drive up to our door but Maud Plowden herself. I had forgotten until then that my mother and she had developed a sudden but intimate

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acquaintanceship.

What she said to me or what I said to her during the space that she remained under our roof I cannot recall, but I remember that when she went away, it seemed as if all the sunshine had gone out of the house.

What a strange and indeed weird experience that first falling in love is, and, as a rule, how signally we fail to estimate its true importance in the building up of a life's character! Is it not a time of high ambitions, of pure intentions, of great resolves,—when not to succeed is a thing impossible? A period of our lives when women are all pure and noble, and men all brave and honest! Oh, the pity, for humanity's sake, that there should ever come an awakening!

On the Thursday following that tea-drinking, I joined my ship, the *Beretania*, then lying in the East India Docks. My mother came to see me off, and her tears and parting blessing opened my eyes to my conduct towards herself, showing me my position in a new and exceedingly unpleasant light.

And now as my doings for the term of my apprenticeship would form but poor reading, let me skip a few years, and come to the time when I returned to England to a certain extent tired of Father Ocean, but very proud of my position as third mate. I was then, to all intents and purposes, a man, six feet in height, broad of shoulder, and, if my dotting mother could be believed, not altogether deficient in good looks. On that point, however, I must be mute.

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As we had just hailed from China, it was only natural that I should have brought with me a whole cargo of curios. These I intended for family presents, and on the day following my arrival I sorted them out, retaining those I most admired for my mother herself, and setting apart those I did not care very much about for transmission to any relatives and acquaintances she might think worthy of the notice. Among the prettiest of the things was an exquisitely inlaid tortoiseshell and ivory card-case, which, in my own mind, I had destined for Maud, if I could but find an opportunity of giving it to her.

This came sooner than I expected, for on the afternoon following my arrival she dropped in to five o'clock tea, and as she intended to walk back, I had the delight, not only of presenting her with my gift, but also of escorting her, at my mother's desire, a little way upon her homeward road. Now I'm not vain enough to think that she was already in love with me (the sin of conceit cannot at least be laid to my charge), but I'm certain, and even she herself admits it now, that after that night she was not altogether indifferent to me. However, be that as it may, I saw her no more during my leave ashore, and it must have been two full years before I looked into her face again.

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When I reached England the next time, I had not only been twice round the world, visiting China, Australia, and both North and South America in so doing, but had passed my examination for chief officer, though I only held a second officer's position.

It was close upon Christmas when we arrived, the *Serpentine* was frozen, and skating parties were in full swing. Now skating is an amusement of which I have always been fond, though naturally in my profession I did not get many opportunities of indulging in it. For this reason, when I did I made the most of them, and that season was a notable instance.

One morning, on the *Serpentine*, I had the good fortune to catch a young lady just as she was about to fall in such a manner that the consequence could only have been a nasty sprain. She thanked me prettily, and a few moments later her protector on the ice crossed over to where I sat taking off my skates, and added an expression of his gratitude. Somehow his face seemed strangely familiar to me, and it was not long before I recognized in him a nephew of Sir Benjamin Plowden, with whom I had been slightly acquainted in by-gone days. Making myself known, I was taken across and formally introduced to the lady, who turned out to be his wife. We strolled part of the way back together, and next day, to my surprise, I received a card for an "At Home" at their residence the following night.

Now though I am not particularly fond of "At Homes," I suppose my destiny ordained that I should accept this invitation. It was altogether a brilliant affair, and as there was dancing, and Captain Plowden (for that was my host's name) was kind enough to see that I did not want for partners, I enjoyed myself hugely.

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Towards the middle of the evening I happened to be standing near the door of the ball-room, when, to my astonishment and delight, who should enter but Maud, leaning on her father's arm. To make myself known to Sir Benjamin (for I had altered so much since my last interview with him that I doubt very much if he would have known me else) was the work of an instant, and before a spectator could have counted a hundred I had completed the necessary preliminaries, and was waltzing up the room, my arm round Maud's waist, and my whole being intoxicated with the fragrance of her presence.

Whether I danced well or ill, whether my step suited hers, what the music was, or why we did not collide with every other couple on the floor, I do not know. I was only conscious that I was dancing with Maud, that I held her in my arms, that I was looking into her face and listening to her voice. When the music ceased I led her through the drawing-room into the conservatory, and finding two vacant seats settled myself beside her.

How can I describe all the delights of that evening! It would be impossible, for beyond the fact that just before supper I blurted out a question which had been on the tip of my tongue for years,

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it is all one mist of rose-coloured light.

When I left the house I trod on air, I was the happiest man in England, for I had proposed to Maud, *and she had accepted me!* Though it was considerably past two o'clock when I reached home, what must I do but wake the mother up to tell her my glorious tidings; and I know her congratulations were genuine, though, in her confused state, the dear old soul could hardly make head or tail of what I said to her.

As early next morning as my conscience would permit, I set off to call upon Sir Benjamin, hoping to catch him and get my interview over before he should leave for the city. Arriving at the house, I was shown into the morning-room, and I had not been there two minutes before Maud entered. If she had appeared adorable the night before, she was doubly so now, and the pretty little air of embarrassment which possessed her did not, I promise you, detract from her beauty in my eyes.

"Oh, Jack," she began—for somehow every one calls me Jack—"how good of you to come so early!"

I thought it was rather a matter for shame, but didn't say so.

"I have come to see your father, Maud," I answered, making, I do not doubt, a rueful face; "and though I know him so well, I feel for all the world like a criminal going to execution. Have you said anything to him about it?"

"Yes," she whispered, nestling her head on my shoulder, "I could not help it, Jack; you see I have no mother to advise me, and I felt that I must tell somebody. You don't mind?" [Pg 130]

"Mind, my darling, as if I should mind anything you might do. And what did he say to it?" I asked this rather anxiously. "I know he won't altogether approve, but does he dislike the idea so very much?"

Maud made what is, I believe, correctly termed a little *moue* before she replied.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Jack, I'm afraid he's not overjoyed about it; but then perhaps it's quite natural; you see, I'm his only child, and—well, he's not seen as much of you as I have, so he doesn't know all your good qualities."

The proper answer to such a speech cannot be put on paper, and, even if it could, I doubt whether it would prove of very much interest here. It was accomplished only just in time, for next moment Sir Benjamin entered, and Maud with an encouraging glance at me withdrew.

Though he had aged a good deal since I had left his employ, he was brisk enough this morning, and to my sorrow I could see not best pleased. I cannot, however, conscientiously say that his greeting was any the less sincere, but his tone was a little more curt, and his demeanour decidedly stiffer, than when I had met him on the previous evening. He seated himself opposite me, and came to business at once.

"I suppose you're aware, Mr. Ramsay, that my daughter has told me of the offer you made her last night?" [Pg 131]

When I had signified that I was, he continued—

"Now I'll be bound you don't know what a shock a piece of information like that gives to a man of my years. I was, of course, quite aware that Maud would be likely to marry sooner or later, but somehow I had never brought myself face to face with the actual situation before. Do you know that she is a very considerable heiress?"

I ventured to remark that I had been so informed, and started to try and convince him that my offer had nothing whatever to do with such a circumstance. But he stopped me.

"I know exactly what you're going to say. If I mistake not, I said it myself once upon a time. But tell me, John Ramsay, what would you say of a young man, five-and-twenty years of age, mate of a sailing ship, with nothing but his pay to depend upon, who proposed to a rich merchant's daughter with an income of something like six thousand a year. Reflect for a minute, and then tell me what you would think of him?"

This was a poser, but I made shift to answer it.

"I should say that it couldn't matter how much money she had if he really loved her, and thought he could make her happy."

He sniffed scornfully.

"Exactly what I thought. Now that's all very pretty. But to look at it in another light. We'll suppose that I give my consent to your marriage, what are your intentions then? Are you going to remain at sea, and leave your wife unprotected ashore, or are you going to abandon your profession, and live a life of idle luxury on her money? For, as I warned you years ago, you're fit for no other calling now." [Pg 132]

I could not answer either way, and I think he saw my difficulty, for he rose and came over to me. Putting his hand on my shoulder, and speaking in a kinder tone than he had adopted yet, he said —

"Jack Ramsay, you understand what a problem it is. I like you, my boy, and I like your family; I

think you're a steady, honest young fellow, and a credit to your calling; what is more, I know you love my girl, and I'm certain that she loves you. For these reasons I shall not definitely forbid your engagement."

"Oh, Sir Benjamin," I hastened to say, "how can I express my gratitude!"

"Hold on, sir, hear me out. Though, as I say, I shall not definitely forbid your engagement, yet remember, I do not sanction it. I shall not do so until I see how you behave. If I know that you work hard, and do your best to advance in your profession, it will be something for me to go upon, and I may eventually find sufficient reason to allow your marriage. Now, good-morning. Maud, I don't doubt, is awaiting you in the drawing-room. You had better tell her what I've told you."

So saying, the worthy merchant shook me by the hand, and hobbled from the room, leaving me a good deal more relieved than I had expected to be by the nature of his communication.

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Over the bliss of the succeeding fortnight I must draw a curtain. Of course I saw Maud every day; and equally, of course, each twenty-four hours convinced me more and more of the wisdom of my choice. But, like the school-boy's Black Monday, the fatal day of parting had to come; and, accordingly, one miserable Wednesday night I bade my darling farewell, and next morning, with a heavy heart, rejoined my ship and put back to sea.

CHAPTER II.

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A CHEQUERED CAREER.

To a sailor, perhaps the most trying parts of his courtship are the lengthy periods he is compelled to spend away from the presence of his beloved one; and yet, curiously enough, when in later life he comes to look back upon the whole business, he is pretty certain to discover that they were not the least pleasant portions of it. However that may be, it is a crucial test of the genuineness of his affection; and then it is that he has an opportunity of realizing what truth there is in the old saying, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." How often, when pacing his lonely watch, do you suppose his sweetheart's face rises before him? How often, when a stiff breeze is blowing, filling the canvas like great balloons, and driving the good ship, homeward bound, for all she is worth, do you think the thought of her he will soon hold in his arms, whose lips he will soon kiss, into whose eyes he will gaze with so fond a rapture, will cross his mind? Or, if his ship's head be turned away from home, hasn't he the sweet knowledge ever present with him that a certain voluminous epistle will meet him at the other end, destined amply to compensate for the bitterness of parting? Well, I protest, though separation may be one of the hardest parts of a sailor's courtship, yet, all things considered, it is worth undergoing, if only for the joy of reuniting. As the Frenchman has it—

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"L'absence est à l'amour ce qu'est au feu le vent;
Il éteint le petit, il allume le grand."

When I bade Maud my first good-bye after our engagement, I was, though I did not know it, bound on a long cruise. We visited Calcutta, Singapore, and Hong Kong, crossed the Pacific to San Francisco, thence round the Horn to Rio; finally returning, *viâ* New York, home. By that time, as may be supposed, I was ravenous—no other word so fully expresses it—for a glimpse of my darling's face; I felt as if I had not seen her for a lifetime.

So soon, therefore, as we were docked, and I could be spared, away I sped, first home to the old mother, and then, as early as I could decently excuse myself, to Maud. By the time my cab pulled up at her door I was in a fever, and I remember well the cabman's expression of surprise when he realized that instead of his legal fare of eighteen-pence I had given him five shillings. Summers, the same ancient butler who opened the door to me on the day I first saw my sweetheart, invited me to enter now, and the grip I gave his honest hand he professes to feel even at this distant date. A minute later I was entering the drawing-room, prepared to clasp my dear girl in my arms.

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At this point occurred a trifling circumstance—so trifling regarded in the white light of these later days that I almost hesitate to narrate it—that was, nevertheless, destined to alter the whole current of my after life, and indirectly to bring me into touch with all the curious things I have set myself to tell.

As I have just said, I entered the drawing-room, prepared to bestow upon Maud the hungry embrace of a long-parted lover. My intentions, however, were dashed to the ground by the presence of a third party—a man. As he stood watching us there was nothing for it but to behave like commonplace mortals, but I promise you I was not grateful to him for his presence. To say that Maud looked prettier than when I had left her last would perhaps be hardly the truth (though to my eyes she was incomparably sweet), for her face had a worn and harrassed expression which had not been there when I bade her good-bye. Her welcome was as warm as I could expect under the circumstances, but nevertheless I was bitterly disappointed by it.

Her companion's name was Welbourne, Captain Horatio Welbourne, of one of the Household Regiments, I believe. We exchanged glances, and from that moment I became furiously jealous of

him. I must, however, do him the justice to admit that he was a fine figure of a man, tall and soldierly, as befitted his calling. Our introduction effected, Maud proceeded to dispense the tea she was pouring out when I entered.

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Inwardly chafing to have my sweetheart to myself, it was with the utmost difficulty I could engage myself in the insipid conversation, through the mazes of which the gallant captain led us. When he rose to depart another relay of fashionables arrived, and after standing it for nearly an hour I made my excuses, and raging against the whole world fled the house.

The next afternoon I called again. This time I was fortunate enough to find Maud alone. I think she was vexed with me for deserting her the previous day; at any rate, her manner was distinctly cold. As it happened, we had hardly been a quarter of an hour together before the self-same Captain Welbourne must needs put in an appearance, bringing with him the peculiar air of being the tame cat of the house I had noticed on the previous occasion. I fancy Maud must have had some idea of what was in my mind, for she became painfully embarrassed, and noticing this, my suspicions grew and grew. How unjust I was to her, I can now see, but at the time I could not help remembering that she was an heiress, and that the gallant captain was really a most attractive person. Yet I determined I would not allow myself to become jealous without good cause.

That was, however, soon forthcoming, and, I blush to relate it now, through the gossip of a female tittle-tattler. Unhappily I was in such a state that I had no option but to believe it true. And, being ever impetuous and hot-headed, nothing would suit me then but I must call upon Maud while under the influence of my anger. Naturally enough she resented the terms in which I couched my remarks, and I left the house in high dudgeon, more than ever convinced that she was false to me. A week went by without a word on either side, and at the end of it I put back to sea nearly broken-hearted. As if to accentuate the sting, that was my first voyage as chief officer.

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From this point I date my downfall. Perhaps I was tired of the sea, or perhaps I was still piqued by what I could not help considering Maud's ill-treatment of me; at any rate, I got it into my poor addled brain that when we reached South Australia I would cry quits with the nautical profession, and if possible settle down out there to a life ashore. This scheme I put into practice, with the result that, after much jobbery, I obtained a situation in a ship-chandler's office in Port Adelaide, retaining it until my employer's fraudulent insolvency threw me on the world again. Then, a new gold-field breaking out inland, off I tramped to it, imbued with the intention of making my fortune, and returning to the mother-country a millionaire. This venture, however, was no more successful than the last, and after nearly three months' hard work, all I had to show for it were six dwts. of gold, and a bad attack of typhoid fever that nearly made an end of me. For nearly ten weeks I was confined to my bed in the tent-hospital, to leave it more like a skeleton than a human being.

What to do now I had no idea. I was bankrupt; my claim had been seized; I was too weak to tramp the bush in search of work; and indeed had I found any I doubt if I could have undertaken it. Added to all this, or perhaps I should say as the result of all this, I grew exceedingly despondent. Indeed the horrors of that period I am loth to dwell upon, save that it gave me an opportunity of experiencing one of those little touches of kindness which go to prove that after all humanity in the abstract is not quite so bad as it is usually made out to be.

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From the gold-field where I had contracted my illness, I had wandered, partly by Government assistance and partly by my own exertions, as far as the famous silver-mining town of Broken Hill, just over the New South Wales border. Here, in the midst of barbaric waste and splendour, a relapse seized me, and for nigh upon three weeks I hovered, in the Town Hospital, on the border-land of Life and Death.

When I said farewell to that kindly institution, I was at my wits' end as to my future. I had no money, and I was without the means of earning any. Fortunately it was summer time, and sleeping in the open air was not only quite possible but very pleasant, so I had no concern about lodgings; that, however, was only a minor matter, for I was starving. Oh, how bitterly I regretted having forsaken my old profession! No one will ever know the agony I endured. I could have fought the world for the very crumbs that were used to fall from the cuddy table. Day after day I toiled up one street and down another, from mine to mine, and smelter to smelter, seeking for the work which never offered.

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One sunset, weary and horribly sick at heart, I was crawling back to my usual camping place on the outskirts of the town, when a sudden faintness seized me. The whole world turned black before my eyes, I reeled, and fell unconscious by the road-side.

I remember nothing of what occurred, till I awoke to find myself lying upon a stretcher in a small tent. A man was leaning over me, and when my eyes opened he seemed to regard it as a matter for considerable satisfaction. I tried to collect my thoughts sufficiently to ask where I was, but seeing my lips attempting to form the sentence, he stopped me by saying—

"Naa, naa, laddie, tha' must just bide still a bit longer. Dunna tha' try to talk, or tha'll be maakin' thaself ill agin. There's na call for hurry, a tell tha'."

That my kind friend, for such he had surely proved himself, was a miner, I had no doubt—his dress, his kit, and even his accent proved that; but otherwise I could hazard no guess as to where I was. Being too weak to bestow much consideration upon the matter, I closed my eyes and immediately fell asleep again. When I woke it was broad daylight, and my friend had just

returned from shift. He hastened to put food before me, talking incessantly the while. From him I learnt that he and his mate had discovered me lying insensible beside the road, not fifty yards from his tent; that between them they had carried me in and put me to bed, and that I had been unconscious for something like six hours. Naturally, I expressed my gratitude, but he would have none of it, bidding me get well before I talked of saying "Thank you."

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My lucky star was evidently in the ascendant. Under his care—for while the kindest and gentlest, he was also the most exacting of nurses—I soon made visible improvement, and in a week was so far recovered as to be able to get up and potter about the tent. It was time for me to be thinking of moving on again.

"Well, laddie," my benefactor said to me one day, "tha's lookin' braavly noo."

"Thanks to you," I hastened to reply, "for without your care, John Trelsar, I don't know where I should have been to-day; not here, at any rate."

"Softly lad, softly, I did na more fa' thee than tha'd do fa' me, I reckon, so we'll cra' quits to it."

"That's all very well; but I owe my life to you, you'll never make me see anything but that. And now, I wonder what's the best thing for me to do. I can't stay idle here; there's no work to be got in the town, so unless I ship to sea again, I don't know what's to become of me."

Trelsar was all alive in a second.

"I've got it," he said, slapping his huge hand on his knee; "there's Seth Polwill below there in Adelaide, look see—working in the Fire Brigade—tha' must go to he, and say Jack Trelsar sent tha', and, mark my words, he'll put thee on the wa' for some'ut."

This Seth Polwill was a great hero of my benefactor's, upon whose appearance, sayings, and actions, he was never tired of discoursing. They were Townies, that is, they hailed from the same place in the Old Country; and as it appeared later, it was to Seth's advice that Trelsar owed his emigration, and the good position he now occupied.

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"That's all very well," I remarked, "but how am I to get to Adelaide? I haven't a red cent to my name, and I don't think I can screw the Government for another pass; they were nasty enough about the last."

"Now, don't thee trouble thaself about that," said John. "If thee wants a pound or two, to see thee on tha way, why not come to tha friend, Jan Trelsar; never fear, lad, but what a'll trust thee."

Upon my deciding to accept a loan, a piece of paper, a pen, and a bottle of ink were obtained, and a letter of introduction to the all-important Polwill produced.

Armed with this, the very next morning off I accordingly set for the South, arriving in due course in Adelaide. So soon as was possible, I made my way to the Fire Brigade Station, and inquired for Seth Polwill. The firemen were at dinner, but one whom I should have known anywhere for the man I sought, came to the door and inquired my business. He was a good-looking, well set-up fellow, and when he spoke, I noticed he had none of the Cousin Jack dialect so conspicuous in my benefactor's conversation. Having handed him my letter, he sat down on the wheel of the big engine to examine it. He read it through two or three times before venturing a word; then rising, he shook me gravely by the hand, and inquired after Trelsar's health.

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After which, he remarked—

"You don't look well."

I replied that I had but recently recovered from a very serious illness, and this led me on to narrate how I came to meet his friend. He listened attentively, and when I had finished, said—

"You say you've been a sailor?"

I replied in the affirmative, though I refrained from telling him in what capacity, for I had a certain delicacy in letting people know that I had shown myself sufficiently a fool to give up a chief officer's billet afloat for starvation ashore.

"Well, look you here, Mr. Ramsay," he said, "I should very much like to help you to something, if only to oblige my friend. The best then that I can do is to tell you that there is a vacancy here. We want another hand, and, as perhaps you know, we prefer sailors. If you can qualify, I don't doubt for a moment but that the superintendent will put you on. Take my advice, go into his office at once, and ask him yourself. You can't do any harm by asking, even if you don't get what you ask for."

Thanking him for his assistance, I went straight to the superintendent's room. Once there, I stated my business, making the best possible case I could of it. The superintendent eyed me narrowly.

"You say you've been to sea," he said. "For how long?"

"Twelve years," I replied.

"In what ships?"

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I gave him the names of the vessels and their owners.

"In what capacity did you serve aboard them?"

"From apprentice to chief officer," I said, feeling it would be the safest plan to tell him everything.

He stared when he heard my answer, and looked me carefully up and down.

"I don't know that that's exactly a recommendation, my man," he said. "Chief officers who exchange the sea for a fireman's billet don't exactly answer the description of the man I want. I suppose you're aware we're considered a crack brigade? If I take you on, you'll have to prove you're no skrimshanker. Our motto here is 'Smartness and sobriety,' do you understand?"

I remarked that I did. Then, giving me a note to the doctor, who would examine me, he bade me come back to him next day.

To make a long story short, the doctor's examination proving satisfactory, I was enrolled a member of the Adelaide Fire Brigade, with permission to do as much work as the day had room for, give as much satisfaction as possible, and risk my life in the interest of the city and the reputation of the Brigade as often as opportunity occurred. All things considered, it was by no means an unpleasant life, and until the novelty wore off, I believe I enjoyed it. One strange coincidence, however, happened to me during my connection with it, which I take to be so extraordinary that I must ask your indulgence while I narrate it.

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One miserable, gusty night, early in winter, the alarm sounded for a fire. Our promptness was proverbial, and almost before the bell had ceased to sound we were racing for the scene. It turned out to be the New Federation Hotel, in King William Street, and when we arrived the whole building was one enormous blaze. The fire had originated, so it was said, in a small store cupboard behind the bar, and had spread all over the ground-floor, thus practically cutting off the escape of those lodged in the rooms above. According to the manager's statement, nearly every bedroom was occupied that night, and so far only four people had effected exits. Within two minutes of our arrival we had the escapes up against the building, and were passing the terrified occupants down as fast as we could lay hold of them. It was dangerous work, but we were not paid to think of that.

Suddenly, at a side window, I saw a woman preparing to hurl herself into the street below. The crowd noticed her too, and raised a yell. Running a ladder round, I mounted to her side, and before she could carry out her purpose had taken her in my arms and borne her safely to the ground. As we reached it, a weird, dishevelled, scallywag of a man rushed towards us, with arms outstretched, crying, "Oh, my God, my God, she's safe—my wife!"

In that brief moment I recognized my old enemy, Captain Welbourne, the man who I believed had deprived me of Maud!

Next day I learnt that he was on his wedding tour, and what interested me far more, *that his wife's maiden name was Hawkhurst!* Two points, therefore, raised themselves for my consideration: either he had never loved Maud; or he had declared himself, and she had refused him. If this latter supposition were correct, what could have induced her action? I must leave it to my readers to imagine what agonies of self-reproach I suffered after this discovery. I saw plainly that I had wrecked my whole life by one little foolish exhibition of jealousy, and that too without the slightest cause or justification. A hundred times a day I cursed my senseless stupidity. But there, what is to be gained by opening the old wound? Rather let me draw a curtain over such a painful subject, one which even to-day I hardly like to think about.

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Now, though life in the Fire Brigade might and undoubtedly did possess attractions, they were such as were liable to become exceedingly monotonous after a time. So it chanced that when I had been employed therein nearly eight months, a friend heard of a situation as store-keeper, on a Darling River sheep station, which he was kind enough to think might suit me. At his suggestion I applied for the position, and had the good fortune to secure it.

Sending in my resignation to the Board, I left Adelaide, and proceeded into the Bush. But the billet did not come up to expectations, and when I had given it a good trial, I discarded it in favour of another as cook to an Overlanding Party. In this capacity I wandered far afield, with the result that at the end of eighteen months I found myself in Brisbane, tired of the Bush, and pining for a breath of sea air again.

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While inactive in Brisbane, an English letter was forwarded to me from the Melbourne Post-office. The writer was a cousin, and her mission was to announce the death of my poor old mother, after a brief illness. The blow, as may be supposed, affected me keenly, the more so because I could not but feel that, all things considered, I had not been the son to her that she deserved. Poor old lady, I never knew how much she was to me until I had lost her. Her death, and the thought that I should never see her loving face, or hear her gentle voice again, seemed to sever the one remaining link that united me to my old life. Could I, I asked myself, be the same person as the little boy she took to school at Plymouth? Could I be the same John Ramsay who followed her into Sir Benjamin Plowden's office, so many years ago? Yes—the same, but oh! how differently situated! With Virgil, I could well cry, "*O mihi praeteritos referat si Jupiter annos!*" Alas! those dear dead years, how bright they are to look back upon, yet how shamefully I misused them!

But in spite of the bitterness of the blow, I could not go on brooding over my loss for ever. My

mother was gone, nothing could bring her back to me. It behoved me now to look after myself, for my necessities were on the point of obtruding themselves upon my notice once more.

When I found that the money I had managed to save from my various employments was running short, I began to wonder how I should obtain another situation. The prospect looked gloomy enough in all conscience, when Fate, which was steadily bearing me on towards a certain goal, took me in hand again, and by permitting me to overhear a certain conversation, led me into a track that was fraught with much danger to my future peace. The speakers were the owner of a Thursday Island Pearling schooner, and a well-known boat-builder. Their talk had reference to a new lugger the skipper had lately purchased, and the difficulty of finding hands to work her North. Here was the very chance for me.

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As soon as they separated, I accosted the Pearler, and offered my services. When he heard my qualifications, he engaged me at once; and so it came about that next day I was a seaman aboard the *Crested Wave*, bound for Thursday Island and the Pearl fisheries.

I need not delay you while I enter upon any description of the voyage northwards, more than to say that we arrived safely at our destination, and having taken a diver aboard, at once set sail again, this time for the Solomons, where we remained cruising about, with fair success, for nigh upon three months.

Though I had, on several occasions, crossed the Pacific in deep-water ships, this was the first time I had pottered about among the Islands themselves, and the new life came to me as a revelation. Even as I sit here writing, the memory of those glorious latitudes rises and sends a thrill through me. There is a saying, that the man who has once known the Himalayas never forgets their smell; I say that the man who has once heard the thunder of the surf upon the reefs, who has smelt the sweet incense of the tropic woods, and felt the invigorating breath of the trade winds upon his cheek, can never rid his memory of the fascination of those Southern seas!

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By the time we returned to Thursday Island a fair sum in wages was owing me, and I think I had won a good reputation with my skipper, for he was anxious that I should take a holiday, and then set sail with him again. I resolved to think about it, and in the meantime to stretch my legs for a week or two ashore, seeing what was to be seen, and as far as possible enjoying the peculiar delights of Thursday Island.

"Come with me," said a shipmate one evening. "You think because you've seen the Japanese you know the Island. Why, man, you're only on the outskirts; you don't even know Juanita!"

"And who's Juanita?" I asked, without interest, for I was wearied to death of the Lizzies, Pollies, Nancies, and their sisterhood.

By way of reply he ran his arm through mine, and headed along the beach, presently to cry a halt alongside the palms which mark the entrance to the "Orient" Hotel. Knowing this house to be the resort of mail-boat skippers, schooner-owners, and high-toned gentry of that class, and to have a fleecing reputation, I had hitherto religiously avoided it. A flood of bright light streamed from the doorway, and sounds of laughter invited us to enter.

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A couple of Pearlery and a woman were the only occupants of the room. The men were of no account, but the woman's face riveted my attention at once. She was not exactly the most beautiful woman—I mean as far as refinement went—that I had ever seen, but she was certainly the handsomest. As we entered, her companions bade her "good-night," and went out. Then my friend introduced me in proper form.

"Mr. Ramsay—Madame Juanita."

She held out her hand and bade me welcome, and from that moment I was a lost man. What sort of fascination it was that she exercised over me I cannot say; I only know that when I left the "Orient" and stumbled out into the starlit night again I had forgotten Maud, forgotten my own impoverished condition, forgotten my self-respect, and was madly, desperately, absurdly in love with this beautiful and mysterious creature.

CHAPTER III.

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SACRED AND PROFANE LOVE.

Somewhere or other I remember to have seen a picture of the two sorts of love which may enter man's life. I think it was called "Sacred and Profane Love," and it may possibly have been by one of the Old Masters. But wherever or whatever it was, it seemed to me that I had now had experience of both passions. Maud was the first, Juanita was the second. I had loved Maud for herself alone; Juanita fascinated me purely by her personal charms, and by a certain Bohemianism which, while it occasionally almost frightened me, held me in chains, that were to all intents and purposes stronger than links of iron. For it must not be imagined that my first visit to the "Orient" was my last. In fact, now that I had once fallen her victim, I was hardly to be found elsewhere. As the first proof of the power she exercised over me, I declined my old skipper's offer to ship for another cruise, preferring idleness and poverty ashore, with the

opportunities it presented of seeing the woman I so slavishly adored, to a life of money-making and hardship at sea.

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So day in day out found me by Juanita's side, either loafing in the hotel itself, or when she could leave her duties, boating in the bay, wandering about the island, or climbing Fortification Hill to admire the beautiful panorama visible from its summit. Looking back on that period, I am smitten with a feeling of intense shame. But at the time I lived only to be constantly by her side. Maud was as much forgotten as though she had never existed.

It must not be supposed, however, that with one so fair as Juanita I should have the field entirely to myself. Women of her stamp were too uncommon in Thursday Island to lack admirers. But among all my rivals there was only one of whom I entertained any fear—a Pole, and men said a titled refugee—by name Panuroff. He was a big, handsome man, with a peculiarly reckless air, certain to possess a great fascination for susceptible members of the opposite sex. Not that I mean in any way to infer that Juanita encouraged his advances, for I think, though she preferred him to the majority of those who paid court to her, they were not always on the best of terms. How she came to take to me so quickly I have never been able to understand, but somehow she was never tired of listening to my adventures, and particularly those relating to my sea career. On the point of my capabilities to take charge of and navigate a vessel she cross-questioned me continually, until I felt compelled to ask if she thought of setting up as a ship-owner herself, and wanted me to enter her employ. She laughed the matter off, saying that if she had money to invest it would certainly be in a schooner; but as she hadn't, well, she'd have to wait until she got it before talking about officers and such like. In fact, this idea of possessing a boat seemed, as far as I could judge, to be her only thought and aim in life. But her real idea, and how I figured in working it out, you shall, if you have not already guessed it, learn directly.

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One night when we had thoroughly come to understand each other, I hurried down as soon as my evening meal was over to the "Orient." As most of the Pearling luggers were at sea, it was a slack time for hotel-keepers, and when I entered the bar Juanita was alone, hard at work upon her interminable calculations. For nearly an hour we remained in conversation. Then our *tête-à-tête* was interrupted by the entrance of a third party, who, as ill-luck had it, was none other than Count Panuroff before-mentioned. I could see that Juanita was not best pleased at his appearance, and during the time he remained in the room her behaviour towards him was barely civil. He noticed this, and his glances towards myself betokened a resentment that only waited an opportunity to take active form. Nor can I with truth aver that I did not let him see that I rejoiced at his discomfiture. When Juanita left him and returned to my side he sat himself down in a corner, and watched us out of sullen, half-closed eyes. I felt sure mischief was brewing, and I was not disappointed.

Partly for the purpose of annoying him, and partly to see how long he would sit in his corner, sulking like a bear with a sore head, I prolonged my visit until some time after the usual hour for closing. When I left the house it was nearly twelve o'clock—a rough, tempestuous night, with a strong wind blowing, and a full moon dodging inky clouds across a somewhat unhappy-looking sky. Leaving the Sea-Front I struck inland towards my abode, but I had not proceeded very far before my ear caught the sound of footsteps following me. Presently a voice I hardly recognized called upon me to stop. I did so, and turning, faced my pursuer. As you will have guessed, it was Panuroff. He came up to me, and clutching me by the arm, tried to speak. But his rage was so great that for the moment it not only deprived him of speech, but shook him like the palsy. When he found his tongue he blurted out—

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"I'll kill you! I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

He would have gone on repeating this for an indefinite time had I not thrown off his hand, and said—

"I advise you to be a little more careful, my friend, or you'll get yourself into trouble. In this country you won't be allowed to go about killing people just as you please."

My coolness only seemed to heap additional fuel on his already surcharged fires. He almost foamed at the mouth. Grasping my arm again, he hissed—

"Coward! coward! I knew you were a coward!"

Not being able to stand this, I did my best to knock him down. It was a futile attempt, however, for he leapt on one side, and in doing so struck me a heavy blow on the side of my face.

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"There," he cried, almost dancing in the moonlight. "What now?"

"Now," I said, as quietly as I could under the circumstances, "you've done it, and I'll have your life if you're twenty times mad!"

"For once you talk like a man," he remarked. "Come with me, and we'll settle it now and for ever. She shall see who is the better man."

If I had any scruples left, that reference to Juanita obliterated them; and so side by side we tramped through the bush round the elbow of the hill to an open spot among ferns and aloe bushes, about the centre of the island. It was a strange place surrounded by giant ant-hills, which in many cases reared themselves quite eight feet above the ground, like monuments in a well-populated cemetery.

Here Panuroff stopped and took his coat off. I followed his example. Then from his breast he drew a sort of stiletto, with which, I suppose, he had armed himself on purpose for the present occasion. I had of course my sheath-knife. While we were making our preparations the moon emerged from behind a bank of clouds, and as she did so the wind dropped and the faint clang of eight bells came up to us from a steamer in the harbour.

I could hardly believe that I was standing face to face with a fellow-creature, my one aim and object being to take his life. But it is a strange fact that man is never so dangerous as when his passions are not roused, that is to say, when he is able to enter upon the work of butchery with a contemplative and evenly balanced mind. Contrary to what I should have expected, I had not the least fear as to the result.

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For perhaps a minute we stood regarding each other. I could hear his excited breathing as he prepared for his spring. Then like a wild cat he gathered himself together, and leapt towards me. I sprang on one side, but not before his knife had grazed my arm. The struggle had commenced in downright earnest. Like game cocks, we circled round and round each other, waiting and watching for an opportunity to strike. It was no child's play, for we were both active men in first-class training.

Suddenly my foot caught in a boulder, and for a second my attention was diverted from his eyes. It was fatal; with one great bound he rushed in upon me, and clutching me round the neck, attempted to drive his knife between my shoulder and my neck. With the strength of despair I clutched the wrist of the hand that held the knife, and backwards and forwards, round and round, here, there, and everywhere about that little plot of ground we passed, swaying to and fro, breathing hard, and wrestling for our very lives. Surely such a struggle the island, with all its strange and mysterious population, could never have witnessed before! At last my right hand reached his throat—my left still held the wrist—I closed my fingers on his windpipe.

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Such is the strange construction of the human mind, that at that moment, when both our lives trembled in the balance, I remember, distinctly, thinking what a wonderful contrivance the Adam's apple of the throat must be.

Further and further his head went back; his breath came from him in thick gasps. The moon shone clear, and by her light I could see the look of despair settling in his eyes. At last, to avoid being throttled, he fell to the ground, I with him. Here the battle recommenced, for both our holds were loosened by the fall. Rolling over, he seized upon me, and raised his knife; yet again I clutched the hand that held it, and with one gigantic effort threw him off; but the exertion was too much for me, and before I could rise he was upon me, and had stabbed me twice. I remember no more.

When I recovered my senses, I was too weak and faint to care very much where I was. But somehow, in a hazy sort of fashion, I got hold of the idea that I was back in John Trelsar's tent at Broken Hill. After a while, however, curiosity got the upper hand of indifference, and I re-opened my eyes to look about me. It was a strange sort of room that I found myself in, and one that it did not take me a year to see, had lately been in the occupation of Chinamen. A couple of celestial jumpers hung on pegs behind the door, and an opium pipe stood on a shelf upon the wall. Through the small window opposite my bed I could distinctly hear the sound of surf breaking on a shore, and as if to prove that my reasoning powers were in no way impaired by my terrible experience, I made it out that I must either be on one of the neighbouring islands, or on a part of Thursday which I had never visited. For several reasons I inclined towards the latter belief.

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How I knew I was not in any proximity to the township itself was the fact, plainly discernible to one having experience in such matters, that the sea was not breaking on sand, but on shingle; and what was more important still, among mangrove trees. Now I knew that the beach on the settlement side of Thursday Island was sandy, while that on the other side I had heard was pebbly; on the former there were no mangroves, on the latter they abounded. But observation of these things was beyond me for very long, so, feeling tired, I turned my face to the wall, and was presently asleep again.

Many hours must have elapsed before I woke; when I did the sun had set, and the room would have been dark but for a candle burning on a table by my side. Rather dazed by my long sleep, I looked around me, and as I did so my eyes lighted upon the most extraordinary being I think I have ever beheld in my life.

He was an albino, and what was worse, a dwarf albino. He sat upon a high box, and was staring hard at me; his hair, very long and snow-white, was just moved by the draught from the window; and his eyes, which I discovered later to be of a peculiar shade of pink, flashed and twinkled like enormous rubies. All the time he cracked his finger-joints, first one way, then another, then backwards, then forwards, with a most alarming noise.

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When he saw that I was awake, he scrambled down from his perch and approached me, saying in a curiously high-pitched voice—

"Ho! ho! my friend, so you are awake again! Well, you've had a wonderful nap, twelve hours on end, or I'm a Dutchman."

I answered that I was surprised to hear it, and went on to ask where I was, and how I came there.

"Well, that's a long story," he said, still cracking his fingers, "but if you want to hear it, I'll tell

you. I found you on the bend of the hill early this morning, lying like a dead man, with pints of good blood run to waste round about you. From the look of the ground I fixed it, young man, that you'd been fighting. But as that was no business of mine, I didn't take any heed of it, but just picked you up, and brought you in here, where you've been ever since."

He did not tell me that had I been any other than John Ramsay he would have let me lie there. But the reason for that, and how I came to hear of it, you shall know later on.

Of course I thanked him for his charity, but again, like John Treslar, he would not hear of it. Among his many extraordinary talents, he numbered a knowledge of surgery, and under his care I made rapid progress towards recovery. Fortunately, though the wounds Panuroff had inflicted upon me were deep, they were by no means dangerous. [Pg 160]

At the end of the week I was almost myself again. All the time, my strange little benefactor was indefatigable in his attentions, and pretended to take a wonderful interest in myself and my welfare. Among other peculiarities, he was as inquisitive as an old woman, and before I had known him a week, he had not only drawn from me the name of my antagonist (whom I was rejoiced to hear had fled the settlement, believing he had killed me), but had made himself conversant with my passion for Juanita. On his own side he was more reticent, and do what I would, I could not draw out of him either his business on the island, or in fact anything important connected with himself or his affairs. That he had seen more of the world than even the majority of those who consider themselves great travellers, I soon gathered; that he was for some years in Chili, was another thing I discovered. But beyond these two small circumstances, I could learn nothing of his past. One obligation he imposed in return for what he had done for me, and that was, that I should never mention him to any living soul, and especially not to Juanita.

"Why especially not to Juanita?" I asked, surprised that he should bring her into the matter.

"Because women wonder, and when they wonder they pry, and when they pry they make mischief, and when they make mischief they're the devil, and there isn't room for Satan and me in this house." [Pg 161]

He paused for a minute, his twinkling little eyes watching me all the time, and then went on—

"You see, my appearance is against me, and as I'm sensitive on the point, I don't want to make new friends. There you have it in a nutshell. If you told your sweetheart anything about me, she'd want to see me, and then the mischief would be done."

Little knowing to what I was pledging myself, I readily gave the promise he asked of me, and then bidding him good-bye, set off across the island (for his house was, as I had conjectured, on the side farthest from the township) to Juanita.

I found her as usual in the bar, and her surprise at seeing me was either complimentary or not as I chose to take it. She informed me that she had made up her mind I had decamped from the island. And when I told her what had occasioned my absence, she said she had always thought something of the sort would happen, for Panuroff had dropped hints which frightened her. Why she had not warned me I could not make out, and indeed her whole attitude towards myself was extremely puzzling. Of course she knew I loved her, not only because she could see it in my face, but because I had reiterated the statement a thousand times or more; but though she professed to return my affection, at times I could not help a feeling that it was not quite as genuine as she pretended.

Just as before, her one thought was to procure a boat, in which to sail among the islands. Hardly a day went by without some reference to it, until I began to hate even the sound of the word "schooner." At last one night she asked me point blank if I could see any way to help her; letting me understand very plainly that her future treatment of myself would depend in a great measure upon my answer. [Pg 162]

Though I knew such a thing was next door to impossible, I did not say so, but intimated that she should first tell me why she wanted to go. Then the whole mystery came out. Drawing me into a corner, with the prettiest little air of confidence, she told me the following remarkable story:—

"My Jack," she said, taking my hands in hers, and speaking with the foreign accent that lent such a charm to her simplest words, "have pity on your poor Juanita. I am in your hands entirely, for I have no one to advise me, save you. Now you shall know all my sad history. As I have so often told you, I am from Santiago, and it was from a convent there that I ran away to marry the young Englishman, who, you may have heard, so cruelly ill-treated me. Together we wandered here, there, and everywhere; always in debt, always in difficulty; to-day we had plenty; to-morrow we had nothing. My husband had squandered two fortunes already, and when we were at our last pinch, a third came to him. As you know is often the way, Jack, he suddenly grew as mean and stingy as before he had been spendthrift and reckless.

"Instead of living as became our new fortune, we literally starved. That he had drawn all his money from the bank I discovered; but what he did with it, or where he kept it, I could never find out. Then he fell ill, and the doctors said he must have a long sea voyage, and absolute rest, or his brain would become unhinged. If the truth were only known, I think it was so then. [Pg 163]

"We were in San Francisco at the time, and I tried hard to persuade him to sail for England. He would not go, making the excuse that it would cost more money than he could afford. But as he had to have rest, he took passages for himself and for me (though he grudged my accompanying

him) on board a tiny schooner trading among the islands.

"We set sail, but instead of the voyage doing him good, he grew weaker and weaker every hour. Oh, the horror of those days, I shall never forget it! At last he died, making the captain promise to bury him on an island we were close to at the time.

"The funeral over, we came on here. Having no money to take me further, I was compelled to remain in the island, but immediately on my arrival, I wrote to his lawyers, to see what they could tell me of my affairs. They replied that my husband had drawn his money from the bank in gold, and had hinted to them that he was going to bury it. But something further, mark you! That, to the best of their knowledge, he always carried the directions for finding it in a locket round his neck. As soon as I read that, I remembered that he did wear a locket, which he had once been furiously angry with me for attempting to open.

"So you see, Jack, nothing remains for me but to return to that island, dig up my husband's body, and recover the precious locket. Now I have told you my secret; I am in your hands entirely. I love you, and I trust you implicitly. If any one else finds the locket before me, I am ruined. Think what I have suffered in this place. Then tell me will you help me—yes or no?"

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Tears were in her eyes, and she looked so beseechingly at me that I was compelled to take her in my arms and comfort her with promises of help. That her story was true, I never for one moment doubted.

When I left the "Orient," it was with the firm intention of finding money enough somewhere to hire a schooner, that I might assist her in her search. I felt, to do a service of this kind would be to win her gratitude for ever, and turning this over in my mind, I set out for the Albino's residence, resolved to place the matter before him.

CHAPTER IV.

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RAMSAY BECOMES A SHIP-OWNER.

When I entered the Albino's abode and confronted him, he gave a strange sort of laugh.

"Why, John Ramsay," he cried, "what on earth's the matter with you? You look as doleful as the man whose wife ran away with a tinker, and took his last five pounds to pay their travelling expenses. What's wrong?"

Thereupon I sat myself down, and told him as much of the story as I thought would enable him to advise me. He curled himself up on his bed opposite me, swinging his legs and cracking his fingers till I had finished. Then he whistled in a strange, uncanny fashion.

"You say your sweetheart, what's her name—Juanita—buried her husband on one of the islands out yonder?" he began, jerking his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the Pacific Ocean generally.

I nodded.

"She never before told you she was a widow I believe?"

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"Well, all things considered, it was hardly likely she would. What's more, I never asked her."

"How do you know she's not leading you on? How d'you know she doesn't want to get you out to sea, and then collar the whole caboose? It's a pity you're so simple with women, isn't it?"

Thinking this question hardly required an answer, I lit my pipe for something to do, and waited for him to continue. All this time he had never taken his eyes off me, but looked me through and through as if endeavouring to read my very soul. He was evidently revolving some problem in his mind, and it must have been a puzzler, if the expression on his face could be taken as evidence. When he spoke, it was with a purpose.

"Look here, John Ramsay, I like the cut of your jib, or you wouldn't be sitting there opposite me. I'm generally considered an 'old Bob Ridley' to cross, but any man'll tell you I make an up and down good friend. As I say, I've taken a fancy to you, and what's more, I've scraped together a bit of money here and there. Tell me one thing,—are you sure this,—are you sure this, what's her outlandish name again—Juanita—is really fond of you?"

"How can I tell? She says she is."

"And you're fool enough to think you can't be happy without her?"

"If it is foolish to think so, I am. What are you driving at?"

He scratched his head musingly. Presently he asked—

"How much d'you think it would cost to hire a schooner for the trip down to this island she talks about?"

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"I don't know, because she hasn't told me where the island is."

"Well, now, that's what I call a pity, but at any rate"—here he leant towards me and dropped his voice almost to a whisper—"if you think your chance with her hangs on your finding money enough for that cruise dash my wig if I won't lend it to you."

If he had offered to produce the moon from his waistcoat pocket, and give me a bite of it, I could not have been more surprised. He was the last man in the world I should have expected to receive assistance from. So, for a second or two, I hardly knew what to say, then I managed to stammer out—

"That's awfully generous of you seeing you know nothing about me; but do you mean it? Honest Injun?"

"Real downright honest Injun!"

In his excitement he had struggled down from his bed, and now stood before me as weird a picture in the half light as any man could wish to see.

"Well, there you are," he said; "there's my offer—take it or leave it, just as you please. Up to three hundred pounds the money's yours; come for it when you will."

"But I may never be able to repay you. Remember, bar what I've told you, you don't know anything of me."

"Never mind that; I like the cut of your jib, that's enough for me. If you can't repay me inside of a year you may before I die. At any rate, there it is, and good luck go with you. Only, remember your promise—not a word to Juanita of me; you'll find it safest in the long run to let her suppose you're doing it all yourself."

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Had I only known then the reasons which actuated this surprising offer, I doubt if I should have been so quick to accept it; but not being able to see into the future, of course it was impossible for me to avert the trouble that was threatening my devoted head.

As soon as I could decently escape him, I made my excuses, and set off for the township to tell the good news to Juanita.

So high were my hopes, and such was my exultation at having brought the matter to such a highly successful issue, that I can recall nothing of my walk until I found myself entering the verandah of the Orient Hotel. For a moment I lingered on the threshold, listening to the music of Juanita's voice within. When I entered, it was to find her leaning across the counter, in earnest conversation with a tall Pearler, whom I had seen hovering about her before. Now, it was a curious thing, that though I had hurried with all the speed I could command to tell her the news, and had been picturing to myself the rapturous way in which she would receive it, on seeing her thus engaged I almost regretted having such good tidings to impart.

Whether she was out of patience with me for something I had done, or whether she purposely wished to make me jealous, I do not know; at any rate, save for a little nod, she took no notice of my entrance, but returned to her conversation with the stranger, leaving me to cool my heels and scowl till she should deign to speak to me. After a while the Pearler seemed to recollect business elsewhere; he drank up his liquor, and went out, leaving us together. She put his glass under the counter to be washed, and then came along the bar to where I stood.

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"Well," she said.

"Well," I replied, now thoroughly angered.

"If you've nothing more to say than that," she continued spitefully, "you'd better go home and sleep. You've been drinking!"

"It's a lie," I said roughly, "and you know it, but if you think you're going to stir me into quarrelling with you, you're very much mistaken. I wouldn't quarrel with you to-night for a thousand pounds. But I'll tell you what I will do; I'll break the head of that jackanapes you were talking to just now, if he comes fooling round here again while I'm on hand."

"You're very rude," she said, tossing her head, "and you're also very cruel. I must refuse to talk to you any more. Leave me, and come back when you're sober."

"Very well," I said, "I *will* leave you, and what's more to the point, I'll make you a bet you'll be sorry for this. I came to tell you some news about your schooner that would have pleased you, but I'll see you dead before you shall hear it now."

So saying, I swung on my heel and left the house.

It would have been a bad business for any man who might have crossed me that night, for I was in about as vile a temper as it would be possible to be. So, unable to trust myself among men, I made for the hill-side, and started walking about the back of the island.

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I must have wandered all night, for breakfast-time discovered me not more than a hundred yards from the Albino's door. With a yearning for some one to impart my sorrows to, I made towards it, and entered in time to catch my friend at his meal. His keen eyes saw in an instant that something was wrong.

"You've been quarrelling with Juanita," he began. "Don't deny it; I can see it in your face. Well,

you're a bigger fool than I figured you. What was it about?"

When I told him, he gave me a glance full of such withering contempt that I almost quailed before it.

"I thought it was a man I was helping; as I live, it's only a school-girl! Did she forget to say he was a pretty boy, and to kiss him, and to chuck him under the chin then?"

His raillery was more than I could stand, so being unwilling to quarrel with him too, I got up to go. But this by no means suited him.

"Sit down," he snapped, pointing with a long fore-finger to the kerosene case which did duty for a chair; "sit down and tell me what you propose to do now; or, what's more to the point, I'll tell you what you shall do."

"What?"

"Why, you shall just eat your breakfast here, my boy, and then go back to the 'Orient' and eat humble pie." [Pg 171]

"Never!" I cried. "I'll see you damned first!"

"Silence, fool!" he almost shrieked. "You shall eat just as much dirt as she chooses to give you. Do you think I'm going to let you spoil this contract for a ha'porth of humility? That's not my way. And when you've talked her round——"

"Supposing she won't be talked round?"

"Suppose your grandmother! She's a woman, and if you go the right way to work, you ought to be able to do what you like with her. Then you'll let her understand that you have money to invest, and after that you'll find all go smooth as buttermilk."

"I don't like making myself cheap."

"Child, you've got to; you've fairly got to grovel, or quarrel with me. Now just pack your traps, and clear out of this; I want to wash up."

In obedience to his command I returned to the township, and once more entered the "Orient." Juanita was not in. She had gone for a walk along the beach. Inquiring the direction, I followed it, and soon discovered her seated on the side of Fortification Hill, gazing across the blue strip of sea to where the mainland of Australia pushes its head up above the horizon. Numbers of white-sailed pearling craft dotted the bay; a missionary schooner was going about on her second board towards her moorings; and so still was the air, that the sound of hammering came quite distinctly from a lugger at anchor under the shadow of the Prince of Wales' Island, nearly a mile away. As I approached her, Juanita looked up and saw me. [Pg 172]

The scene which the Albino had arranged for me was not destined to be put into practice, for she took the matter into her own hands, and when I had seated myself beside her, fell to crying, and bitterly reproaching herself for what she termed her "wickedness" on the preceding night. I endeavoured to soothe her, but it was only when she had convinced herself of my forgiveness that she deigned to be comforted.

"Oh, my Jack," she said, brushing away her tears, "you don't know how angry I've been with myself for treating you so! Let me hear again that you forgive me."

For the sixth time I reiterated the fact, and only then would she let me say anything further. The breach was completely healed. When I told her the good news her rapture knew no bounds; she lavished kisses upon me, calling me by all sorts of pet names, both Spanish and English, and continually urged me to make haste, as if it could be possible for us to set sail that very evening.

"Oh, how good you are to me!" she repeated. "And what boat do you think you can get? There's Phelp's *Ocean Queen*, but she's too large; there's the *Alberta*, but she's not large enough. Oh, what boat can we find?"

"I was thinking of the *Mother of Pearl*," I answered. "She's quite big enough; and I know Jameson would let us buy her outright for a small sum cash. He's in low water, and wants a smaller boat." [Pg 173]

"Yes; she would do beautifully," she continued, clapping her hands. "You must go and see about her this very hour, and then we may get away to-morrow, perhaps."

As she said this she looked up into my face with such an air of entreaty that I convinced myself that I was more in love with her than ever.

"Well, hardly to-morrow, I fancy," I replied. "You see there's so much to be seen to; a crew to be hunted up, stores, and a thousand and one things to be attended to, that all take time. What's more, I expect she'll want overhauling; she's been lying out there these six months past, just going to rack and ruin."

"Then when, my Jack, may we sail?"

"Perhaps the day after to-morrow—hardly before."

This at first caused her to look disappointed, for she seemed impatient of even an hour's delay;

but she soon regained her spirits, and we set off back to the township on the best of terms.

Leaving her at her door, I passed on along the Sea-Front, to a spot where I knew I should find the owner of the *Mother of Pearl*. Just as I expected, he was seated on a bench, sunning himself between drinks; and as it was about time to hunt up another, I invited him to step inside the shanty and lubricate at my expense. This he willingly consented to do; and when the operation had been safely accomplished, and not till then, I began to lead up to the subject of the schooner.

As my reputation in the island was not exactly that of a monied man, he was thrown completely off his guard, and forthwith entered upon a string of abuse regarding the unfortunate vessel. She was too big for diving purposes; she cost twice as much to keep up as he could afford; she took a young man-o'-war's crew to work her; and altogether he wished he'd never set eyes on her. I waited my opportunity, and then said—

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"Don't you wish you could sell her?"

"Sell her! You'd just better believe I do!" he replied with considerable energy. "I'm dead sick of her,—there never was a rottener bargain going."

He looked across the smooth stretch of the bay to where the object of his animadversions lay swinging to the tide. Then smothering a curse, he turned to me—

"Look here, Jack," he said, never of course dreaming I meant serious business, "I'm not what you'd call a big bug for style; but I'll tell you what I *will* do. I'll make you a present of that craft for two fifty, cash on the nail, and lose a hundred pounds by it. Now then, there you are; I couldn't say fairer than that if you was my missus's first husband's uncle, could I?"

He had made me the offer so often "just for style," that such a thing as my accepting it never for an instant crossed his mind. Therefore when I said quietly—

"Make it two hundred, Jim, and I'm your man, cash on the capstan when you please," there never was a man more overcome with astonishment.

"You don't mean it," he gasped; "you don't mean to go and say you've got two hundred pounds, Jack?"

His surprise was almost pathetic.

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"I do," I answered, smiling at his earnestness; "and what's more, remember you've offered me the *Mother of Pearl* for two hundred and fifty pounds. I offer two hundred, cash, if she suits me, and we'll go off and look at her this very minute."

Taking him by the arm, I led the way to the beach, and pushed a boat into the water.

"You can pull," I said, seating myself comfortably in the stern-sheets.

"Who? Me? Not much," he replied; "there's no beastly pride about me. Here you, Tommy," turning to a Solomon boy who stood watching us, "just you jump in and put us aboard the *Mother of Pearl* yonder, and I won't say but what there mayn't be a plug of tobacco at the end of it."

Five minutes later we were aboard the schooner, and I was closely inspecting her, satisfying myself as to her good and bad qualities. When I had made up my mind, I turned to look for the owner. He was in the boat alongside, refreshing himself from a black bottle he had brought with him. As we pulled ashore, I said—

"Well, Jim, is it to be business?"

"Two fifty, not a red cent under."

"All right," I answered carelessly, "you're the best judge of that. She's not worth two hundred, but I'll give you that cash, otherwise no trade!"

He hung in the wind. Two hundred pounds, he reflected, would not only buy the new boat he wanted, but would enable him to extend his present drinking bout another week. An inspiration struck him—

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"Two hundred cash," he said, "and I keep the pumps in her."

"There I'll meet you, though it's giving you the whole business. Is it a bargain?"

"My Colonial!" he replied, and the next moment we stepped ashore.

"Now," I said, "you just toddle away and fix up the papers. I'll be along with the money before you can turn round."

With that we separated, he returning to the hotel where we had met, while I made across the island to the Albino's abode. I found the dwarf at the wash-tub.

"What news?" he shouted, as soon as I approached; "have you talked her over? But there, of course you have, I can see it in your face! Well, what's the result?"

"That I've bought the schooner *Mother of Pearl* for two hundred pounds."

He eyed me suspiciously for a second, then flicking his fingers to clear them of soap-suds, led the way into the house. Seating himself on the bed, he dried his hands and spoke—

"Bought the *Mother of Pearl*, have you, and for two hundred pounds? Very good. You'll want another hundred to see you on your way."

Here he took from his drawer a leather bag which he tossed towards me.

"There you are, you'll find it correct, I think. Count it."

Doing as he bade me, I counted the sum out on the rickety little table; three hundred sovereigns in bright gold coin. When I had returned them to their bag, he continued— [Pg 177]

"You find it as I say? Well, so much for that. Now, listen to me; have you breathed a word of my existence to your sweetheart? Think carefully before you speak, for I shall be sure to find out if you have."

"I gave you my word I would not," I replied, "and I have kept it; if you doubt me, take your money back."

"No, no," he hastened to say; "bless you, I don't doubt you, not a bit of it; I only wanted to be sure. Now just run along back and complete your bargain."

Before I went, I endeavoured to thank him again for his generosity, but he would not let me. One thing was certain; the more I thought about his action the further I was from understanding it.

Reaching the township I rejoined Jameson, and counted out to him the price of the schooner, which he repeatedly informed me was "dirt cheap at the money." Then leaving him to drink himself into *delirium tremens*, I pushed on to the "Orient," that I might inform Juanita of my success. Her enthusiasm was contagious, and urged on by it, before bed-time I had not only secured my crew, but had arranged my stores, and accepted the services of a mate.

Next morning I crossed the island to bid the Albino farewell. My surprise may be imagined when I found him gone. Not a trace of his whereabouts could be discovered, and, considerably exercised in my mind regarding him, I returned to make my final preparations. Shortly after midday I escorted Juanita (who had said farewell to the "Orient," amid much lamentation) aboard, and at three o'clock the *Mother of Pearl* stood out of the bay, bound on the most curious errand she had ever weighed anchor to accomplish. Only then did I learn our destination. [Pg 178]

Though she certainly did not realize all the good qualities her late owner had (since the sale) led me to suppose she possessed, the schooner was a handy enough craft, and likely to serve the purpose for which we required her, every bit as well as one costing ten thousand pounds could have done. The best description of her would be to say that she was just a steady-going, serviceable old tub; and as I was not likely, with Juanita on board, to be in too much of a hurry to complete the voyage, that was all we wanted.

The mate proved a decent sort of young fellow. The crew were Kanakas, with a Chinaman cook, who also officiated as steward.

And now comes a portion of my yarn that I am tempted to dwell upon. How can I describe the beauties of that summer voyage? How resist the temptation it offers of indulging in extravagant waste of language? As I sit here recalling it, a strange longing rises in my heart that will not be suppressed; a longing that is not without a touch of sadness and regret. It is impossible, I have to tell myself, that I can expect to cross an old trail without some mixture of pain. Can I, in this fog-ridden England, hope to be allowed to stir up recollections of enchanting islands lifting their green heads from bright blue seas, of umber cliffs peering out of clustering foliage, of azure skies, and trade winds redolent of sweet perfumes, and yet expect to escape scot free? [Pg 179]

The only thing regrettable about the voyage was its brevity. Is it therefore to be wondered at that, madly infatuated as I was with the woman who accompanied me, I viewed the prospect of calms with equanimity, and was loth to employ any exertions that would help to hurry it or get it over?

But every moment was bringing us nearer our destination; and at last, one sunset, I was able to tell Juanita, that in all probability another twenty-four hours would find us abreast of the island which contained her husband's grave.

As it turned out, my prophecy proved a correct one, for towards five o'clock on the following afternoon, the high peaks of Vanua Lava appeared above the horizon. By tea-time the schooner had brought the island abeam, and before darkness fell we were anchored off a thickly-wooded promontory, to the right of which Juanita declared her former lord and master lay buried.

CHAPTER V.

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A CURIOUS QUEST.

Apart from the fact that it was being undertaken solely for the purpose of digging up and rifling a dead man's body, there was something peculiarly uncanny to me about this voyage to Vanua Lava. And the more I allowed my mind to dwell upon it, the more convinced I became that,

somehow or other, what we found would materially affect my welfare. It may therefore be imagined with what interest I gazed across the intervening stretch of water at the thickly-timbered island, now disappearing into the fast-falling shadows. Juanita was wildly excited, and would have liked nothing better than to have gone ashore and commenced operations that very night. Indeed, I could not help thinking that the fortune her husband had hidden away must be even larger than she had led me to suppose, if I might estimate its size by her anxiety to obtain possession of the locket.

As soon as tea was over we returned on deck. It was a glorious night. Overhead, in a coal-black sky, the great stars hung lustrous and wonderful. Below them all was silence. Not a sound save the subdued voices of the crew forward, and now and again a tiny wave, stirred by some gentle zephyr, breaking against the schooner's side, disturbed the stillness. Then, little by little, the eastern stars began to lose their brilliance. The sky at that end of the island relinquished some of its blackness, and presently, with a majesty untranslatable, the great moon rose into the heavens, casting a mellow light across the silent deep, and touching with silver the topmost trees ashore. With her coming a faint breeze stole down to meet us and set the schooner gently rocking.

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When we had paced the deck together for a while Juanita drew me to the taffrail, and passing her arm through mine in a caressing manner peculiar to herself, fell to talking in a strain which I had never discovered in her before. The impression her conversation forced upon me was that she was trying to excuse herself for a great wrong she had already done or was about to do me, and yet nothing in her actual speech lent any reason to this supposition.

"To-morrow," she said, half to herself, "will decide a great deal for both of us."

"How for both of us, Juanita?" I asked. "If you find what you want over yonder you'll be a rich lady, and then 'good-bye' to poor Jack."

She started as if frightened, and pressed my arm tighter.

"You have been so good to me that I don't know what to say to you," she continued, disregarding my last speech. "Oh, Jack! if we could only be ourselves, free to act and to do whatsoever we wished, instead of being driven so relentlessly on and on by destiny, how much happier we should be! Do you believe in fate?"

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"I believe you are my fate," I replied, pressing her hand with all the ardour of a lover, "and what better fate could I ask?"

"Or what worse?" she said sadly. "Jack, my poor Jack, you don't know how you will hate me some day."

"Never, Juanita, and that I'll swear to."

She was silent for a minute or two. When she spoke again there was a bitterness in her voice I had never heard in it before.

"If I had only known and loved you sooner," she went on, "I might have been a better woman. But I was cursed from the very beginning; cursed with a bad mother, cursed with a bad father, cursed with a beauty that was only a snare for sin; lured to my ruin before I was old enough to understand, driven by poverty and despair to be what I am—a woman at war with all the world. Oh, Jack, may the Holy Mother forbid that you may ever know what my life has been! But there, why should I tell you all this? let us be happy and believe in each other to-night, if only for to-night."

"My darling," I cried with real alarm, noticing that big tears were rolling down her cheeks, "what is the matter? Tell me, and let me comfort you. This monotonous voyage has tired you, to-morrow you will be better. Don't give way just at the time when you want all your nerve."

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But my advice came too late; she threw herself into my arms and wept as if her heart would break. I could see that she was thoroughly upset, but what had occasioned it I could not of course understand. Since then, however, I have become wiser, and whenever I think of that night on the schooner's deck, under the shadow of the island, I say to myself, "Well, however she may have acted towards me afterwards, at least Juanita loved me then."

When she grew calmer she began again, this time with a sort of malignant fierceness that was equally inexplicable.

"My Jack, if I told you that I was a despicable coward and asked you to weigh anchor to-night and to leave the island without as much as going ashore, would you do it? Think before you answer, for heaven and hell depend upon it."

I suppose at some period of his life every man has his fate in his hand to do as he likes with. I had mine then, and, as will be seen, I threw it from me. Oh, if I had only taken the opportunity she offered and set sail without rifling that grave, what awful misery for both of us I should have averted! But, blind bat that I was, it was ordained that I should see everything in a wrong light, and so I began immediately to reproach her for her weakness, telling her that since she had come so far to do it, it would be worse than cowardice to return without carrying out her work.

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"But, Jack," she said, "if you only knew, if you only knew?"

"If I knew what?" I asked. "Come, come, Juanita, what does all this mystery mean? What are you

hinting at? You're in a very extraordinary mood to-night." I was beginning to grow impatient with her.

"Don't," she cried, preparing to burst into tears again, "don't scold me. If you could only know how we shall both look back on this night some day, and how it will comfort me to remember that at least you were not angry then!"

When she went below I lit my pipe and fell to work upon my own thoughts. I tried to recall her conversation and to find a reason for her extraordinary behaviour, but it was impossible. In vain also I endeavoured to rid myself of the feeling of approaching danger which possessed me. At last, unable to make head or tail of it, and thoroughly wretched, I sought my bunk in the hope of obtaining a little rest against the labours of the morrow.

My dreams were not pleasant ones. Juanita seemed to stand before me continually, gazing at me as she had done on deck, with tear-streaming face, imploring me to forgive her, always to forgive her. I don't remember ever to have spent a more miserable night. But it was only a foretaste of what was to come.

Shortly after daylight I awoke to hear the hands "washing down." I went on deck and had a bath; the clear green water braced me like a tonic. A more perfect morning could not be imagined. The sea lay around us, in colour a pale grey, and smooth as the inside of an oyster-shell. Ashore the rugged mountain peaks were enveloped in vast masses of white cloud, while on the lower lands every shrub and tree was gemmed with dew. A few sea-birds hovered round the schooner, and from far down the northern beach a spiral column of palest blue smoke ascended into the still morning air.

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About half-an-hour before breakfast-time, Juanita came on deck, looking radiant; all signs of her last night's trouble had completely disappeared. Stepping out of the companion, she swept the sea with a proud, defiant glance, as though she had at length achieved something which other people had deemed impossible. Then her eyes fell on me, and she came across to where I stood, wishing me "good-morning" with a bright smile. I felt inclined to ask myself if this could be the same woman who had wept upon my shoulder the night before, and begged me in heart-broken accents to forgive her some imaginary transgression. After a few moments her glance wandered from the schooner and the open sea to the island, and then the expression upon her face (for I watched it continually) changed. When she came on deck, it was that of a woman who through much suffering had conquered; but when she looked towards the spot where the man she had once loved lay buried, it was the face of one who had still to prove that the struggle was not going against her. Just at that moment the bell sounded for breakfast, and leaving the deck to the mate, I escorted her below.

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As soon as we had finished our meal, I gave orders for the long-boat to be swung out, and a crowbar and a couple of shovels put into her. I had already chosen the hands who should accompany us, so nothing remained but to assist my sweetheart down the gangway, take our places in the boat, and set out for the shore. It was no use trying to persuade Juanita to remain on board, and let me do the work. She would not hear of it. On the way I could not help noticing the appearance of her face; it had become deadly white and haggard, a circumstance which I could only attribute to the ghastly nature of our errand.

Owing to the fact of there being no reef on this side of the island, we were able to bring the boat flush up to the shore, and to secure her by a long painter to a tree.

As I helped Juanita out, I asked her in which direction she supposed the grave to lie, and without any hesitation she pointed to a little wooded knoll, about a hundred yards to our left. Off we set towards it.

By this time the pallor of her face was such as to quite frighten me. I asked her if she did not think she'd better sit down and rest a while. Her answer, if not assuring, was emphatic.

"Rest! What rest can I have? No, no, no; on, on! I can't rest; I can't think till we've done the work. Oh, be quick! be quick!"

Reaching the spot she had pointed out, we commenced our search for the grave. Though she declared her husband had only been buried a few months, no sign of his resting-place was to be seen. This I accounted for by the fact that it was situated on a slope, and the wash of the water (for the rains had occurred since the burial took place) had smoothed the earth all along the hill-side, levelling and obliterating all traces of the mound. However, after much diligent search, I found amid some rank grass a spot which seemed to bear some resemblance to what we sought, and here I decided to dig.

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The ground was by no means hard, and as the two men I had brought ashore were muscular fellows, it was not long before we had a good hole to show for our work. Suddenly the shovel struck something with a hollow sound, bringing my heart into my mouth with a jump. Next moment a corner of a roughly-made coffin came into view. And as it did so, Juanita gave a little cry, while I felt large clammy beads of sweat ooze out and down my own forehead.

Bidding the two men exert all their strength, I worked the crowbar underneath the coffin, and leant my weight upon it. Inch by inch it uncovered itself, and at last we were able, by getting our hands under it, to lift it out on to the level ground. As we laid it down, I heard Juanita gasp for breath. And when I told her we were going to prize the lid off, she could bear it no longer, but

turned her back, and burying her face in her hands, bade me search round the dead man's neck for the locket. She could not do it herself.

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Inserting a corner of the shovel between the lid and the side, I tried to force it open, but it was securely fastened, and defied me. There was nothing for it but to send off to the schooner for a screwdriver. How bitterly I reproached myself for not having brought one with me!

The waiting was intolerable. Though it was in reality not ten minutes, it seemed an hour before the man returned with the tool. Then, one by one, my hands shaking with nervousness, I withdrew the screws. That work accomplished, I ordered one of the Kanakas to lift off the lid. As he prepared to do so, I could not repress a feeling of wonderment as to what this former lover of Juanita's would be like; at the same time, I braced my nerves for what we should see.

The lid was off. I looked; I rubbed my eyes and looked again—could I be dreaming?

Save for a large roll of sheet-lead, the coffin was empty. No man had ever been buried in it!

The whole funeral must have been a farce, intended to deceive some one. Could that some one, I asked myself, have been Juanita?

My exclamations must have puzzled her, for she cried out—

"Oh, what have you found?"

I was so overcome with surprise that I had some difficulty in finding voice enough to reply to her. Then I said—

"Juanita, you've been hoaxed! No man was ever buried here. There's only a sheet of lead in the coffin!"

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With that she faced round on me, and never, before or since, have I seen such an expression of fear in the human face. She stood there, wildly staring, first at the open coffin, then at the grave, unable to speak. Her face seemed to grow every moment paler. Then, turning to me, she said very softly, so softly that I asked myself whether the shock could have been too much for her brain—

"I have been the victim of a conspiracy; take me back to the schooner."

I signed to the men to collect the tools, and we were in the act of starting on our return to the beach, when I heard unmistakable sounds of some one moving through the undergrowth on the bank above us. Juanita heard them too, and by some means, for which I cannot account, must have divined their cause, for she faced round like a tigress at bay. Then the bushes parted, *and the Albino stood before us!*

Anything so uncanny as his appearance at that moment cannot be imagined. He gazed at us, his fingers cracking, his little pink eyes gleaming maliciously, and his long white hair floating in the breeze. As I looked, I felt Juanita fall heavily on my arm. She had fainted.

CHAPTER VI.

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AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

In a second the little man had taken everything in. He glanced at Juanita, lying unconscious in my arms, at the open grave, and last at the untenanted coffin. This latter seemed to occasion him some amazement, but only for an instant. Then, turning to me, he said with authority—

"Carry her down to the boat, and get her aboard the schooner. Can't you see there's not a moment to be lost, man?"

My astonishment at his appearance had made me almost forget the woman in my embrace, but before the words were well out of his mouth, I had picked her up, and was carrying her towards the beach.

When we had pushed off, and were pulling towards the schooner, I was surprised to see the Albino seated in the bows of the boat. He ventured no remark to justify his presence until after we were aboard, and he had helped me to carry my burden to her bunk. Then he said—

"Remember my medical knowledge. I'm going to help you with her. Get some brandy."

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Hastening to my own berth, I rummaged among the things in my locker, found what I wanted, and returned with all possible speed to the cabin.

As I approached it, I could have sworn that I heard the dwarf say, "Remember, whatever happens, you've never set eyes on me before!" But I must have been mistaken, for though I found him bathing her forehead, she appeared to be still unconscious. As soon as she revived, we left her, and returned to the deck.

"What's the meaning of this mysterious business?" I asked my companion when we reached it. "How on earth did you get here, and what are you going to do now?"

"Fair and softly, my dear fellow," he said quietly, a curious smile playing round his lips, "all in good time. If you want to know, I was called down here on most important business. It's lucky I saw your schooner, otherwise I should have had to wait a month for a chance of getting back to civilization."

"And how *are* you going to get back?" I asked.

"Why, on board this boat," he answered. "Surely you won't be ungrateful enough to refuse me a passage after all I've done for you?"

Not being in a position to gainsay the justice of his argument, I held my tongue. My situation was a very delicate one. I had possession of the boat, it was true; but, on the other hand, it was only given to me for a certain purpose. That purpose having failed, what was my position? Could I make over the schooner to the Albino for my debt? And if I continued to keep her, was I free to act as I pleased with regard to Juanita?

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I have said nothing so far about my own disappointment. Nevertheless I had devoted a considerable amount of anxious thought to it. If the funeral of Juanita's husband had been a hoax, his death must have been one too. Then, for all we knew to the contrary, he was still living! And in that case my marriage with her was impossible. I was as hopelessly cut off from her as if we had never met.

When I judged she would be able to see me, I went down and knocked at her cabin-door. She came out immediately and seated herself at the table.

"Juanita," I began, taking my place beside her, and holding her hand, "what can I say to comfort you after your disappointment?"

"Why do you speak of it—why do you say any more about it?" she cried fretfully. "My worst anticipations have been realized—that's all! I might have known he would have fooled me. Yes, I repeat it, fooled me."

"But you were so certain he was dead!"

"I was certain I saw him lying dead in his bunk, if that's what you mean." Then with a sudden outburst of fury, "Marcos Veneda, as God is above me, if I can find you, I'll punish you for this!"

"Marcos Veneda! I thought you said he was an Englishman?"

"So he was. Veneda was only an assumed name."

Seeing her state, I decided not to say anything about our position towards each other until she was calmer.

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"And what do you wish me to do now?" I asked, to turn the conversation into another channel. "Shall I make a course back to Thursday Island?"

"No, no, anywhere but there."

"Then where would you like to go? Say the word, and I swear I'll do my best to oblige you."

"Oh, anywhere, anywhere. Why do you bother me with your stupid questions?—what does it matter now where I go?"

"Very well," I said, considerably piqued by her behaviour, though I tried hard not to show it; "I'll leave you alone for a bit, you may possibly think of some place before nightfall. In the meantime we'll make a course for Cape York."

When I reached the deck to give orders for getting under way, I found the Albino pacing up and down, his long arms behind his back, and his little pink face puckered into a hundred wrinkles with thought. He came across and led me out of hearing of the mate.

"What's your course going to be?"

"That's just what I'm waiting to know," I answered. "Juanita can't make up her mind."

"Damn Juanita!" he jerked out. "Why do you want to be always considering her? Let me advise you. Batavia, Java—that's the place; and when we get there, I've a little treat in store for you that'll pay you better than all this shilly-shallying here."

"What do you mean?" I asked, naturally a little astonished at his remark.

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"Just this," he replied. "One place is as good as another to you, isn't it? Then, I say, don't ask any questions; steer for Batavia. You've trusted me before, trust me again. Leave Juanita to me. Womanlike, she doesn't know her own mind, and wants somebody to help her make it up."

Bidding the mate go forrard and superintend the raising of the anchor, I gave the necessary orders for getting sail on her. Just at eight bells his cry of "All clear, sir," sounded, and the *Mother of Pearl* resumed her journey.

It was either a case of sulkiness, or she felt too overcome by her disappointment to mix with us, but Juanita did not show her face again that day, and it was not until nearly sun-time on the following morning that we caught a glimpse of her. She came on deck during my watch. The Albino was standing beside me. She looked ill and haggard, and as the schooner was pitching

unpleasantly, I hastened to offer her my arm. She took it with a kind of shrinking, at the same time glancing timidly at my companion. He held his hat in his hand, and was looking at her with what I thought a nervous expression on his face.

As they did not know one another, nothing remained for me but to introduce them. Then, and for the first time, a strange circumstance struck me. I did not know the Albino's name. Somehow I had never had occasion to speak of him to any one, nor had I ever heard him mentioned. I looked at her and said feebly—

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"Juanita, let me introduce my friend, Mr.—" (here I turned towards him a look of appeal).

"Macklin," he said.

"My friend, Mr. Macklin."

She bowed gravely; he followed suit like a court chamberlain. Then they began to pace the deck together, while I returned to the duties of my watch.

Being anxious to reach Batavia as soon as possible, I cracked on everything the schooner could carry, and before many days were over we had passed and left Thursday Island behind us, and were entering the Arafura Sea. Fair weather accompanied us all the way, and I found the schooner's sailing capabilities improve as I became better acquainted with her.

One thing was plainly evident. Since the arrival of the Albino on board I was thrown quite into the shade. Juanita seemed to prefer his company to that of any one else. He was never absent from her side; they sat together at meals, paraded the deck together, and in fact were inseparable companions. So conspicuous did her partiality at length become, that I felt compelled to remonstrate with her about it. Her look of pained surprise went to my heart.

"Jack, how can you be so unkind to me?" she said, with tears in her eyes. "Though it is all over between us, you know, or you ought to know, how much I love you. Do you think that poor little creature could make me forget you? I am sorry for him—very sorry—that is all."

Of course I forgave her immediately, and equally of course she promised amendment in the future. But though her liking for his company was not so openly shown as before, I could not see that it had undergone any radical change.

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But I had other and more important things than Juanita's behaviour towards myself to think about. I discovered that trouble had cropped up amongst the crew forward, and that on two occasions knives had been drawn. What it had originated in I could not find out, but that a big Kanaka boy, called Rhotoma Jimmy, was at the bottom of it all I had good reason to be certain. He had come aboard in Thursday as a stowaway, and was, I found out, a vindictive, ill-tempered fellow, who never lost a chance of making himself objectionable. When I saw that my rowings proved useless, I ironed him for a couple of days. This seemed to sober him; he became deeply penitent, and thinking I had punished him enough, I let him go back to his duties.

The night following his release, he was at the wheel during my watch. I was not satisfied with his steering, and had occasion to reprimand him twice. A short while afterwards I noticed the same irregularity, and went over to the binnacle, determining this time to give him a good rating. As soon as he saw me coming, he left the wheel, and made for the belaying-pins. Seizing one he rushed at me, and endeavoured to hit me over the head with it. But before he could effect his purpose, I had closed with him, and wrenched it from his grasp, striking him as I did so a blow upon the head. He fell like a log, and as he struck the deck I heard footsteps on the ladder, and the Albino stood beside me.

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Calling another man aft to the wheel, I took the binnacle-lamp and knelt beside the prostrate man. To my dismay I found I had bit him harder than I intended. *He was dead!*

CHAPTER VII.

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BATAVIA—A STRANGE MEETING.

When I realized that the Kanaka boy, Rhotoma Jimmy, was really dead, the shock the discovery gave me may be better imagined than described. I was the last person, I told myself, to take a fellow-creature's life without adequate reason, and if it came to that, I had only struck the man in purest self-defence. Indeed, had I not closed with him, he would undoubtedly have murdered me. It was fortunate, I thought, that the Albino had come on deck in time to witness the conclusion of the affair.

Ordering the body to be taken forward, I stumped the deck for nearly an hour, endeavouring to make the Albino see how it had happened. His manner struck me as odd; but I was too agitated to attach much importance to that. Among other things, also, I questioned him about the future; I told him that I did not like being so much in his debt, and finally asked him to take the schooner in lieu of payment. He hesitated for a while, and then requested a day or two to think it over. But during the evening he returned to the subject, and stated that he had decided to do what I asked. Thereupon we drew up the necessary documents, and when I had signed them the *Mother of*

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Pearl was no longer my property. Little did I see how artfully my ruin had been contrived.

Next morning we were abreast the Java coast; Madura on our starboard bow, Sourabaya away to port. From the latter place to Tanjong Priok, as the seaport of Batavia is called, is but a short run, and the *Mother of Pearl*, with everything in her favour, was not long in accomplishing it.

As if an omen of the disastrous events which were to befall me during my stay in Java, we sighted the breakwater on a wet, miserable, depressing afternoon. Our moorings were on the left hand of the harbour, just abaft a Dutch man-o'-war, and almost opposite the Custom House. The view was about as cheerless as the day; the soup-coloured sea, slimy wharves, gaunt, wind-tossed trees, made up a picture that was suggestive of cholera, Yellow Jack, and a multiplicity of unknown horrors. There was nothing to detain us on board, so as soon as the necessary formalities had been complied with, Juanita, the Albino, and I went ashore, intent upon visiting the city before we settled our plans for the future.

From the railway-station we drove to the Hôtel des Indes. It was the first time I had been in Java, but the Albino seemed to be familiar with every part of it. It was in keeping with his strange character that he should be thoroughly at home in all the out-of-the-way places of the world. When I said as much to him, he laughed, and gave utterance to one of his odd remarks, to the effect that "Strange dogs must know strange kennels."

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In the evening, as soon as dinner was over, Juanita and I passed from the hotel gardens into the broad street which runs alongside the canal. Though the rain had ceased, and it was a perfect night, hardly a soul was abroad. At intervals mysterious watchmen emerged from their shelters to look at us, but finding nothing suspicious in our behaviour, retired into them again. With these few exceptions we had the streets to ourselves. The great round moon, sailing serenely overhead through a cloudless sky, the tropic foliage, lights flashing amid the trees, all combined to produce a scene that was almost fairy-like in its exquisite loveliness. And after the cooping up of shipboard we were both in the mood to appreciate its beauty. Up one road and down another we passed, conversing quietly, until at length we found ourselves upon the King's Plain.

Here I prepared myself to broach the subject of our future. To my surprise, Juanita received my ideas with a peculiar air of fretfulness that on looking back upon now I can easily account for. At the time, however, I remember it caused me a considerable amount of pain.

Under a small tope of trees she stopped, and placing her hand on my arm, said in answer to a speech of mine—

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"You are quite right. I fear this *is* the end of everything for us. When we leave Batavia our ways must lie in different directions."

"You mean," I continued, "because you believe your husband to be still alive?"

She hesitated before replying.

"Yes," she finally answered. But there was something in her voice that made me believe that though she gave it that reason, it was not exactly what was in her mind.

"And what will you do now, Juanita?"

"Endeavour to find that man, and repay him for his treachery. That's what I shall do."

Simple as were her words, I cannot express on paper anything like the ferocity of the tone in which they were uttered. But this mood only lasted a few seconds. Then came the old wail.

"Oh, Jack, Jack! if you only knew; if we could but be our true selves for one little moment!"

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind, you will know soon enough, and, oh, how you will hate me for it! But now,—oh, I cannot, Jack,—I cannot!"

Here she fell to crying, just as she had done on the schooner. It was an exact repetition of her strange behaviour on that eventful night. I did my best to comfort her, and after a long while succeeded. She dried her tears, and we set off upon our homeward walk. Not satisfied with what she had told me, I determined to renew the subject on the morrow.

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But the morrow had something of its own in store for me, of which I could not have even the vaguest idea.

When we returned to the hotel, the Albino was smoking in the verandah. After a few commonplaces about the beauty of the night, I went into my room to procure a cigar, leaving Juanita alone with him. As soon as I had obtained a weed and lit it I rejoined them. Through no fault of mine they did not perceive me until I was close upon them. Macklin held a paper in his hand, from which I presumed he had just been reading. Juanita was evidently much put out about something.

"No, no, it's too cruel," she said, "I cannot do it."

To which he replied—

"I tell you, you must. It's all arranged, so don't let me hear any more nonsense about it."

When I coughed to warn them of my presence, both seemed considerably disturbed, though the Albino passed it off with his customary ease.

After they retired to their rooms, I remained in the verandah smoking. Suddenly my eye caught sight of something white upon the ground. Picking it up, I discovered it to be a cablegram from London. It was addressed to Macklin, and ran as follows:—

"Still unclaimed. Come at once. Don't delay."

The signature was a name I had never heard before.

On my way to my room I called in upon him to restore the document, explaining where I had found it. He thanked me civilly enough, and that was the last of the matter for the time. [Pg 203]

Breakfast over next morning, I settled myself in an easy-chair beside Juanita in the verandah, and lit a cigar. The Albino was not to be seen, nor had I set eyes on him up to that time. Juanita's behaviour, generally rather strange, was now altogether peculiar. She seemed afraid to look me in the face, and I was in the act of asking her to tell me what was the matter, when she suddenly turned pale, and rising, retired hurriedly into her own apartment. As she disappeared I chanced to look round. A party of Malay police under a Dutch officer were approaching me. The officer held a sheet of paper in his hand. This when he reached my chair he presented, at the same time saying in broken English—

"Ess it you are Jan Ram-say? De captain *Mother Pearl* sheep?"

Replying to the effect that I was the man he sought, I asked his business, whereupon he said—

"You are arrest, Mynheer, for murder!"

I give you my word I was so astonished you could have knocked me down with a feather. That the warrant, for so I conjectured the paper he held in his hand to be, was for my arrest on a charge of causing the death of the Kanaka Rhotoma Jimmy, I had no doubt; but who could have supplied the information that produced it? How bitterly I blamed myself for delaying to report the matter to the consul! Now it would probably be a matter of some hours before I could free myself. [Pg 204]

Seeing that the officer desired me to accompany him, I called Juanita to me, and I shall never forget the look upon her face when she came into the verandah. The officer bowed politely to her.

"Juanita," I said, "I am arrested for the murder of that Kanaka boy. It's only a matter of form, but it will necessitate my leaving you for an hour or so. Tell Macklin what has happened, and ask him to come at once to our consul, that's a good girl."

Thereupon I surrendered myself to the officer, who, to my supreme annoyance, insisted on handcuffing me like a common malefactor. Then the Malay policemen, wretched little fellows but little bigger than monkeys, ranking themselves on either side, and the officer taking the lead, off we set for the lock-up. Here I was detained for nearly an hour, in company with a collection of the vagabond riff-raff of the town, at the end of which time I was handcuffed again, and marched off to the office of the English consul.

On arrival there I was thrust into a small room and allowed to cool my heels for ten minutes or so. After that I was led into a spacious chamber, partaking more of the nature of an office than a court of justice, and placed in what was equivalent to the dock.

An elderly gentleman of dignified appearance, whom I rightly judged to be the consul, sat at a large desk at the further end of the room, busily writing in a book before him. A couple of clerks were ranged at desks hard by, and two or three native policemen lounged near the door. Presently the consul looked up, and intimated that the case should commence. [Pg 205]

I was thereupon charged with having wilfully and maliciously caused the death of a native known as Rhotoma Jimmy, aboard the schooner *Mother of Pearl* while on a voyage from Vanua Lava to Batavia. Witnesses were called, and, to my delight, the first person to appear was none other than John Macklin. His face when he looked towards me was filled with the deepest concern, and he gave his evidence with well-simulated reluctance.

He deposed to being the owner of the schooner, and therefore my employer; also to having been witness to the *whole* affray on the night in question. I had, he was extremely sorry to say, always betrayed an intense and unreasoning dislike to the dead man, and for this, on more than one occasion, he had been compelled to remonstrate with me. On the night of the murder I had pulled the man away from the wheel after making some complaint about his steering, and without warning struck him a heavy blow with a belaying-pin on the side of his head, thus undoubtedly causing his death.

I could hardly believe my ears. Was it possible that a man, confessedly my friend, could so unblushingly swear a fellow-creature's life away? When he went on to say, that with the exception of this one single instance, I had always borne an excellent character, and that he himself was much attached to me, I could have throttled him where he stood, and gone willingly to the gallows for it. [Pg 206]

The next witness was the mate. At least, if he had not seen the affair, he would be able to clear my character of the charge of ill-will against the dead man. But, to my continued horror, he corroborated all the Albino had said, at the same time throwing in some artistic touches of his

own, which did not mend matters. When he had done me all the harm he could—God alone knows for what reason—he stepped down, and the next witness was called. Then who should enter the room but Juanita! My heart leapt for joy. She at least would be true to me, and by her help I might be able to give my enemies the lie. As I looked at her noble figure, and noted the proud flash of her eyes as she glanced round the court, I could have laughed them all to scorn. But my feeling of confidence was of short duration.

To the first question as to whether she had seen my assault on the man, she falteringly answered "Yes." Then my heart became heavy as lead; I knew I was ruined and done for. What she told the court further I never heard. When she had given her evidence, she left the room on the Albino's arm weeping bitterly, and I knew I was the victim of as vile a conspiracy as ever was hatched to promote a man's ruin.

Having heard all the witnesses, the consul asked me if I had anything to say. The only chance I could see of saving myself was to request that the crew might be examined, and to this he consented, adjourning the case for that purpose until next day. Disregarding any thought of applying for bail, I allowed myself to be marched away again, not to the lock-up this time, but to the Dutch prison itself, a great rambling barrack of a place on the other side of the town.

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Once there, I was cast into a large yard, where a meal of rice was given me. But I was too cast down and utterly miserable to eat. The more I reflected upon my situation, the worse it appeared to become. If my enemies intended thus to swear away my life, goodness only knew what the end would be! The reason for it was what puzzled me. I could make neither head nor tail of it. But though I could not fathom the Albino's motive, I began to see the reason of Juanita's strange behaviour the previous night, and the vague hints she had thrown out that evening alongside the island. Could it be possible that all the time she was in collusion with the Albino? This notion I discarded at once. What most affected me was that they were in league now.

For hours I sat thus brooding over my unhappy fate. At last, unable to bear it any longer, and to distract my thoughts, I turned to examine my companions, and the place in which I was confined. I found myself in a large quadrangle about fifty yards long by thirty wide, bounded on either side by rows of cells, and having at either end high walls of rough masonry, each surmounted with a bristling *cheval de frise*. As far as I could gather, the prisoners confined in that portion of the gaol might have numbered a hundred, and were for the most part Malays and Chinamen, with a sprinkling of Europeans. As soon as they became aware of my presence they crowded round me, gesticulating, and criticising my woe-begone appearance. Among them I noticed one whom I knew at once for an Englishman. In spite of his rags and filth he was the handsomest man I had ever seen; but it was a wild reckless sort of beauty for all that. He came over to me, and placing his hand on my shoulder, said—

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"You're an Englishman, I can see. Now, how the deuce do you come here?"

I told him I was accused of murdering a man aboard the ship of which I was skipper, and that my life was being sworn away—

He laughed and went on—

"My boy, I pity you if you once get into this place. Look at me, I've been in here over six months; put away for resenting an insult from a Dutch officer; not allowed to communicate with my consul, and told to hold my jaw directly I ask for justice. I tell you you're in luck's way if you even get brought to trial. The consul will ship you off to Singapore by the next mail, while I'll have to rot here till I can pass the word to some one outside to make inquiries. That's their notion of civilization in this God-forsaken country."

At that moment a bell clanged, and the crowd began to scurry into their cells for the night. I found that my new friend and I were located with about fourteen others in the same dormitory. On inspection it proved to be a large bare room, ill-lighted, ill-kept, and, like all other parts of the prison, villainously dirty. The beds such as they were, were strewn about on the floor, just wherever their owners cared to place them, and each one had a new and complicated odour of its own. As soon as we had entered, the door was shut, and we knew that we might consider ourselves locked up for the night.

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One thing struck me. I could not help noticing the respect with which my companion was regarded by his fellow-prisoners. His word seemed to rule as law, and no sooner did he express a wish than it was, if it lay within their power, immediately gratified. Thus when he asked that we might be left alone, the rest of the prisoners migrated to the other end of the room, and we were free to continue our conversation uninterrupted.

"Now let's have your story," he said, seating himself on the pile of blankets by my side. "You can't think what a pleasure it is to me to have an Englishman to talk to! You say you're the victim of a conspiracy; tell me all about it from the beginning to the end. Who knows but that I may be able to throw some new light upon the subject."

Beginning at the very commencement, I told him everything, only suppressing Juanita's name. He listened with the utmost attention, and his interest seemed to increase as the story developed. When I had finished, he said—

"By Jove! I begin to think I do see a glimmering of reason in it after all. But it's a strange enough affair, if you like. Now first tell me what sort of man this dwarf is, who proved himself your friend

by lending you the money to buy the schooner, and your enemy, by misrepresenting your connection with that nigger." [Pg 210]

"Well, among other things, he was an Albino."

He jumped up like a shot.

"An Albino and a dwarf? Great snakes! What was his name?"

So taken aback was I by his excitement, that for the instant I could only stare at him. He seemed more affected by my story than if he had undergone it all himself.

"Quickly," he said, "what is the name of this dwarf, this Albino?"

"John Macklin," I answered promptly, and when he heard it he began to pace the room, like a man labouring under some extraordinary emotion.

For a few minutes he occupied himself in this fashion. Then, in the middle of one of his peregrinations, he stopped short, and asked me another question.

"And the woman, what was she like? Was she tall and dark, foreign in appearance, with a suspicion of a moustache, and a little mole on the lobe of her left ear?"

I nodded, wonderstruck. He smiled a pitying sort of smile.

"Perhaps her name was Juanita?"

Again I nodded.

"She hailed from South America?"

I said I believed so.

"Well, all things considered, I reckon this bit of business fairly licks creation." [Pg 211]

This he said more to himself than to me.

"Anybody would think you knew these people," I remarked, chock-full of astonishment.

"Know them? Well, if I haven't cause enough to know them, there's not a man knocking round this old universe who has! But their cheek beats cock-fighting. Mark my words, it'll be diamond cut diamond between them now."

"You're getting out of my depth. What the deuce do you mean?"

"Never you mind just now. Tell me one thing more. When the Albino found the money for you to purchase the schooner, did he say that he knew Juanita?"

"I should think not. On the other hand, he sternly forbade my even letting her know of his existence."

"Ah! that throws another light upon affairs. They were playing lone hands after all. He's just 'Old Nick' himself, is John Macklin, and she's pretty near as bad. Now, when you left Thursday Island, am I right in surmising that you steered a straight course for the Banks Group?"

"I don't know how you guessed it, but we did."

"And you brought up off Vanua Lava, maybe?"

"That's so. You've hit it again."

"You went ashore to a grave about a hundred yards inland, under a tope of trees, and alongside a high bank, to look for a locket round a dead man's neck?"

The excitement was growing intense. Hardly able to trust myself to speak, I fell back on nodding. [Pg 212]

"Then you opened the grave and discovered a coffin?"

"Yes."

"And you found in it?"

"Nothing more nor less than a sheet of lead."

"Ho, ho! I can imagine their disappointment. And then the Albino put in an appearance?"

"He did."

"At his suggestion you set sail for Batavia?"

"Yes; but why Batavia? Only tell me that, and I'll say you've got the tow-rope of the whole mystery."

"Why, to me it's the simplest part of it. Look here, can't you see this? The woman, for some reason, had staked all she'd got on finding that locket buried with the dead man. That's it, isn't it? Well, the Albino was a stranger on Thursday, and was not known to do any work. That being so, why was he there? People don't live on Thursday for pleasure, or the good of their healths, I

reckon?"

I made a negative sign, and he continued—

"Why, you chuckle-head, can't you see he was there because he was watching some one? I leave it to you to figure out who that some one was."

"Juanita, I suppose."

"You suppose! Of course it was. Well, she tells you she wants money to reach a certain island for a certain purpose. You carry the news on to him. That's his dart exactly. That's just what he wanted to know. He wants that locket too. But he can only get it through her. So, under a cloak of friendship he lends you the amount to get the boat, and then clears for his natural life to the island to be ready for you." [Pg 213]

"Yes, your theory's very pretty, but here's the corker. How did he find out the island's name? He didn't get it from me, because I didn't know it till we sailed. Somehow, that don't seem to tally."

"Why, you galoot, don't you think, long before that, he had found out where the schooner that brought the woman and her husband from Tahiti touched before reaching Thursday—where, in fact, they buried the man he wanted to catch. You bet he did."

"I never thought of that."

"Perhaps not; but I did. He sets off, as I say, reaches the island, watches to see where the grave is, and what success she meets with when she opens it; and then, when he finds out how he's been tricked, saddles himself upon you in order to watch the woman further. She faints directly she sees him, proving as clear as daylight that not only has she met him before, but that she has good cause to be frightened of him. By Jove! I can imagine the shock to their systems when they discovered that the man whom they both believed to be dead was in reality alive—that he'd hoodwinked them after all."

He threw back his head and laughed.

"And what then?" I asked.

"Why, don't you see, the treasure they're after is slipping through their fingers. The man has six months start of them. Directly they arrive in Batavia, the Albino sends a cablegram to England. He receives a reply. What was it?" [Pg 214]

"Still unclaimed. Come at once. Don't delay," I answered, reciting the words on the form I had picked up in the verandah of the Hôtel des Indes.

"And what significance has that for you?"

"I can't say, unless it affects the treasure."

"You've drawn your bead on the bull's-eye this time, sure enough. That's exactly what it does affect. It affects it like grim death. Don't you see—the other man hasn't got home yet. So they've still a chance for the money. Now they know they've just got to get up and clear for all they're worth to London. What then?"

"It's no use; I'm done for, clean stumped! After that, I can't make head or tail of it."

"Why, they argue in this way. They can't take the woman's lover with them, can they? He'd not only be in the way, but he'd probably want to go shares in the boodle. The woman is too suspicious to let the Albino go alone, so, as the man has served his purpose, he must be got rid of. But how? 'Ah!' says the Albino, 'I've got it! The murder of the Kanaka; that'll fit him like a glove!' Therefore this charge was trumped up to detain you here. D'you know. I should be more than a little surprised if they are not already gone."

"In that case, what will become of me?"

"That remains to be seen. I fancy to-morrow will set it right. But I suppose you understand now how you've been bilked?"

"Worse luck! But there's one thing puzzles me more than all the rest, and that is, how the deuce you come to know all this so accurately." [Pg 215]

"My boy, if I gave you a hundred guesses you'd never hit it."

"Well then, I give it up, first time."

"And yet, I reckon, it's as clear as daylight. Who should you call the most important person in the whole affair?"

"Why, the chap who caused it all—the man who led them such a dance—the man who died."

"You mean the man who, by rights, ought to have been where the sheet of lead was, in that coffin?"

"I do."

"Well, that's how I came to know about it."

I jumped to my feet, and all the other occupants of the room, hearing my exclamation of surprise, turned round to look at me.

"What the devil do you mean?"

"Why, can't you guess? Because, sonny, I'm that man. I'm the man who led them such a dance. I'm the man who ought to have been dead and buried in that coffin. In fact, *I'm Marcos Veneda!*"

PART III.

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CHAPTER I.

RAMSAY IS RELEASED FROM CUSTODY.

To say that I was only astonished by Veneda's information, and the explanation he gave to my mystery, would be to define it too tamely altogether. To tell the truth, at the time I was so completely overwhelmed by it as to be unable to grasp, in the least degree, what significance it had for me.

Strange though it may appear, while the most galling part of the whole business could not but be Juanita's treachery to myself, this was almost atoned for, in my mind, by the remembrance of her singular behaviour on the evening preceding my arrest. Come what may, with this knowledge before me, I shall always cherish the belief that not only was the affection she pretended to entertain for me perfectly genuine, but also that she was alone driven to such extreme measures by the extraordinary influence the Albino possessed over her.

Poor Juanita! To be unable to feel bitterly towards you may be to show myself a soft-hearted fool, but whenever I think of that night on the King's Plain, and remember your sorrowful cry, "Oh, Jack, Jack, if you only knew; if we could but be our true selves for one little moment!" all reproaches die out of my heart, and in their place springs up a great pity and a great compassion for you.

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Another thing that gave me plenty to think about was the strange fact of my meeting Veneda, of all people, and in such a place! Though as yet I knew next to nothing of his history, I could not but see that his connection with the affair we were both so interested in was genuine enough. As for himself, as soon as he had told me his name he left me, and went without another word to his bed, not to speak again till morning.

When I woke it was just daylight, the door was open, and the prisoners were passing in and out. So far as I could see, in the part of the building in which I was confined, no recognized employment was found for them; though in the other wards, I believe, they were taken out under escort, to do the street scavenging, wood-cutting, public gardening, etc.

A little before seven o'clock a coarse meal was served to us, and while I was partaking of it, Veneda came up. I made room for him to sit down on the bench beside me, for I was burning to question him further on the subject that lay nearest to both our hearts.

"Look here," I said, "for goodness' sake let's get this thing properly squared up. I've been puzzling my brain over it till I'm nearly crazy. I *must* understand two or three things more."

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"Go ahead," he replied; "you can't be more anxious to get to the bed rock than I am. What do you want to know?"

"Well, in the first place, how on earth you managed to die and come to life again so cleverly? Juanita told me she saw you lying stiff and stark in your bunk."

"So she did, as far as she knew; but I was only playing 'possum. It was the one way out of my difficulty, you see. I knew I had to get rid of her, and there was no other fashion in which it could be managed."

"Then the captain was in the secret after all, and his dislike to you was all assumed?"

"Every bit! But he was a money-grubbing old dog, was Boulger, and it cost me a cool hundred to bring him up to the scratch. Once that was done, all was plain sailing. After leaving Tahiti, cholera, Yellow Jack, fish-poisoning, or some other disease came aboard, and the crew and mate went down before it like ninepins. There was my chance! I pretended to go under to it too. The skipper acted his part like a little man, and wouldn't let Juanita into the cabin for fear of detection. Then, in the night, I died. Next day, according to her wish, my dummy was taken ashore, and buried on Vanua Lava, while I was safely stowed away in the skipper's cabin, until we reached Thursday Island. There *she* remained to hunt up a way of getting back to look for that locket."

"While you?"

"Next morning I caught a craft sailing this way, intending to pick up a mail-boat from Batavia, home. But luck was against me; I ran athwart the hawse of a Dutch officer; put a bullet into him, and got locked up. That's how I came here. Want to know any more?" [Pg 219]

"One thing. Now you're alive, what is going to become of your wife?"

"My wife? And who may she be? Never heard of the lady."

"But Juanita?"

Veneda whistled a long note of astonishment.

"You don't mean to tell me she's been parading me as her husband?"

"You're not? You're not Juanita's husband?"

"You'd better believe I'm not."

"Then, my God! how I've been fooled!"

Veneda seemed not to notice my remark, but sat staring at the blue sky above us. Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"Look here, Ramsay," he cried, "come what may, I must get out of this, and you must help me."

"How can I help you? If it comes to that, I'm in quite as bad a fix as you are."

"No, I think not," he continued gravely. "I shouldn't be at all surprised if you find yourself at liberty to-night."

"What do you mean?" I asked, jumping at the hope he held out. "What do you think can bring such a thing about?"

"Never mind, you wait and see. But if you do get off, will you pledge yourself to assist me?" [Pg 220]

"If I do get off," I said, "I could inform the consul of your being here, and he would get you out himself."

"No, no, that would never do; I've been thinking it over. If the consul gets wind of it, he'll make inquiries; then the matter will get bruited about, and will be certain to come to the ears of the Albino's agents."

"Agents?"

"Why, of course. You don't imagine that little devil hasn't arranged for somebody to watch your movements here, and at the same time to hunt about for me! Bless your heart, now that he knows I'm alive, I'd bet a thousand pounds to a half-penny he finds out I'm in here."

"Good heavens," I cried, "it's a perfect network of plots and counterplots, and I seem fated not to understand it. Now you're alive, and still the possessor of your money, what do they want that locket for? They can never hope to find out where you buried the gold."

"Buried the what?"

"The gold you obtained by your last legacy when you were in San Francisco."

"Sonny, they've been playing you again. What do you mean? I never had any legacy."

Thereupon I set to work and told him the story Juanita had told me. He laughed uproariously, then smacking me on the shoulder said—

"You just help me to get out of here, and you'll see what I'm worth. I promise you'll not find me ungrateful." [Pg 221]

"Well, if I do get off," I answered, "I give you my word that I'll do my best for you."

We shook hands gravely upon it, and I continued—

"In what way do you propose to effect your escape? If we're going to make any plans, we'd better set to work upon them at once."

"Walk over here with me and I'll tell you all I think."

With that we began to pace the courtyard, and Veneda to propound his theory.

"Now," he said, "my idea is this. You see that further wall?"

I nodded. It was, as I have said before, a stone affair, perhaps thirty feet in height, surmounted by a bristling *cheval de frise*.

"Well, on the other side of it, as far as I can gather from the natives locked up in here, is a road, with a big paddy field on the other side of that again. At night, a sentry or patrol of some kind passes round the entire building once every ten minutes, and naturally our attempt must be made between his visits."

"But how do you propose to get over it?" I asked, looking at the wall's apparently unscalable height.

"Very easily," my intrepid companion replied, "if you will only carry out my instructions to the letter."

"Let me hear what they are, and I'll do the best I can for you."

"Well, in the first place you will procure from one of the stores in the town, sixty feet of strong rope. With this carefully disguised you will wait till midnight; then you must engage a small kharti (native cab) with a good strong Malay boy driver, and proceed to the other side of this wall. When you get there, and only then, you will say to the boy—by the way, do you speak Malay?"

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"No; unfortunately I don't."

"That's a pity, but it can't be helped."

He stopped and thought for a moment, then borrowing a pencil and a piece of paper, wrote something on it.

"There are two sentences," he said, and he repeated them once or twice to enable me to pick up the proper accent. "This one means, 'To the gaol'—that, 'You shall have ten guilders if you help me.' Say them over to me."

I repeated them till I was tired, and only then did he seem satisfied.

"I think he'll *sumjao* you now," he said.

"And when I get here," I continued, "what am I to do?"

"Then you will uncoil the rope and throw one end over the wall, to the left, there. I will make it fast round my waist, and you and the boy must manage between you to pull me up to the top. It'll be a struggle, but you must do it somehow."

"And if the sentry should appear while we're at it, what then?"

"Well, in that case," he said with a laugh, "I'll leave it to your own instinct to know what to do with him; but I should suggest timing it so that you'll just miss him."

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"And how are you going to manage to get into this courtyard after you've been locked up for the night?"

"Leave that to me, I'll work it. Perhaps I shan't go in at all."

"And when you're out, what are your plans?"

"Tanjong Priok, as slippery as the Malay can take us. Then we must get into the docks, borrow a boat, and set sail for the islands, to hide there till we can get on to Singapore or Ceylon. Batavia will be no sort of place for either of us after that. You'll stand by me, Ramsay?"

"I've given you my word," I said; "I can't say more than that, can I?"

"Not if you're the man I take you to be. Anyhow I'll trust you."

Just at that moment a stir was observable in the yard; the great gate at the end swung open, and a party of police entered. They came to where I stood, and signified that I should accompany them.

"Good luck," cried Veneda as I rose to go; "don't forget me."

I waved my hand to him and off we set. Once more our route lay in the direction of the consul's office, and arriving there, I was ushered into his presence forthwith. It seemed to me that on this occasion he regarded me in rather a somewhat different light.

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"I suppose you're aware," he began, when the case was opened, "of the serious nature of the charge against you?"

I told him I was.

"Have you anything more to say on the subject?"

"Nothing, but that I am the victim of a villainous conspiracy," I answered. "I certainly did struggle with the man, and I don't deny that I hit him, but it was in purest self-defence. He was a noted bad character, and only came aboard at Thursday Island as a stowaway. On the occasion in question I had reprimanded him several times without any effect, and I was in the act of doing so again when he rushed at me. Had I not closed with him, he would have dashed my brains out with a belaying-pin. It was my fault that he died, but though I struck him, I had not the very faintest intention of killing him. I don't know who laid the charge against me, but that it was preferred simply to get me out of the way, I am as certain as that I stand before you now."

Thereupon, being permitted, I set to work and told him my story, just as I had told it to Veneda the preceding night. He listened with the utmost attention, and having asked me one or two questions, said—

"I am inclined to believe you. There is certainly something very underhand somewhere."

Stopping his examination, he wrote something on a sheet of paper, and ringing a bell, ordered

that it should be despatched immediately. It was a telegram, I discovered later, to Thursday Island. Having done this, he recommenced his examination, and finally remarked—"I have sent for some information about you; until I receive it, you will be detained here."

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Turning to the police, he said something in Dutch, whereupon I was marched into another room, and locked up. During the period of waiting my thoughts were none of the pleasantest. From a consideration of my own position, they wandered to the strange story Veneda had told me, and thence, by natural transition, to Juanita and her professed love for myself. From Juanita they passed back, across what seemed a vast interval of years, to my first love Maud; and as I allowed my mind to dwell upon her sweet face, her ladylike manners, her gentle disposition, and her general refinement, a great home-sickness came upon me, and I resolved then and there, that if ever the opportunity offered, I would forsake my wandering life, and go back to England, like the prodigal son, never to leave it again so long as I should live.

While these thoughts were thronging my brain, I was again summoned into the consul's presence. This time he greeted me with a smile.

"Mr. Ramsay," he said, "I have been making inquiries in Thursday Island about you, and partly on their account, and partly in consideration of the fact that the *Mother of Pearl* and all the witnesses against you have seen fit to decamp, goodness only knows where, I have decided to release you from custody, on the ground that there is not sufficient reliable evidence to warrant your detention. You may thank your stars that you have got off so easily, and I hope this will be a lesson to you to keep out of such company in the future."

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I thanked him warmly for his action in the matter, and at the same time asked him if my bag had been taken away from the Hôtel des Indes. It had, and he gave instructions to his clerk that it should be handed over to me. I was particularly anxious about this, for I had nearly forty pounds of the three hundred the Albino had given me in it, and I knew I should want all the money I could get to ensure success in the perilous enterprise which lay before me.

After answering the consul's inquiries as to what I intended to do with myself now that my ship had sailed without me, by saying that I had not yet made up my mind, I left his office, and departed in the direction of the town.

As we drove through it on the ill-starred day of our arrival, I had noticed some Stores, which I now thought would be likely to contain the article I required. I was right, and obtaining what I sought in the way of rope, I returned to my hotel, took a room, and composed myself to rest until it should be time to set off on the business of the night.

As darkness fell it began to rain, and continued to pour down until well after ten o'clock. Fortunately not a sign of the moon was to be seen; a thick pall of clouds obscured the entire sky. Having nothing to do, I sat and smoked in my verandah all the evening, and it was not until after eleven that I commenced any preparations for my departure. Then, stowing my money and what few little things I valued among my effects about my person, and carrying the big parcel of rope, wrapped up in as unsuspecting a manner as possible, under my arm, I closed my bedroom door, and passed out across the garden into the streaming street.

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CHAPTER II.

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GAOL-BREAKING EXTRAORDINARY.

When I left the hotel I hurried with all the speed I could command in the direction I knew the gaol to lie. As I went, I kept my eyes open for a kharti of the required description. It was late, I knew, for a cabby to be abroad, but I had little doubt that I should soon find some driver who would be glad to earn a few additional guilders, in spite of the dangerous nature of the business for which I wanted him. Apart from any consideration of the time to be saved by driving, it was very necessary that I should obtain a conveyance soon, or my wanderings with a large and heavy parcel (for sixty feet of stout rope is no light burden) would be more than likely to attract the attention and suspicion of some of the curious night watchmen, one of whom I passed about every hundred yards. Fortunately, however, it was a wet night, and these gentry preferred the shelter of their boxes to following mysterious pedestrians, otherwise I might have been called upon to stop and give an account of myself, and my reason for being so late abroad.

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As no sign of any conveyance was to be seen, I began to despair of obtaining one, and was in the act of turning down a by-lane, through which it would be impossible for a vehicle to pass, in order to reach the prison, when I heard the sounds of a pony's feet behind me, and the cries of the driver urging it forward.

As soon as he was close enough, I sang out to the cabby to stop. Thereupon he hauled up, and waited for me to approach him. As this looked like my last chance, I wasn't going to give him an opportunity of saying whether he wanted another fare that night or not, but jumped up on the back seat before he could expostulate, and pressing five guilders into his hand, bade him drive to the gaol.

He must have thought me mad or drunk, for he approached a smile as near as a Malay can get to

it without breaking his neck, and urged the pony forward at increased speed. Ten minutes later we had drawn up opposite the gaol wall, under cover of some over-hanging trees, and I was anxiously waiting for the passing of the sentry, and the approach of twelve o'clock.

By this time my charioteer had some idea of what was going forward, for he gave unmistakable signs that he wished to be off. This, however, I had no intention of allowing him to do, so placing another five guilders in his hand, I repeated the sentence Veneda had taught me so carefully, to the effect that "he should have ten more if he helped me." This seemed to decide him, for he jabbered something in reply, and I saw by the way he settled himself down in his seat, that not only had he resigned himself to his fate, but that I could safely count upon his co-operation.

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Hardly had I finished my talk with him than I espied something dark moving against the further end of the long bare wall. My heart gave a jump *as I recognized the Malay sentry*. He was armed with rifle and bayonet, and was muffled up like the watchmen I had met on my journey through the town. So narrow was the road that, to my horror, I saw he would be compelled to pass within fifteen feet of where our conveyance stood; so close indeed, that it seemed impossible he could fail to be aware of our presence. But he was no doubt tired and sleepy, and as on this side of the prison no eye could observe his actions, he was in the habit of indulging himself with a nap as he passed round it.

Directly he had turned the corner I hastened across the road, and prepared to hurl the rope I had previously uncoiled over the wall.

Beckoning my cabman to me, I bade him lay hold of one end, and next moment the other was whistling through the air. As I threw it, I wondered if Veneda had managed his part of the contract, and also what would befall me if he did not make his appearance before the sentry should pass that way again. But I was not to be kept very long in suspense, for a minute had hardly elapsed before I felt a sharp twitch upon the line; a signal, I did not doubt, that all was right on the other side. A second jerk bade me pull.

I promise you it was no easy task to haul a heavy man like Veneda over a thirty feet wall, more especially as the rope had to draw over the *cheval de frise* above the stone coping. It seemed as if we should never get him to the top, and that the sentry *must* appear before we could accomplish it. I don't think I ever spent a longer five minutes in my life. But every second the pile of rope was increasing at our feet; Veneda could not surely be more than a few feet from the top. Suddenly there was a crack, a big jump on the rope, and a dull and ominous thud on the other side. What had happened?

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I soon realized it all. The *cheval de frise* had given way under the strain upon it, and the rope had dropped on to the coping of the wall itself. The thud must have been Veneda's body striking against it.

Once more we pulled till we could get no further draw on the rope. It had jammed against the broken iron-work.

Funnelling my mouth with my hands, I called to Veneda, but received no answer. What could be the matter? Could the bump against the wall have stunned him? As I wondered, to my consternation I heard footsteps approaching round the corner. It was the sentry again. Now we were in a pretty fix! To let go the rope would be to allow Veneda to drop thirty feet down on to the ground on the other side; yet, on the other hand, I knew it would be fatal to permit the sentry to discover us in this invidious position. I ransacked my brains for a way out of the difficulty. The sweat streamed over my face; it was like some horrible nightmare from which, strive how I would, I could not awake. And every moment the steps were coming closer.

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So far as I could see there was only one thing to be done; feeble reed though he was to lean upon, I must trust to the fidelity of the Malay driver. Signing to him to hang on to the rope, as if his very life depended on it, I left him, and crept towards the corner. It was my idea to jump upon the sentry as he came round it, hoping to being able to silence him before he could give the alarm.

What I went through during the thirty seconds or so in which I lay crouched behind the buttress of that wall no man will ever understand. The steps came nearer and nearer—I pulled myself together in preparation for the spring. It seemed as if the beating of my heart must be plainly audible yards away.

Then suddenly a dark figure appeared before me, and I leapt upon it.

So swift was my onslaught that the man had not time to guard himself before my left arm was round his waist and my right hand tightening on his throat. My left leg I crooked round his right, with the intention of throwing him. He was a plucky fellow, and did his best against me. But his surprise was no match for my despair. As we swayed backwards and forwards his rifle fell from his grasp, striking the wall with an awful clatter. When I heard that I gave myself up for lost.

Exerting all my strength, I lifted him clear off the ground (a feat I could never have accomplished in cold blood), and dashed him from me against the buttress edge. His head struck it with a ghastly thud; he slipped, fell, and lay upon the ground a huddled up mass of groaning humanity. Ascertaining that he was powerless, I turned and ran in the direction of the rope, to which I was relieved beyond all measure to find the Malay still clinging.

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What to do now was a puzzle. I reflected there were only two ways out of it—I must either be

content to abandon the enterprise altogether, and to leave Veneda to his fate, or, as he could not come down to me, go up to him. But whatever I intended to do must be accomplished quickly, for it might be the sentry's duty to report himself as he went by the guardhouse every round, and in that case his nonappearance would be the signal for search, and we should be irretrievably lost.

With this thought in my mind I clutched the rope and began to swarm up it, trusting to Providence that whatever was keeping it at the top would hold it until I could get there.

Even now, when I think about the climb to the top of that prison wall, I feel a shudder pass over me. It was interminable. I seemed to be doomed to climb thousands of feet of rope, and never to get any farther. But at last it was accomplished, and I was hauling myself along the broken *cheval de frise*, to where a black mass lay blocked between it and the stones. Needless to say, that mass was Veneda, and unconscious. He had tied the rope round his waist before starting, and its sudden drop from the iron-work on to the coping must have inflicted on him a terrible wrench; in swinging round, his head had struck the wall with sufficient force to stun him.

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One glimpse was enough to show me that it was impossible for him to help himself, so drawing the rope up, I made it fast round the stanchions of the iron, and pulling his body over to the other side, lowered it as gently as I could, under the circumstances, to the ground. It was a dangerous undertaking, for, as I have said, he was a heavy man, and I had only the narrow top of the wall on which to take a purchase with my feet.

How it was that no one saw us from the prison side I am at a loss to understand. I can only attribute it to the fortunate darkness of the night; for had the moon been visible we must certainly have been discovered.

As soon as Veneda reached the ground I slipped down the rope to his side, and with the assistance of the Malay bore him to the cab. Then, without waiting to ascertain the condition of the unfortunate sentry, who still lay where I had thrown him, off we set as fast as the pony could take us in the direction of the port.

At the best of times, and under the most pleasant circumstances, it is a miserable drive; but with a sick man to support, for Veneda had not yet returned to consciousness, a treacherous Malay to watch, and my own balance in the tiny cart to keep, it was one long-continued horror.

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The awkwardness of my position was increased ten-fold by Veneda's insensibility, for, not being able to speak Malay myself, I had no one now to fall back upon. I could only repeat "Tanjong Priok, Tanjong Priok," over and over again, prefacing my remarks with a guilder, and accompanying each repetition with hints of more. But such was my despair, that had my driver attempted to play me false, I believe I should have terminated his existence without thinking twice about the matter.

The endurance of the little rat of a pony was nothing short of marvellous; along heavy roads, through slushy pools, up and down hill, he dashed with a vigour of which, had I not seen it for myself, I should hardly have believed him capable. Now and again the moon struggled out between the clouds to reveal a waste of horrible country. Dense mangrove swamps, reeking paddy fields, slimy canals, funereal barges, and native dwellings slid past us, like the ever-changing patterns of a kaleidoscope.

Once or twice my companion showed signs of returning consciousness, but it was only for a few seconds, and after each he inevitably sank back again into his former comatose condition. Seeing him so long in this state, I began to be alarmed for his life, and even seriously contemplated abandoning the flight and taking refuge somewhere, until I could bring trustworthy medical advice to his assistance. But this extreme measure was, after all, not necessary, for as we approached the port he opened his eyes.

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"What's the matter?" he asked faintly, trying to lift his head up to look about him.

I explained as briefly as I could, and asked him how he felt.

"I don't know," he said; "somehow I seem to be dead below my waist. What happened to me? Oh, I remember, that cursed rope."

Turning his face to the driver he said something in Malay, to which the boy offered a vigorous reply.

"I have been asking him," said Veneda, "if he can get us anywhere near the docks without exciting attention, and he says he thinks he can. He declares there'll be the devil and all to pay for this night's work, which, all things considered, I don't think unlikely."

Then taking my hand, he continued, but in a different tone—

"I don't know what to say to you for what you've done for me. I'm afraid, though, you've had your trouble in vain; I'm in an awful state."

"I'm more than sorry to hear it," I replied; "but bite on the bullet, old man, we'll never say die."

"It's devilish good of you, Ramsay; but don't you think you'd better clear out without me? I shan't think a bit the worse of you for it, and it will only be spoiling your own chance to burden yourself with me."

I cannot remember what reply I made to this, but I believe it was to the effect that we were in the

same boat, and must sink or swim together. Somehow my heart was more warmly disposed towards the poor fellow in his helplessness than it had ever been in his strength. Such a strange and wonderful thing is the responsibility of protection.

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By this time we were close to the shore. I could smell the sea-breeze distinctly; and the first whiff of it put new life into me. It was the breath of freedom, and with that in my nostrils I felt there was nothing I could not do or dare. Like the old war-horse, whose courage rises and whose old deeds of derring-do come back to him with the ring of the trumpet-call, so all my powers and energies derived a fresh fillip from that glorious ozone.

When we reached a safe place the driver pulled up, and I lifted my companion out of the cab.

Only a wall separated us from the docks. With the Malay's assistance, and a vast deal of pain to the sufferer himself, whom I could hear grinding his teeth in his endeavour to prevent any cry escaping him, I got Veneda over it.

This accomplished, I gave the driver the sum I had promised him, and saw him start away on his journey back to the city. Then I rejoined Veneda, and taking him up in my arms, proceeded towards the wharf side. Laying him down, I started off in search of a boat.

On every side were numerous big craft, mail-steamers, men-of-war, etc., but further inland, towards the river, was the sort of vessel I wanted—a small native sailing boat of about two tons. The moon emerged from behind a cloud as I stepped on board her to investigate. Only one man was to be seen, and he lay asleep under a sort of thatch place aft. Without disturbing him, I crept off again and back along the wharf to Veneda. Taking him up, I carried him to the boat and aboard, placing him very gently under the shelter beside the sleeping man.

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Just as I did so, three bells struck on a big steamer in the pool with alarming distinctness. The clang was taken up by some of the other boats round about, and it was well-nigh a minute before they'd all done chiming. To make sure of my defence I drew my revolver from my pocket and examined the chambers; they were all charged. Then, signing my intentions to Veneda, I placed my fingers round the sleeping man's throat and shook him back to consciousness. I must leave you to imagine his astonishment when he woke.

As soon as he was able to understand matters, Veneda explained in Malay that we wanted the loan of his boat for a day or two, and that it behoved him to go ashore quietly and peaceably, or he'd get into trouble. But a brilliant thought had struck me. The craft was too big for one man to manage, so, since Veneda was unable to assist, why shouldn't we take the man as well as his property? Besides husbanding our strength, this would prevent the authorities from obtaining any clue as to the manner of our departure from the island.

I explained my idea to Veneda, who fell in with the notion at once. It was a case of Hobson's choice for the nigger; he had no option but to submit. Giving Veneda the tiller, such as it was, I escorted the owner forward, and assisted him to get sail on her. Then, casting off, we began to tack slowly down the harbour, past the Singapore mail-boat, the Dutch gun-boat, and astern of the big mud-dredger, out into the open sea. Fortunately the wind was in our favour, and though the boat was not built on the latest yachting lines, yet it was astonishing what pace it was possible to get out of her. What most puzzled me was the course we ought to steer, for I hadn't the remotest acquaintance with these waters. I put the question to Veneda, who called the man aft and sounded him on the subject. A long jabbering ensued.

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"He says it would be best for us to make further down the coast; but I don't cotton to that notion at any price."

"What do you think then?"

"Why, my idea is, one of the small islands off Sumatra. They're right in the way of ships. Then we'll get rid of this fellow and his boat, and wait our chance to be picked up and carried on to Singapore or Colombo, as the case may be."

"Very well," I said, "we'll just let her run her present course for an hour or two, and at the same time keep our eyes open for an island that will suit us."

Fortunately the boat was well provisioned, even to the extent of a small supply of arrack, or native spirit, which came in handy for Veneda, so we were not likely to want for food for some time to come.

As soon as we were clear of the land, I took my place by my poor friend's side, and endeavoured to discover in what way he had hurt himself. Save, however, for a few large bruises, and a cut or two, there was nothing to indicate the nature of his injuries. Advising him to try and obtain some sleep, which I felt sure would have a better effect than anything I could do for him, I took the tiller and prepared to stand the first watch. The Malay sulked forward, looking as if he'd like to stick his *crease* into the pair of us, which under the circumstances perhaps was not to be wondered at.

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By this time it was hard upon sunrise, and such a sunrise too! The first sign that came to us was the paling of the larger stars in the east; this was followed by a long thin streak of silver-grey, just balanced on the edge of the horizon. As, bit by bit, this grey died out, its place was taken by a faint tint of salmon-pink, which in its turn again surrendered to all manner of other colours as the darkness drew off the remainder of the sky. Even the sea participated in the general glory. A

wonderful hush overspread everything, and to me it seemed that an intense melancholy had assumed possession of the world. Like the man in the *Ancient Mariner*, we might have been the "first who had ever burst into that silent sea." The very ripple of the water under our squat bows, and the creaking of the boat's timbers, were subdued into harmony with the general effect. Gradually long shafts of light pierced the eastern heavens. Then, with almost startling suddenness, the sun leaped above the horizon, and the sea resumed its natural hue; as if by magic, the colours faded out of the sky, and day was born to us.

About seven o'clock Veneda woke, much refreshed by his sleep. Calling the Malay aft I gave him the helm, getting Veneda to instruct him as to the course I wanted steered. This done, I went forrard to prepare some rice for breakfast. Though he never allowed a sign of it to escape him, I knew Veneda's sufferings must be intense. As far as I could see I was powerless to alleviate them; and whenever I asked him how he felt, he only laughed grimly, and said—

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"Get me to an island, that's all I want, get me to an island!"

All that day we sailed on and on. About midday the wind dropped, and the boat's progress was consequently very slow. It was monotonous work, but, as we both agreed, it was better than prison in Batavia. Towards evening the coast of Sumatra was just distinguishable, and this we followed up in the hope, before dark, of hitting an island that would suit us. We sighted several, but for some reason Veneda found an objection for them all. At last, just as I was beginning to think we should have to pass the night at sea, we came abreast of one of which he expressed his approval. It was very small, not more than a mile in length, but thickly timbered, and with a broad strip of sand running all round it.

Having decided on the best spot to land, I steered the boat in, and after a bit of manœuvring, beached her on a good sandy bottom towards the most northerly point. The first business was to discover if the island contained fresh water. And here arose a difficulty. I could not take Veneda ashore with me, and I dared not go myself and leave him at the mercy of the Malay. He divined what was passing in my mind, and solved the problem with his usual quickness.

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"Give me your revolver, and prop me up here. I'll watch him till you come back, never fear."

I did as he desired me, and then bidding him "good-bye," clambered over the side and waded ashore.

CHAPTER III.

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THE ISLAND.

As I splashed my way ashore, I could not help a feeling of wonderment as to whether the whole circumstances preceding and attending our arrival at the island were not part of some horrible dream, from which I should presently awaken. In fact, my whole existence, from the day I left the *Beretania* at Port Adelaide up to the moment of my setting foot upon these sands, appeared almost too strange to be possible. With the dwelling of my mind upon the subject, all the events which had accompanied my chequered career rose before me like sheeted phantoms of a dead past. They embraced even my monotonous employment in the ship-chandler's office, my experience on the gold-fields, and my starvation and illness at Broken Hill; took in my life as a fireman, as a station store-keeper, as cook on a cattle camp, as a loafer in Brisbane, and a pearler in Torres Straits; included my love for Juanita, my introduction to the Albino, our voyage to the island, the hoax, my betrayal in Batavia, and my meeting with and participation in the escape of Veneda; his accident, and finally our arrival at the place where I now stood.

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I must risk the charge of being called a Fatalist when I affirm that I honestly believe that everything in our lives, down to the most trifling circumstance, is mapped out for us beforehand by an all-wise Providence to bring about a certain pre-arranged result. If this is not so, why did I give up the sea?—why was I allowed to meet Juanita and the Albino?—and why was I brought to Batavia? Could it have been only chance that led me to rescue Veneda, and by so doing to work out my own ultimate—but there you must let me cry a halt; to go into it any further would be to anticipate the strange things I have yet to tell you.

Having reached the shore, I looked about me for the best point at which to strike into the undergrowth, for, as I have said, the island was densely covered from end to end with vegetation. A spot decided on, I threw a glance towards the boat, and plunged into the thicket.

From the beach the land rose abruptly till it reached a sandy plateau, something less than a hundred yards long. Round this on every side trees and shrubs throve luxuriantly, not only protecting it from the violence of the sea-breeze, but lending to it a picturesqueness that was like a glimpse of fairyland. What was more to my taste, however, I discovered at the further end a stream of purest water, bubbling its tiny torrent through the thicket down to the sea below, and here I determined to pitch our camp, if only I could manage to convey Veneda up to it.

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Above the plateau rose another slight elevation, from the summit of which a splendid view of the sea might be obtained. Before returning to the boat I climbed to it, and searched the offing for a sail, but not a sign of such a thing was to be seen. The sun by this time was nearly down, so

bestowing a hasty glance upon the other side of the island, I hastened back to the shore to fetch Veneda. Though I did not anticipate any danger, it was with a feeling of relief that I espied the boat lying just as I had left her, the Malay still seated forward, and my poor friend propped up in the shelter astern.

Very well satisfied with the success of my visit of inspection, I splashed out to his side and informed him of the result. But when I offered to carry him up to the plateau, he was quick to point out the difficulties of the climb, and to suggest a far safer and more comfortable means of transit.

Once more I waded ashore, this time to return with two stout saplings, to which I fastened a strong piece of sail-cloth, thus making a rude but comfortable litter.

At Veneda's command the Malay jumped overboard, and placed himself between the poles at the further end, leaving the after part resting on the gunwale of the boat. Raising the sick man carefully in my arms, I placed him on it, and then taking the other end myself, we were presently bearing him triumphantly ashore.

After pausing for a moment on the beach to recover our breath, we started on again through the thicket and across the stream, up to the spot I had marked out for our camping-place. There, under the shadow of a large rock, we set him down, and I returned with the Malay to secure some necessaries from the boat.

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Ere this work was accomplished the sun had disappeared, and it was time for our evening meal. Our fare was necessarily simple, consisting of boiled rice and a small portion of dried fish; but while I partook of it greedily, Veneda could not be induced to touch a particle.

In truth, I was beginning to be more and more alarmed about him, for instead of improving, his condition was growing perceptibly worse. His face, always thin, was now pinched and contracted almost out of recognition; only his great eyes burned like live coals in his head. His fortitude was marvellous. In place of the hasty, ill-tempered man Juanita had always described him to be, I found him patient, long-suffering, and even hopeful to an extraordinary degree. It was a piteous sight to see one hitherto so strong lying like a log, unable even to turn himself without assistance.

As soon as our meal was eaten I set to work to construct a rough sort of shelter for him with saplings and branches of trees, pressing the Malay into my service. When it was completed it was not much to look at, but it answered my purpose very well. The Malay then left us to return to his boat, a proceeding for which I was not sorry, having no desire for his company on that lonely spot all night.

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You will notice that I had quite constituted myself Veneda's protector. And what a strange and wonderful thing it is, that responsibility of protection! Take for instance the man who is playing a lone hand in the Game of Life. When he has only his own safety to consider he is careless of danger to an extraordinary degree; on the other hand, give him but the slightest control over, or the right to protect any one weaker than himself, and he begins at once to discover all sorts of dangers in the very things which hitherto he has most vehemently despised. It is the same feeling which makes the strong man tremble when, in the first flush of his golden love-dream, he catches the ominous word *infection*, and remembers that even his great love is insufficient to protect his dear one from the insidious inroads of disease.

After the sun had been down about an hour the moon rose like a ball of gold above the farthest point of the island, revealing the waste of sea, the coral sands, the tree-tops just rocking in the evening breeze, and the dim stretch of land on either side of us. The soft ripple of the wavelets on the shore sounded like faintest music in the intense stillness, and the crooning of some belated sea-bird came like a cry across the waters. Our fire burnt merrily, and when we had sat for some time gazing into it, occupied with our own thoughts, which I can promise you were none of the happiest, Veneda said he should like to tell me his history.

Thinking it might distract his thoughts from his unhappy position, I professed myself delighted to listen, and giving the fire a final armful of fuel, stretched myself beside him.

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It was then that I learnt the queer story which my Cousin Luke has told you in the first part of this book, only saving the fact that Veneda made no mention of the amount of his treasure, in what manner he had obtained it, where it was hidden away, or how another person might procure it. Even in the hour of his extremity his habitual caution did not desert him; and though he must have known himself to be little better than a dead man, he was not going to share his secret with any one else until convinced that it was impossible for him to enjoy the fruits of it himself.

Another strange point about this remarkable man was the affection he displayed for small matters connected with his boyhood. He would linger with the fondest remembrances on the most insignificant trifles. For instance, on a certain tiny trout stream in which he had been in the habit of fishing; on the different names scratched upon the pews in his school chapel; on the various natures of his boyish pets, and particularly on the vagaries of a certain one-eyed fox terrier, for whom he seemed to have cherished a singular regard. I have often noticed this peculiarity in men of his stamp, but never before in such a marked degree.

While his mind was recalling these ancient recollections his face wore an expression of unaccustomed gentleness but a moment or two later, when the name of the Albino happened to

occur, the look that accompanied the utterance of it was almost diabolical in its malignity. Wrecked though he was, it would have been an ill moment for the dwarf had he ventured within the reach of those muscular brown hands. [Pg 249]

One subject I was surprised to hear him touch upon, and that was his dismissal from the service of a London bank on a suspicion of forgery. This charge he contended, with considerable earnestness, was altogether false. He was innocent; some one else had committed the crime, and had saddled it upon him, convinced that his reckless conduct, bad reputation, and proverbial want of money would supply sufficient motives for the deed.

"Ramsay," he asserted vigorously, "it was just that false accusation which sent me to the devil. I was on the brink before, but that fairly toppled me over. And, as God is my witness, whatever sins I have committed since that time must be laid to the charge of that real thief, whoever he may have been."

"How did you manage to get out of it?" I asked.

"Simply because my uncle, Sir Benjamin Plowden—a pious, New Jerusalem patriarch of East India Avenue—not caring to have the family name figuring in the police reports, took the matter in hand, and used his influence to square it."

"Sir Benjamin Plowden!" I gasped. "You don't mean to tell me Sir Benjamin is your uncle?"

"He was my father's brother. My real name is Plowden. But, good gracious, man, you don't surely know him?" [Pg 250]

"Know him! Why, I should rather think I do! Wasn't I in his office for years? And wasn't I engaged to his daughter Maud until I was blackguard enough to think her false to me?"

Veneda was silent. After a while he said, as I thought, rather sadly—

"What a rat-trap of a world it is, after all! Ramsay, this is too much of a coincidence; there's fatality in it. Fate must have willed that we should meet!... And so you were engaged to little Maud! By Jove! how well I remember her—a tiny slip of a thing in a white frock, tied up with blue ribbons. She came into her father's study one day when I was waiting for him, pretended she came for a book, but I believe myself it was just to steal a look at wicked Cousin Marmaduke, whom the women-folk had piously permitted to figure in her mind as a sort of cross between Giant Blunderbore and the devil. Perhaps Cousin Satan was not quite so ugly as she had expected him to be, for when Sir Benjamin entered later, he found us seated side by side on the hearthrug, making paper boats. I can see his face now! And so—she's a grown woman!—and I—well, I'm just a derelict on the ocean of life, useless to myself, and harmful to my fellow-men. But there, I can't complain; I've made my bed, and I suppose I must lie on it. Ramsay, shall I tell you what I was going to do if I had reached home?"

"What?"

"I should have been a rich man, remember. And I had figured it that I would purchase an estate in a county where nobody would know my past, marry some nice quiet English girl, and settle down to bring up my children, if I had any, to be as honest as their father was crooked, to do good to my neighbours, and when I went down to my grave, to have lived so that somebody should be able to say, 'There's an English gentleman gone to his rest!' An English gentleman, mark you, and there's no prouder title under the sun than that. As it is, I shall peg out here, cut off from all who knew me, and—as somebody has it—going into my grave 'unwept, unhonoured, and unsung!' A grand end, isn't it?" [Pg 251]

Not knowing how to comfort him, I held my tongue. He continued—

"Somehow I've been an outcast all my life, and I shall certainly die one. After my first slip I was never given a chance, but was badgered from pillar to post, until I was driven out of England, the victim of what we may call uncivilized Christianity. It was rough on me, deuced rough."

After this our conversation dropped off bit by bit, till it ceased altogether. I made him as comfortable as I could, and then sought my own couch on the other side of the fire. Hours passed before sleep came to me, my brain was full of the thoughts his words had conjured up. Strangely enough, it was not of Juanita I had thought within the last few days. She seemed almost to have passed out of my life. It was on another and a purer love I pondered. "Oh, Maud, Maud, my own lost love," I moaned, "if only I could live those fatal days again!" But it was impossible. Like Dryden, I must cry henceforth— [Pg 252]

"Not heaven itself upon the past has power;
But what has been, has been, and I have had my hour."

Next morning I discovered that Veneda had not slept at all. It needed but little medical knowledge to tell that his condition was worse than on the previous night. His face was fast losing even the faint colour it had hitherto possessed. His forehead was covered with a clammy sweat, and at times he moaned softly and wandered in his talk. I was more distressed about him than I can say. But what could I do? To carry him elsewhere in search of help would have been useless, had it even been possible; besides, it would only have hastened his death to have moved him. In addition to this, I found the Malay had taken advantage of the opportunity to clear out, and his boat was already a dim speck upon the horizon. There was nothing for it but to make

Veneda as comfortable as I could, and to patiently await the end.

In his moments of consciousness I think he must have been aware that he had not much longer to live; indeed, he hinted as much to me when I asked if I could do anything to relieve his pain. His patience was marvellous. He uttered no sign of complaint, but met his fate with a fortitude that was inexpressibly touching.

Towards the middle of the morning I struggled up the hill to scour the offing for a sail. But no sign of a ship was to be seen, only the blue expanse of water, other islands peeping up to right and left of us, and the dim outline of the Sumatra coast away to the westward. Round my head white sea-gulls wheeled with discordant cries, while from the farther side of the island the boom of surf sounded like mimic thunder. What would I not have given for a sail, or anything that could have brought relief to my dying companion! But it was no use wishing, so as soon as I had satisfied myself that no assistance was forthcoming, I descended to the plateau and anxiously approached Veneda.

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I found him in an excited condition, his face flushed and his eyes brighter than when I had left him half an hour before. He was talking in the wildest fashion, and at the same time endeavoring to raise himself from the ground.

Hastening to his side, I tried by every means in my power to soothe him, but it was useless. He imagined himself back in Chili, and for some time his utterances were in the Spanish tongue. For nearly two hours he remained in this state, eventually falling into a heavy sleep which lasted until about three o'clock. When he awoke his delirium had left him, but he was much weaker; his voice, when he tried to speak, was hardly louder than a whisper. I could see that the end was only a matter of a short time now.

"Ramsay," he managed to say, "I know all about it; I'm down and done for. It seems like a joke, old man, but Marcos Veneda's played out."

As he mentioned his assumed name a faint but bitter smile flickered across his face. I knelt by his side, and, thinking it might afford him relief, raised his head, but he bade me let it lie.

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"I shan't be able to talk much longer," he said, and his voice was even weaker than before. "Feel round my neck; you'll find a locket there—the famous locket—take it off."

I did so, placing it in his hand.

"You've been very good to me, Ramsay, one of the only men in the world who ever was, and in return I want to do something for you. Take this locket, it's all I have to leave you, but, as the others knew, it's the key to my fortune. It will make you a rich man."

He paused to regain his strength.

"As soon as you get away from here work your way home to London. And when you have been there a month—*swear you will not do so before*, I have the best of reasons for asking it—open it."

I swore that I would respect his wishes, and he continued—

"You will find in the locket a small slip of paper on which is written a name and address. Go to the address, show the paper just as you have it there, and demand from the man Two Hundred Thousand Pounds. When he sees that slip of paper in your possession he will pay it without demur. And may you be as happy with the money as I intended to be. Above all things steer clear of John Macklin, for if he dreams that you have the locket he'll stick at nothing to get it from you."

"But is there nothing I can do for you?" I asked, thinking he might like to send some message to the old land he appeared to love so well.

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He only shook his head sadly, intimating that there was no one there who would be either glad or sorry for his death.

After this for a long while he remained silent, till I began to think that perhaps the end had come. At last, without opening his eyes, he said slowly—

"Little Maud—she was the only one of that set who ever trusted me. Somehow I'd like her to have a share of that money. Ramsay, I know you love her still; you must marry her after all."

"It's too late," I groaned; "too late."

"No, no, I have a conviction that you will win her yet. Try. Swear you will!"

I swore!

For a minute or two only the sighing of the wind through the trees and the crackling of the fire was to be heard. Then that weary voice began again—

"Ramsay, it's a strange request for a man like me to make, but d'you know, if you could manage to scramble out some sort of a prayer I believe I should die easier."

Like a flash my memory flew back across the waste of years, and once more I was a tiny chap worshipping at my mother's knee. With a great awe upon me I knelt and commenced the Lord's Prayer. When I had finished he slowly repeated the last few words, "For ever and ever, Amen."

Then a wonderful thing happened. He raised his head, and, as he did so, his eyes, which had hitherto been shut, opened wide, and his voice came from him quite clear and strong. It was a grander and a nobler voice than I had ever expected to hear. He said— [Pg 256]

"My Lord, I urge nothing in my own defence; I simply throw myself upon the mercy of the Court."

Then with a little sigh his head fell back again. Marcos Veneda was dead!

CHAPTER IV

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RESCUED.

Long after Veneda's speech I remained kneeling by his side in earnest prayer, but when his laboured breathing ceased altogether, and I looked up to find his jaw dropped and his great eyes fixed in a horrible stare, I knew that all was over, and prepared to perform the last sad offices.

These accomplished, his expression changed completely. Up to the moment of his death a haggard, weary look had possessed his features, but now his face was like that of a little child for innocence and peace. I stood looking down on him for some minutes, my mind surging with a variety of thoughts. Then, picking up my cap, I strode hastily from the plateau towards the interior of the island, in the hope of diverting my thoughts from the scene I had just witnessed, and from the contemplation of my own awful loneliness.

Swiftly I marched along; the bright sunshine straggled amid the trees and lit up the glades through which I passed, but beyond being aware of these things I had little attention for them. I could not divest myself of the horror of my position. Here was I, I told myself, the sole living being upon this island; my companion a dead and unburied man; my prospect of rescue as remote as ever, and my food supply limited to a few more meals. Indeed, so horrible was my condition that consideration of it inclined me even to wish myself back in prison in Batavia. [Pg 258]

In this state I passed out from the woods on to the shore. The tide was far out, and an expanse of sand stretched before me. Thinking brisk exercise might raise my spirits I set off to walk as quickly as I could round the island. But it was only putting off the unpleasant work, for I could not allow day to depart and leave me with the body still unburied.

My prison, I discovered, was not as large as I had thought it, being considerably less than a mile long. My first view had evidently been a deceptive one, and I must have allowed more for the fall of the hill than was justifiable, considering that I had not seen the end of it.

In the hope that I might discover some sort of shell-fish with which to sustain life when my meagre supply of rice should be exhausted, I walked close to the water's edge, but not a trace of anything fit to eat could I find. This knowledge added considerably to my uneasiness.

While engaged in my search, I espied, bobbing up and down in the water not far from the shore, something that looked suspiciously like a bottle with the cork in. My curiosity was instantly aroused. Who knew but that it might contain the last message of a shipwrecked crew, thrown overboard in the hope of carrying to the world information of their unhappy fate. If this were so, into what weak hands had it fallen! [Pg 259]

My mind made up to gain possession of it, it was the work of a moment to wade towards it. I found it to be a Bass' beer-bottle, and on holding it up to the light, I could see that it contained a sheet of paper. The mouth was firmly corked, and to render it additionally secure, the latter was not only tied down but carefully sealed. Bearing it ashore, I threw myself on the warm sands and prepared to broach its contents.

I discovered the cork to be fastened with copper wire, while the wax used was of a quality more generally employed by ladies on their *billets-doux* than by men before the mast. Cracking the bottle with a stone I extracted the paper and spread it carefully out.

It was a full sheet of cream-laid, folded longways into a narrow strip to go through the bottle's neck. Owing to this precaution it was quite dry. The following is an exact transcript of what I read—

*S.S. Cambermine,
"Three days' steam from Nagasaki.*

"To all whom it may concern,

"This is to certify that we, the undersigned, being on our honeymoon, are the two happiest people on the face of this globe, and don't you forget it!

"REGINALD AND MAY."

A sillier and, under the circumstances, crueller hoax it would have been impossible to conceive. And yet to my mind there was something terribly pathetic about that tiny message, tossed about by many seas, buffeted by storms, carried hither and thither by various currents, its ultimate fate to fall into the hands of perhaps the most miserable being on the whole face of that world so [Pg 260]

flippantly referred to by the writers. Shutting my eyes I could conjure up the scene—the promenade deck of the steamer—the happy couple busily engaged upon the preparation of the message—the toss overboard, and finally, the bottle bobbing up and down a mute farewell among the waves. Big man as I was, when I pictured the happiness to which the note referred, and compared it with my own position, the tears rose into my eyes, and surely if it served no other purpose, the message had done one good work in diverting for a time the current of my miserable thoughts.

For some vague reason, I could not tell what,—perhaps that I might have in my possession something which was the outcome of a fellow-creature's happiness, or, maybe, because it was a last feeble link with the outside world,—I resolved not to tear up the paper, but to keep it as a talisman about me. When I had put it carefully away I resumed my walk, and half-an-hour later had completed my circuit of the island, and was back again on the sands opposite the plateau.

By this time my mind was made up, and I had resolved to carry out as expeditiously as possible the horrible task which lay before me. But how I was to dig a grave of sufficient depth, seeing that I had no tools, save my knife and hands, with which to do it, I could not understand. Fearing, however, that if I delayed matters any longer I should never undertake it at all, I chose a suitable spot a little to the right of the plateau, and fell to work.

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I found it a longer business than I expected, for though I commenced it early enough, it was nearly dusk before I had completed it. Unfortunately I had only accomplished the least horrible part. What I most dreaded was conveying the body to the grave, and this I had now to do.

Returning to the camp on the plateau, the very remembrance of which had grown indescribably repulsive to me, I approached the spot. A feeling of surprise took possession of me when I saw that the body lay just as I had left it, and perhaps for the same reason I found myself creeping towards it on tip-toe, as if it were wrapped in a slumber which might be easily disturbed.

Stooping down, I placed my arms round it, then lifting it on to my shoulder, hurried back to the grave with all possible speed. Laying it down, I returned for the cloth stretcher on which we had borne Veneda the previous night, and having procured this I wrapped the body in it and laid it in the grave. Then endeavouring to bring my mind to bear on the awful solemnity of what I was doing, I repeated as much as I could remember of the service for the burial of the dead. It was an impressive scene. The dead man in his shallow grave, the evening breeze just stirring the trees, the light and shadow effects of the sunset, the smooth sea, and the awful silence of the island. Such an impression did it make on me, that it seemed if I did not get away from the spot I should go raving mad. So soon therefore as I had committed his body to the ground, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," I began to fill in the soil with feverish haste. The instant that was finished, I picked up my remaining supply of rice and the cooking-pot, and ran for dear life. Strange shapes peered at me from every tree, and unearthly voices whispered in the faint rustling of the leaves. The truth was my nerves were utterly unstrung,—and was this indeed to be wondered at, considering the nature of my experiences within the last twenty-four hours?

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So great was my horror of an Unknown Something—what, I could not explain—that I had run to the end of the island farthest from the grave before I came to myself. Then I threw myself down upon the sands quite exhausted. But I was too hungry to remain inactive long. Lighting a fire with my one remaining match, I set to work to cook some rice, obtaining water from a spring I had discovered in my morning's ramble. By the time I had finished my meal it was quite dark, so I laid myself down, and after a while fell asleep.

With prudence born of the knowledge that if my fire once went out I should have no means of relighting it, I had heaped plenty of fuel on it before I turned in, so that when I woke next morning it was still burning brightly. Having cooked and eaten a small portion of my rice, for I was now compelled to rigidly allowance myself, I replenished my fire, and started off to climb to my usual look-out spot on the top of the hill.

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Though I searched in every direction, not a sign of a sail was visible. Only the same expanse of blue water stretching away to the sky-line, the same wheeling gulls, and the same eternal thunder of the surf upon the rearward reef.

Anything more awful than the feeling of desolation that encompassed me I would defy any one to imagine. My sensations were those of a man cut off for ever from his fellow-creatures, a hapless outcast, destined to perish by slow starvation on that barren spot. A few more meals I discovered would find me at the end of my supplies. And what would happen then?

While I was occupied with these miserable reflections, the locket Veneda had given me chafed my skin, and the bitter irony of my position figured before me in a new light. Here was I, I told myself, having about me the key to enormous wealth, unable to procure the commonest necessaries of life. A Cræsus and a beggar! Indeed, at that moment, had it been in my power to do so, I would willingly have exchanged all my chances of obtaining the money for another small bag of rice like the one I was just at the end of. I returned to my fire to spend the remainder of the day tramping up and down the hill watching for the sail that never came.

That night I ate my last mouthful of food. Hence forward I must go without, unless I could find some sort of fruit or shell-fish with which to keep body and soul together. Having this object in view, off I set next morning on another expedition round the island. But I might have spared myself the labour. Trees there were in abundance, but not one having any pretence to fruit. Fish I knew teemed in the bay, but I had neither line nor hooks wherewith to catch them, nor anything

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of which to manufacture such tackle. Thus when I reviewed my position I began to see the hopelessness of it, and to think it would be better for me to lie down and die without struggling any further against my overwhelming fate.

All that day and the next I was without a morsel of food; my agony was indescribable. How many times I climbed that hill I could not say, but it was always with the same result—no sail—no sail! My one remaining thought was to keep up the fire, for I knew that if that went out I should have no means left of communicating with passing ships. Then a period of abject despair supervened, in which I cared not a rap what became of me. How I spent my time after that I could not tell you. I believe, however, that I must have been delirious, for I have a faint recollection of running along the beach screaming to Veneda that the Albino was pursuing me. Certainly this fit lasted a long time, for the next thing I remember is finding myself lying more dead than alive on the sand beside my *burnt-out fire*.

My last hope was gone. My chance of attracting attention had been taken away from me. Thereupon I asked myself, Why should I wait for death to release me? why should I not take the direction of affairs into my own hands, and anticipate what could only be a matter of another day, by the very longest calculation?

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Strange though it may seem, my troubled brain found something peculiarly soothing in this idea. I brooded over it unceasingly, deriving a melancholy satisfaction from the knowledge that, though my agony was more than human, it was in my power to end it when I pleased. Somehow or other I developed the idea that the evening would be the most fitting time for me to accomplish the awful deed, perhaps just at sundown. Three words, "the evening sacrifice," part of a half-forgotten hymn, faint relic of my boyhood, haunted me continually—

"The sun is sinking fast,
The daylight dies;
Let love awake, and pay
Her evening sacrifice."

Then suddenly a grisly notion seized me, and all the afternoon I occupied myself procuring from a tree a slab of wood, upon which to carve my name and age. With what care I chose the inscription! With what labour I worked upon it! When it was completed to my satisfaction, it read as follows—

THE MORTAL REMAINS
OF
JOHN RAMSAY,
MARINER,
*Who, dying by his own hand,
Bluffed Starvation, and became the Victim of Despair!*

The sun was now only half a hand above the horizon, staring me in the face, a great globe of mocking fire. I had long since chosen the spot for my death, and thither I proceeded, sticking my tombstone in the ground beside the place where in all probability my corpse would fall.

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When all my arrangements were made, I fell to sharpening my knife upon a stone, pausing now and again to watch the sun. His lower edge was hardly an eighth of an inch above the sea-line, and as he sank beneath it, I determined to have done with this weary world, and to endeavour to find in another the peace which was denied me here.

For the second time since my arrival on the island, my whole life passed in review before my eyes;—I saw the dame's school at Plymouth, Sir Benjamin, and the East India Avenue, Maud, and my dear dead mother. The bright side of my life seemed suddenly to end here, and a darker procession commenced to stalk across the stage. My early sea life, my quarrel with Maud, the gold-fields, my illness, Broken Hill, and, lastly, Veneda's death. The beach seemed peopled with phantoms, and it was as if they were all imploring me with outstretched arms to stay my wicked hand. But I would not heed them. The sun was now more than half sunk beneath the sea, and I drew back my arm to point the sacrificial knife.

At that instant a tiny object moving on the beach, fifty yards or so from where I stood, caught my eye. I paused to wonder what it might be, and that little act of curiosity saved my life. In that moment I abandoned the idea of self-destruction, and the next I was staggering towards the thing, whatever it might be.

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It was a turtle making for the sea!

Before he could escape me I had turned him on his back, and plunged the knife into his breast; then working it round, in less time almost than it takes to tell, I had portions of the flesh cut out, and was ravenously devouring them. Oh, the delight of that meal!

When I had eaten as much as I wanted, I carried what remained to a place of safety, and afterwards knelt upon the beach to thank God earnestly for sparing my life to me. But for that tiny beast's intervention I should have been a dead man. Then with a heart considerably lighter I rose to my feet, and determined to see if by any chance I could discover another of the animals.

My luck had turned, for on the other side of the island I was fortunate enough to obtain another and even larger one. Carrying him back to my camp, I despatched him at once to make sure, and

then hid his flesh. I can assure you that it was with a happier and more contented heart that I fell asleep that night.

Next morning I breakfasted on the turtle, and when I had finished, started up the hill to look for ships. As usual, none were to be seen. Having convinced myself of this melancholy fact, I returned to the shore, and, for something to do, set myself to destroy the head-board I had manufactured the day before, and to begin another to perpetuate Veneda's memory. In this manner I occupied myself all that day. When it was finished, I set off to view the grave for the first time since I had laid him in it.

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It had already begun to look unkempt and straggling, so quickly do things grow in these latitudes. When I had tidied it as well as I could, I dug a hole at the head and erected the board. It is not much to look at, but at least it will serve its purpose, so that whosoever visits the spot in the future will be able to read the name of the man who lies beneath it.

This work accomplished, I started back along the shore to my camp for dinner. Turning the point, I happened to look out to sea. I stopped suddenly in my walk. I almost dropped under the shock! *A sail was in sight, and heading towards the island!*

For a moment I remained rooted where I stood; my excitement chained me hand and foot. Would she see me, or would she pass me by? The latter thought was agony. How could I attract her attention? I had no means to raise a flare, so I must hit upon some other scheme. Rushing swiftly across the sands into the thicket, I cut a long pole, and to this fastened my jacket. Then running with all my speed along the beach towards a piece of elevated ground, I ascended it, and wildly began to wave my signal.

Closer and closer she approached the island, and, as she came, I made out that she was not one of the small trading boats I had at first imagined her, but a steam-yacht, and a large one at that. When she was about two miles distant she ran a flag up to her peak. I could not of course at that distance make out what it was, but I understood that it was an answer to my signal, and waved my flag the more frantically, running down to the water's edge to do so. Then I saw that a boat was being lowered.

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As soon as she was clear she started for the shore, and when I saw her coming I fell upon my knees, and sobbed as if my heart would break. After what seemed an eternity they grounded her, and I waded out to meet them. A gentlemanly-looking young fellow sat in the stern-sheets. He stared at me rather hard (and well he might, for I must have cut a strange figure), and said—

"I've been sent to see what's the matter. Can we help you?"

"Take me away," I cried, "take me away. I'm dying!"

I really thought I was. My senses were leaving me. I tottered, clutched at the gunwale of the boat, and remember no more!

CHAPTER V.

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RAMSAY MEETS OLD FRIENDS.

When I came to my senses, my first impression was that I was still upon the island. This notion was perhaps strengthened in my mind by a continuous grinding noise (proceeding from the engine-room, I discovered later), which, I must own, somewhat resembled the distant roar of the surf upon the beach. When, however, I looked about me, it was not upon the timber-clad hill, or the long sandy foreshore of the island that my eyes alighted, but on the confined space of a ship's cabin. It contained one bunk, a narrow sort of sofa, somewhat like the contrivance one sees in the first-class state-rooms of the great mail-boats; a miniature chest of drawers and desk combined, on the top of which, beneath a number of photographs, pipes, and cheap knick-knacks, stood a variety of sombre-looking account-books; a curtained recess for hanging clothes, and a well-contrived washstand.

Then, in a flash, the remembrance of my rescue by the yacht came back to me, and I had just recalled the circumstance of my wading out to her boat, when the door opened and two men entered. The first was a dignified, grey-haired man, possessed of a handsome, aristocratic face; the second was rather smaller, with a bright, rosy little countenance, eyes that bespoke him a humourist, and a general air that said as plainly as words could have done that he was an Irishman. There was still a third behind them, the steward, whose cabin I was then occupying; but he, either from motives of delicacy, or because he imagined the cabin to be already sufficiently crowded, remained in the alley-way. The Irishman opened the conversation.

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"Sir Richard," he began, as soon as he saw that I was awake, "you've lost your money, he's himself again. Now, my man, how are you, eh?"

I answered that I felt almost well, but that I would be grateful if he would inform me what boat I was on, and to whom I was indebted for my rescue. Perhaps something in my voice told him that I was not an ordinary foremast hand, for he immediately adopted a different tone, and after feeling my pulse, said—

"You're undoubtedly much stronger than when you were talking nonsense about Albinos, and digging up dead men, yesterday. Where are you? Why, on board the *Esmeralda*, Sir Richard Tremorden's yacht, to whom you are indebted for the civility of saving your life. Let me introduce you to Sir Richard."

I turned to Sir Richard and tried to thank him, but he would not hear of it.

"Not at all, Mr.—" Here he paused for me to give him my name.

"Ramsay," I said.

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"Not at all, Mr. Ramsay. I am very thankful that I was in a position to do so. It was quite by chance that we sighted the island, as our real course lay a good deal to the eastward. Forgive my curiosity, but you must remember you're a mystery, and we're all suffering from an attack of impatience to know how you got there."

I was going to begin my story, but Dr. Sullivan—for such I afterwards discovered the little medico's name to be—would not permit it.

"No, no, Sir Richard, not just now. I must really exercise a doctor's authority, and forbid you to worry him with any questions until he's stronger; besides, ye're doing the ladies, God bless 'em, an injustice, by trespassing on their rights. They'll be wanting to cross-examine Mr. Ramsay for themselves."

"As you please, doctor," Sir Richard said, with a laugh. "You're in command down here, of course. Williams!"

The man in the alley-way answered, "Yes, Sir Richard?"

"Mind you take good care that Mr. Ramsay has everything he wants." Then turning to me, "Now, I must return to the deck to tell the ladies how you are. I hope, when you feel stronger, you'll give us the pleasure of your company."

Shaking me by the hand, he bade me good-bye, and went out, leaving me to the doctor, who thereupon began his medical examination, interspersing it with many good-natured sallies. From him I learnt that Sir Richard Tremorden was returning from a yachting trip to Japan, *viâ* Borneo and Java, to Singapore. The yacht was full of his friends, and it was only just by chance that he, the doctor, had been able to make one of the party. Furthermore, it was Lady Tremorden who first caught sight of my signal, and it was a strange coincidence that she it was who had proposed leaving their course to take a look at the island.

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While we were talking, the steward brought me a large cup of beef-tea, and after he had helped me to sit up to it, the kindly little medico withdrew, having elicited all the information he could, concerning myself and my profession, for the information of the ladies on deck. When I was alone, I found myself face to face with a situation I had not before contemplated. How was I to account for my presence on the island without introducing the subject of our escape from Batavia? I thought and thought, but without telling a downright untruth I could see no way out of it. At last, after a deal of earnest consideration, I determined, if asked, to say that, having nothing to do for a while, I had accompanied a Malay on a sailing-trip. We touched at the island, and while I was ashore he cleared out and left me. This was the only course I could see. I had my own reasons for saying nothing about Veneda.

After lunch, dressed in a white duck suit of Sir Richard's, and having removed from my face the fortnight's beard that covered it, I went on deck, and was presented in proper form to the ladies, who, you may be sure, were all on the *qui vive* to hear my story. This, as soon as I could, I told them, and I must own that I blushed to hear their vigorous denunciations of the treacherous Malay. Lady Tremorden was particularly gracious, and to her I hastened to express my deep debt of gratitude.

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When I look back upon the strange experiences of that year, I always think of that short voyage on board the *Esmeralda* as one of the few parts of it I should care to undergo again. I said as much to Sir Richard the other day, when I met him in London at a certain club of which we are both members. He laughed and answered—

"You were as good as a tonic to us, we had had no sensation since one of the hands fell overboard in Nagasaki."

Early next morning we reached Singapore, where I was to bid my kind friends "farewell." Before I left the yacht, Sir Richard invited me to his cabin, and in a real spirit of friendliness asked me how I stood with regard to money, offering to become my banker if I should require anything to help me along. But as I still possessed a fair amount of the Albino's loan, this kind offer I was able to decline, though of course I was none the less grateful to the generous thought which prompted it.

By nightfall the yacht had coaled, and proceeded on her way to Saigon, and, nothing else offering, I had signed myself on the *Turkish Pacha*, to work my way home before the mast.

She was a powerful old Ocean Tramp, homeward bound from Hong Kong. Strangely enough, to show how small the world is, it happened that her second officer was none other than young Belton, who was third mate of the *Beretania* when I was chief officer. I suppose I must have looked very much the same as the other fo'c'sle hands, for though we were often thrown

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together, we were off the South Foreland before he recognized me. Then, up to a certain point, and with numberless reservations that quite altered the face of it, I told him my story. I don't suppose he believed it for an instant; doubtless he thought me a wonderful liar, and put it all down as the result of a liking for strong waters. But I must do him the justice to admit, that when we were paid off he proffered me a loan, my non-acceptance of which must have puzzled him considerably.

The time was now coming for me to ascertain what truth there was in the story Veneda had told me of his fortune. But as I had passed my word to him not to open the locket within a month of my arrival in London, I had to look about me for a place to stay in until that time should expire. Having sufficient money to keep me for at least six weeks in comparative comfort, I resolved to put up at a quiet place I knew of, near the East India Docks, until the end of that period, and then to open the locket and try my success.

Somehow or other, though I had been assured by Veneda of its worth, though I wore it round my neck as a tangible proof of its reality, and had been warned of the attempts that would in all probability be made to obtain possession of it, I was not altogether a believer in the likelihood of its doing very much for me. I had been devoid of luck so long that I began to believe no more could ever come my way. So, all things considered, I should not have been overwhelmed with astonishment, had I on opening it discovered the information it contained to be entirely valueless.

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I cannot tell you how strange it seemed to me to be back again in London after so long an absence, and how bitterly I felt the loss of the poor old mother's kindly welcome. As to Maud, my gentle Maud, of whom I had been thinking more than was good for me of late, was it any use to think of her? Had I forfeited all right to her regard? So constantly was she in my mind that I remember one night, under cover of darkness, stealing down to Holland Park just to take one glimpse at the old place where she had lived, and where once I had been so happy.

It was a wet, miserable evening; a piercing wind shrieked along the dismal streets and moaned round the corners, chilling to the marrow the bones of one accustomed to the warmth and brightness of those sunny Southern seas. Leaving my omnibus in the Uxbridge Road, I walked up a side street to the house. There it stood, solid and respectable as I remembered it. No changes had been made in its exterior, everything was exactly as when I saw it last, even to the peculiar scrimpiness about the piece of privet hedge beside the gate. A light was burning in an up-stair window, but otherwise the house was dark and silent as the grave. I stood and looked, the tears rising in my eyes as I did so; then, heaving a sigh for the sake of "auld lang syne," and all that might have been, I turned and went sorrowfully away.

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And now I am brought to the relation of an incident which was to have a great and awful bearing on my future. One wet morning, I had just alighted from a 'bus in Oxford Street, a little below the Holborn Restaurant, and was half-way across the street, when a hansom whisked past me, so close that the horse's nose brushed my sleeve. The driver called to me to stand clear, and, expecting an accident, the fare threw open the apron and half stepped out. *To my amazement he was none other than the Albino.* There could be no mistake about it; I knew him in an instant. My astonishment was so great that I stopped in the middle of the road, and once more came near being run over.

On recovering myself my first impulse was to hail a hansom and make after him, but on second thoughts I saw the folly of such a proceeding. My one endeavour must rather be to keep out of his way. Whether he recognized me or not I could not of course tell, but we were so close to one another that it was most unlikely that he could have failed to do so. But then, I told myself, even if he did, what could it matter? He would never suspect me of being the possessor of the locket, for how should he know that I had escaped with Veneda from Batavia? Still, until I knew whether the secret the locket contained was of any value, it would be folly to run the risk of losing it. How well I guarded it the sequel will show.

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Having little if any money to spend in what is called "knocking about town," I did not go out very much of an evening. When I did, my chief amusement was the theatre, to which I treated myself on an average about twice a week. After the performance it was my custom on the way home to drop into a small hostelry called the "Rose and Crown" for a night-cap. One evening (I had been to the Lyceum, I think) I went in and called for my usual refreshment. The bar was crowded, and among the visitors was a man who seemed to take a particular interest in myself. He came up to me and invited me to take a glass with him. Upon my offering some excuse he tried by every means in his power to ingratiate himself with me. But I did not like his look, and resolved, if I saw anything more of him there, to transfer my patronage from the "Rose and Crown" elsewhere.

A few nights later I was annoyed at finding him there again, this time evidently awaiting my coming. As soon as I entered he advanced upon me, and asked why I had refused to drink with him on the previous occasion, demanding if I had any objection to his company? It would have been the easiest thing in the world for me to have knocked him down, but I did not want to make a row, so I resolved if possible not to lose my temper with him. As soon as he found I was prepared to listen to what he had to say, he entered upon a long rambling statement as to what he would have done had I insulted him again, winding up by inserting his hand inside my collar, and at the same time tugging violently at the chain which held the locket round my neck. I was so surprised by his impudence that for a second or two I let him pull, then, divining his intention, I immediately knocked him down.

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His fall raised a hubbub, but as soon as I could I explained matters to the landlord, who, knowing

me for a regular customer, was the more disposed to overlook such a trifling indiscretion as knocking a stranger down in his bar. When I left the house I hastened home, reflecting with considerable gratitude (seeing the aspect affairs were beginning to assume) that another ten days would give me the right to open the locket and decide its secret.

That the man was an emissary of the Albino's, employed to find out if by any chance I had the locket, I did not for a moment doubt. The whole thing was as clear as daylight. Macklin had discovered Veneda's whereabouts, and our escape together. Of course he could not know anything of the other's death, but meeting me in London he must have thought it worth his while to make sure that I was not the possessor of what he was so anxious to obtain. Now the man would be able to inform him definitely that I *had* got it, and things would be pretty certain to come to a crisis. I resolved to be more careful than ever.

On the Saturday following the events just described, I was not very well, a feeling of intense depression had seized me, and in order to try and raise my spirits I went to the Empire Music Hall. While mixed up in the crowd leaving it I felt my arm clutched. Imagine my amazement on turning at finding myself confronted by *no less a person than Juanita!* She was dressed entirely in black, and though thinner than when we had parted, still looked surpassingly beautiful. Without a word she slipped her arm through mine and drew me from the building. When we reached the street, she said—

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"My Jack, how I have longed for this day! Oh, the joy of seeing you again!"

I was about to venture some remonstrance, but she would not hear me until we had left the square, and were pacing down a side street.

"What joy this is for me!" she said, as we walked along. "Never did I think on that dreadful morning in Batavia that we two would meet again."

"It isn't your fault that we have," I said bitterly, remembering her treachery. "It wasn't your fault that your evidence didn't bring me to the gallows."

"Oh, Jack, you would not be so cruel as to blame me for that?" she cried. "I could not help myself. If I had not given the evidence I did, I should not have left Batavia alive."

"What do you mean?" I asked, astonished.

"Macklin," she hissed, and her eyes glowed with a sudden fury as her lips dwelt upon his name. "I was his slave, body and soul. I dared not do anything but his will. Oh, Jack, forgive me, forgive me, for I have been so unhappy."

But though she pleaded in this fashion, I was not to be hoodwinked. I had tasted her treachery before, how was I to know that she was not fooling me now? I told her as much, whereupon she withdrew her arm from mine, and made as if she would leave me. Her voice, when she spoke, had a certain pride in it, which I could not understand.

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"Say no more; it was foolish of me to have stopped you. I thought, when I saw your face, there might be some little pity for my loneliness. I was mistaken. Good-bye Jack, good-bye."

She held out her little hand to me as though she would leave me there and then, and looking into her eyes—we were just beneath a gas-lamp—I saw that she was crying.

Now, never in my life have I been able to stand the sight of a woman's tears. Crocodile tears though they often are, they have an effect on me which is more than peculiar. I began at once to reproach myself for having been so blunt with her, and was more and more inclined to place credence in her assertion that she was only led to act as she had done by the influence of the Albino.

"Forgive me, Juanita," I said. "I spoke roughly to you, but it was only natural under the circumstances. I believe what you say, and regret that I should have given you additional pain. Where are you staying now?"

She gave me her address and I asked if she would allow me to take her home. She consented, and as it was too far to walk, I called a hansom. Placing her in it, I seated myself beside her, and we rattled off. As we went her spirits began to revive. She recalled our voyage in the schooner, our love-making in Thursday Island, and many other little circumstances connected with our mutual past.

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At length, after passing down a long overgrown thoroughfare, the cab pulled up before a house. She got out and opened the front door while I paid the cabman. Then we went up-stairs together to her sitting-room. Once there, her light-hearted manner left her altogether.

"Jack," she began sadly, "I know it is all over between us, but can you find it in your heart to say you forgive me?"

"Quite, Juanita. Badly as you have treated me, I forgive you everything."

"And you believe, Jack, that whatever I may have done, I loved you once?"

"Yes, I honestly believe that you did love me. But, Juanita, will you let me ask you one question?"

"A hundred if you like, Jack; for this will be our last meeting. After to-night we shall never see

each other again."

"What do you mean?"

"That I am going away,—never mind where,—away from England. Now, what is it you wish to ask me?"

"First, why did you want that money?"

"Oh, Jack, that is a long story, and a sad one. But I will tell you. Once I was poor,—oh, so poor! And to keep myself from starving I sold my honour. A little son was born to me—born in sin and shame. I loved him more than all the world, but knowing what I was, I dared not imperil his immortal soul by letting him remain with me. So I gave him into the keeping of the Good Sisters. But when I did so, I bound myself by a great oath. In bringing him into the world I had done him a wrong which I could never repay. Poverty had compelled me to it, so I swore that I would never rest until I had collected a certain sum of money, by any means, good or bad, to be his property when he should become a man; so that he should never experience the miserable want which wrought his mother's ruin. This I set myself solemnly to accomplish. For a long time I could hear of nothing. Then I joined a certain Society and learnt the game Veneda and the Albino were playing. By chance I discovered Veneda's secret, and I threw my lot in with him, determining to steal the locket which contained the paper, and by that means obtain the money. How I fought for it, how he deceived me, and how the Albino tracked us down, you know. There is one thing, perhaps, of which you are not aware."

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"What is that?"

"That your presence in London with the locket is known to him. That he is aware of your escape with Veneda, your journey to the island, your voyage to Singapore in Sir Richard Tremorden's yacht, and your arrival in England by the *Turkish Pacha*."

"Good heavens!" I cried, astounded. "How on earth did he learn all that?"

"How does he get to know of anything? He is the most wonderful man under the sun, I think, and certainly the wickedest. His agents in Batavia found out your escape from a cab-driver and a boatman. Lady Tremorden described your rescue in a letter she contributes to a ladies' newspaper. And he was in the docks when the *Turkish Pacha* arrived from Singapore."

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I was so overcome with astonishment that I could not reply. She continued—

"Jack, you don't know what escapes you've had. One night you crossed the river to a house on the Surrey side, didn't you?"

I nodded. I remembered the occasion perfectly. I went over to spend the evening with an acquaintance, but not feeling well, left early.

"Well, that night, by his orders, three men waited two hours for you on Westminster Bridge. Somehow they must have missed you. Had they caught you, you would most certainly have lost the locket, and probably your life. One night you went to supper on board the *Prince of Tartary*, lying off Blackwall?"

I nodded again.

"Those three men followed you. You slept on board, or they would have had that locket and thrown your body into the stream."

"But, Juanita, this is simply murder."

"Jack, you may not believe what I am going to tell you, but it is nevertheless true. I have quarrelled hopelessly with Macklin, and I'm hiding from his anger now."

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"Why did you quarrel with him, Juanita?"

"Because he wanted me to help him in another scheme to murder you. I refused, and he attempted my life. He is hunting for me everywhere, thinking I shall communicate with you."

"But, Juanita, if you still want that money for your child, and you didn't spare me before, why do you do so now?"

Big tears rose in her eyes, and her voice trembled as she replied—

"Jack, my child is dead. And think, he died on the day that I betrayed you in Batavia. It was the judgment of heaven on my sin. Had he lived, I should have betrayed you again. But now that I know he is dead, I will not side with that man against you. But you must be careful. If you have the precious paper, why don't you go to the place, and get the money at once?"

"Because I can't. I have sworn not to open the locket until I have been a month in England. The time expires in three days, then I shall do so. But, Juanita, you must leave London at once, you are not safe here. Go into the country, and in a week I will send you money enough to enable you to get out of England. You must let me help you in return for what you've done for me."

"Ah! you don't know," she answered sadly. "Now my little one is gone, my life seems over; I am tired of the battle. I would rather die ... Jack, if possible I should like to give my life to save yours, to show what the worth of my love really is. Perhaps you would sometimes think kindly of me

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then."

"I shall never think otherwise. Believe me, there is only kindness in my heart towards you."

"Yes! Only kindness. Your love is dead. Jack, some day you will marry a good woman. Don't let her believe me to have been altogether bad."

"Don't you know me better than that, Juanita?"

"But now that the Albino——"

"Well?"

We both sprang to our feet, and turned in the direction of the voice. *The Albino stood before us smiling sweetly!*

"And what of the Albino, my dear Juanita? You see, he appears to answer for himself. But there, don't let's talk of him. This is indeed a pleasant surprise. Quite like old times, I declare. John Ramsay, how d'you do?"

"You little devil!" I cried. "How did you get in here?"

"By the front door, my dear boy,—how else? The door has not been built yet that could keep John Macklin out. But you don't seem pleased to see me."

"I should be delighted if I thought I should never set eyes on you again. I've come to the bottom of a good many of your tricks, and I've a good mind to wring your neck, you murderous little reptile."

"That's nonsense, arrant nonsense. But let's get to business. Look here, John Ramsay, you're very smart, but I'm smarter. I want that locket Veneda gave you. I must have it sooner or later, so you may as well hand it over now. Give it to me, and I'll give you a cheque for a thousand pounds. Could anything be fairer?"

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"I wouldn't give it you for two hundred times that amount."

"You're a fool, a madman! You're bringing about your own ruin. You've got it on you now—give it to me, or I swear you don't leave this house alive. You can't escape; I've got men in the street, and I'm armed, so hand it over."

My temper, never too good at the best of times, here deserted me altogether. Picking up the poker, I made a dash at him. Quick as lightning he whipped a revolver from his pocket and covered me. Seeing him about to pull the trigger, I came to a halt. Before I knew what had happened, Juanita had thrown herself between us. He fired. Juanita gave a little cry and fell at my feet. Mad with rage, I sprang over her body towards him. He fired again. I felt a stab as if a red-hot knitting-needle had been run through me, and became unconscious.

When my senses came back to me, I was in the Charing Cross Hospital, more dead than alive. The bullet which had brought me down had been extracted, and the police were anxiously waiting to examine me as to the reason of it all. One thing was very certain; the Albino had achieved his purpose, *for the precious locket, the cause of all the trouble, was gone.*

CHAPTER VI.

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CONCLUSION.

Three days after my meeting with Juanita in Leicester Square, I was lying propped up in bed in the hospital, feeling very weak and miserable, when one of the nurses came to tell me that two visitors were coming up to see me.

"Who are they," I asked,— "men or women?"

"Ladies," the nurse replied, as if she were speaking of a third sex. "Drove up in their own carriage."

"Ladies!" I said. "Who *can* they be?"

Any further wonderment was put a stop to by the entrance of the ladies themselves, escorted by the house surgeon. Can you guess who they were? One was a lady I had never seen before, a chaperon, I suppose. The other was—but there, I must leave you to imagine who alone would have sufficient pity to forget the past, and to come and comfort the sick and sorrowful? *It was Maud!* The Maud I had treated so shamefully, to whom I had done so great a wrong. I could hardly believe my eyes! With that exquisite grace that always characterized her movements, she floated up the long bare ward to where I lay, bringing with her sunshine and happiness unspeakable.

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"Jack, Jack," she began, taking my great brown paw between her dainty hands, "welcome home, ten thousand welcomes home!"

Though the words she uttered were nothing more than ordinary, there was something in the way she said them that invested them with a charm no other woman could have given them.

"How did you know I was here?" I asked, when the first embarrassment was over, and she had taken a chair by my side.

"Papa saw it in the paper," she said, "and we immediately made inquiries."

"And you were forgiving enough to come and see me. Oh, Maud, how little I deserve it!"

"Hush, you mustn't talk like that. Of course I could not let you lie here without coming to you. Some people might be shocked at the idea of a young lady visiting a gentleman in a hospital. But I do what I think right myself. Now, the doctor tells me you are better, and will soon be able to come out. Directly you are ready, you must come to us."

"Come to you, Maud? Your father would never allow that."

"Papa wishes it as much as I do, so be quick and get well. I have such a lot to tell you, and messages to give you, Jack, from your poor dear mother. I was with her till the last."

"I guessed you would be. Poor mother!"

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We were both silent for a minute, then I said—

"Maud, can you tell me one thing? How is the woman who was found in the room with me?"

"Dead, Jack. She died while the police were examining her this morning."

The shock was almost too much for me. It was some time before I could realize it.

"Dead? Oh, poor Juanita! Then her wish was gratified after all. She gave her life for mine. Maud, there is the end of a tragedy. Poor Juanita!"

"Don't think of it for the present, Jack. Wait till you are stronger. I must go soon, or the doctor will say I'm keeping you from getting well."

"Nonsense, your presence will do me more good than all his drugs put together. Forgive me one question."

"A hundred. What is this one?"

"Maud," I asked, almost afraid, "you are not married?"

She shook her head a little sadly, I thought. Oh, if I could only find the pluck to put another! I would try, at any rate.

"Maud, have you only come here in pity, or do you—do you——"

She must have divined what I meant, perhaps she read it in my eyes, for a great blush spread over her face, as she bent towards me and whispered—

"How cruel of you, Jack, to make me say it! I am here because I love you,—because I love you!"

My emotion was so great that I could not speak. My eyes overflowed with tears; I could feel them coursing down my cheeks. The doctor and nurse had taken the chaperon to the other end of the ward, and as I had a screen round my bed, we were quite alone. At last I found my voice.

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"Maud," I faltered, "I am not worthy of you, my dear, I am not worthy. You do not know what my life has been."

What she said in reply has no business here but I know that it acted on me like a magic potion. When she went away, I only let her go on the strict understanding that she should come again as soon as she could spare the time. After the door had closed on her it was as though all the sunshine had gone out of the ward; but she had left behind in my heart a greater happiness than I had ever known before, one that can never leave me again as long as I live to feel it.

A little later the doctor came to examine me. He was struck by the improvement in my condition.

"Why, man, what on earth have you been doing to yourself?" he asked. "You're a hundred per cent. better than you were when I saw you last."

"Happiness, doctor," I answered. "I have had some news which has done me more good than anything your science could prescribe for me."

"It looks like it," he said, and went on to the next bed laughing.

But though my heart was full of joy because I knew that Maud still loved me, it was not unmixed with a feeling of sorrow. In the first place, I knew in my heart of hearts that I was not worthy of my darling's love; and in the second, how was I, a pauper, to ask her to be my wife? My fortune, if it had ever been a fortune, had been stolen from me, and even if I returned to my old profession, the sea, I should stand but a poor chance of ever making enough to justify me in asking Sir Benjamin for her hand. Consideration of these things was, however, postponed for the present by

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the arrival of the police and a magistrate, to take my deposition for use at the inquest on poor Juanita's body. She, brave soul, had sacrificed herself for me, and it should go hard if any exertion on my part should be wanting to bring her murderer to justice. In the evening I had the satisfaction of hearing that a verdict of wilful murder had been returned against John Macklin, and that a warrant was already out for his arrest.

By special favour, Maud was permitted to see me every other day, until I was in a condition to be moved. When that happy moment arrived, she herself came to escort me. The carriage was at the great hospital door, and in it we set out for Holland Park.

When we reached the house, who should open the door but Sir Benjamin himself! His welcome could not have been more cordial had I been his own son returning after an absence of many years. On his arm I entered the house, tenderly watched by Maud. We passed into the drawing-room, and I was soon seated in a comfortable chair before the fire.

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"Sit yourself down, my dear boy," Sir Benjamin said, "and you'll just take a glass of wine and a biscuit before you do another thing. I prescribe it myself, and surely I ought to know. Hum, ha! Maud, my dear, God bless you."

I never remember having seen Sir Benjamin so much affected before. Tears stood in his eyes, and his hand trembled so violently that it was as much as he could do to pour out the wine for me. Dear old man, I had always misjudged his affection for myself, though why he should have felt any was a thing which, personally, I could never understand.

It was not till after lunch that I got an opportunity of a private conversation with him. Then, as I had made up my mind I would, I told him my whole story, from the time of my leaving England on my last voyage, up to the present moment. As my yarn progressed, I was alarmed at the change in his face. From its usual rosy hue its colour passed to an extraordinary pallor, and when I reached the account of my scene with Juanita, and my attempted assassination, with the robbery of the locket, I thought he would have fainted. He gasped—

"You say that Marmaduke, my nephew, gave you that locket containing the piece of paper?"

"Yes, and bound me by a promise that I would not open it till I had been a month in London."

"Then, John, God forgive me, I have done you an awful injury. I have, unconsciously it is true, robbed you of £200,000!"

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"What!" I cried, in my turn astonished by his words. "What had you to do with that affair?"

"I was the custodian of it; my nephew sent it home to me from Chili to keep for him, with the proviso that if ever he should send a messenger for it, bearing a certain piece of paper, I should give him whatever amount, even up to the entire sum, he should ask of me."

"And that messenger?"

"Came the same day that we heard of your accident, and brought the scrap of paper; he said my nephew was in great danger, and wanted his money immediately; he took away my cheque for £200,000 and accumulated interest, and, as I have found out by inquiry, cashed it the same morning. By this time he has probably left the country!"

"What was he like, this messenger?"

"Well, he was the most extraordinary little man I ever set eyes on. He was a deformed Albino."

"The Albino! Then you've seen the murderer—the man who killed Juanita, and attempted to do the same for me."

"Good heavens! What's to be done now?"

"Nothing that I can see. The police are searching high and low for him. We can't recover the money, for we haven't the vestige of a right to it. You must remember it was to be the property of whosoever brought you the paper. The Albino brought it, and he has got it. We must grin and bear our loss. You are not a bit to blame, Sir Benjamin."

I saw that he felt he had injured me, and to try and drive the subject from his mind, I spoke to him of my views regarding Maud. In a second he was another man.

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"Jack, my boy, God bless you for that idea! My carelessness, though certainly I did not know any better, has deprived you of great wealth; now I can make up for it. You love Maud. Maud has never wavered in her affection for you. I'm not going to ask what your life has been since you left us, because I trust to your honour not to ask me for my girl if there's anything against it. On the point of money we'll split the difference, and on your wedding-day I'll make you a present of a cheque for £100,000. Will that suit you?"

"No, Sir Benjamin, I cannot let you do it. If when I'm strong enough you'll help me to some appointment which will enable me to support Maud in a proper manner, I should be just as grateful. But I can't take your money in compensation for what was not your fault."

"It shan't be in compensation then, it shall be as a free gift. See, here is Maud; if you want to talk about it, let it be to her. I must go into town, and find out if the police have discovered anything regarding that Albino."

With this excuse the old gentleman hobbled out of the room, and I was left alone with Maud. When I told her of her father's generosity she became very silent, and her dear eyes filled with tears, but you may be sure they were not tears of sorrow.

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"There's one thing I want to tell you, Jack," she said. "I asked papa to undertake on your behalf the funeral of that poor woman. He did so, and now she has a quiet resting-place in Wendthrop churchyard, under the great yew-tree near the lych-gate. I knew you would like to think she had been given a proper burial. Some day we will go together, and see the grave of the woman who sacrificed her life in such a noble way. We must never forget her nobility, Jack."

"No, dear, pray God we never may! Poor Juanita, her troubled life is over! Surely all her sins have been atoned for by her last act of self-sacrifice!"

And so it came to pass, a month or two later, when summer was on the land, that we twain, as man and wife, went down together to the little village, in the churchyard of which Juanita takes her last long sleep. It was evening, the after-glow of sunset was still upon the sky, and bats were flitting hither and thither among the tombs. In the dip below the churchyard the dear old river ran its silent course towards the sea; a faint chattering sounded from the rooks in the elms above us, and across the meadows came the gentle tinkling of cattle-bells. We passed through God's acre to the old yew-tree, beneath whose ample shade a grave was just beginning to show signs of the care that had been bestowed upon it.

Hand in hand we stood beside it, thinking of the woman whose body lay beneath us. In *my* thoughts I was far away from England. Thursday Island rose before my eyes; the bay dotted with shipping, clouds upon the hill-tops, the noise of the surf upon the beach, the rustling of palm-trees, and Juanita's laughter ringing from the Orient Hotel.

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Before we came away we made a resolve that once every year, as long as we two should live, we would repeat the visit. The grave will be our constant care. For in that way alone can we show our gratitude to the woman whose resting-place it is.

But to return to a more cheerful topic. My long story is fast drawing to a close, and, as I don't doubt, you will say it is about time. But there are two more circumstances of importance to be recorded before I can with satisfaction call a halt.

The first is the matter of my marriage. But when I tell you that it only happened a couple of months ago, you will see that I am hardly in a position yet to describe it with the care such an important event demands. Suffice it then that it took place at the parish church without any ostentation or fuss. I'm not going to tell you how Maud looked in her wedding-dress, because I was far too nervous to find that out for myself. A tiny cousin acted as her bridesmaid, and an old sea friend was good enough to officiate as my best man.

After the ceremony, which took place in the afternoon, we drove back to the house, where Maud held a little reception; and here occurred the second event to which I desire to draw your attention.

Among the guests who came to offer their congratulations were two people whom I had seen before under very different circumstances. That they had not recognized my connection with that affair was evident. So waiting my opportunity, I took Maud on my arm, and bidding her listen, approached the lady, saying politely—

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"I think we have met before!"

She stared in blank surprise, grew very confused, and at last replied—

"I'm afraid you must be mistaken, Mr. Ramsay; I don't think I have ever had the pleasure of seeing you before!"

"And yet I think I carried you in my arms once, and for a considerable distance!"

"You, Mr. Ramsay? Surely you must be mistaken! Pray tell me when."

"In Australia. You were staying at the Federation Hotel the night it caught fire. A fireman carried you down a ladder in his arms!"

"Good gracious! You were not that fireman?"

"I was, though please say nothing about it. If you do, I shall be sorry I recalled the circumstance to your memory."

"But you saved my life. Oh, where is my husband? I must tell him. Maud, do you hear what Mr. Ramsay says?"

"Yes, I have heard about it before, and I am very proud of him," said Maud; and that little sentence was more than sufficient praise for me.

Next moment Major Welbourne—for he was Major now—was overwhelming me with protestations of gratitude, and I was bitterly regretting having said anything about the matter. But for all that it was a strange coincidence, wasn't it?

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As soon as the reception was over, we bade Sir Benjamin good-bye, and started for Southsea, *en route* to the Isle of Wight, where, as the guests of Mr. Sanctuary, Maud's cousin, we proposed to

spend our honeymoon.

It is under his hospitable roof that this account of my strange adventures has been written, and now comes to a conclusion.

I am loth to say "farewell," but what more can I tell you? Only the other day I discovered that Bradshaw the banker, whose embezzlement was the primary cause of all the trouble, had the misfortune to be extradited soon after the loss of his money, and now occupies a cell in one of her Majesty's criminal lunatic asylums. Of the ill-fated pair who left Valparaiso in the schooner *Island Queen*, Veneda lies buried on an island off the Sumatra coast, Juanita in an English churchyard. So far nothing has been heard of the Albino. Despite his extraordinary personality, which, one would be tempted to believe, would render it the more difficult for him to escape, he has succeeded in completely baffling the police. Whether I shall ever hear of him again is a matter outside my power to tell, but that he will some day overreach himself, and suffer the penalty of his crimes, I am as certain as that I am one of the happiest of men to-day. And nothing can be more certain than that!

And with the assurance of that fact I bring my story to a close. My only hope is that I may be permitted to be the husband to Maud that she deserves; and my only regret is that I cannot prove myself better worthy of her love. Surely a life devoted to achieving both these ends cannot be altogether spent in vain!

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THE END.

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