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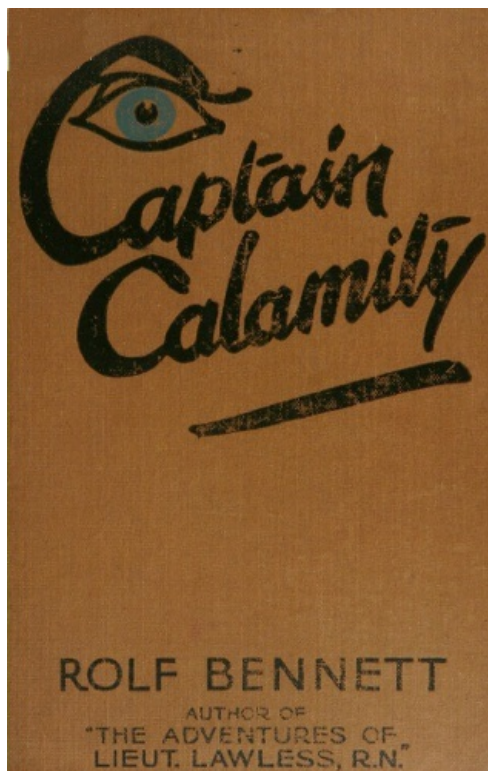
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CAPTAIN CALAMITY

BY ROLF BENNETT

AUTHOR OF "THE ADVENTURES OF LIEUT. LAWLESS, R.N."

SECOND EDITION

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To MY WIFE

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CHAPTER I

THE PARTNERS

"Know all men that we do by these presents issue forth and grant Letters of Marque and reprisals to, and do license and authorise John Brighthouse to set forth in a warlike manner the ship called the 'Hawk,' under his own command and therewith by force of arms to apprehend, seize and take the ships, vessels and goods belonging to the

German Empire, wherefore it may and shall be lawful for the said John Brighthouse to sell and dispose of such ships, vessels and goods adjudged and condemned in such sort and manner as by the course of Admiralty hath been adjudged."

The man who had been reading aloud from the closely written parchment laid it down on the table and glanced inquiringly at his companion. He was a man of between forty and fifty, a little over five feet in height, but so squarely built that, without exaggeration, he was well-nigh as broad as he was long. His head was small and bullet-shaped with a thatch of wiry black hair, and his face, bronzed to a copper-hue, was clean-shaven. A pair of thick, shaggy eyebrows brooded over eyes that usually produced a shock when first seen; for while one was steely-grey and possessed extraordinary mobility, the other was pale green and gazed upon the beholder with the fixed and stony stare of a dead fish. But this alarming optical phenomenon admitted of a simple explanation. At some period in his eventful career, Captain Calamity—for thus he was known throughout the length and breadth of the Pacific—had had the misfortune to lose an eye. After experiencing some difficulty in obtaining a glass substitute, he had at last managed to secure one second-hand from the relative of a gentleman who no longer required it.

The other man, Isaac Solomon by name, might have been any age from forty to sixty. He was lean and angular, with features of a pronounced Hebraic cast and a pair of beady black eyes that conveyed the impression of mingled cunning and humour. His upper lip was shaven, but he wore a beard which, like the few remaining hairs upon his head, was of a dingy grey colour.

This oddly assorted pair were seated in a small room, half parlour, half office, at the rear of the premises wherein Mr. Solomon carried on the business of ship-chandler. The one window, partly shuttered to keep out the fierce glare of the sun, looked out upon Singapore Harbour, with its forest of masts and busy fleet of small craft darting to and fro across the sparkling, unruffled surface of the water.

"That good enough for you, Solomon?" inquired Captain Calamity, tapping the parchment.

"Vell——" the other paused and meditatively rubbed the palms of his long, skinny hands together. "I suppose," he went on hesitatingly, "it is all O.K.; genuine—eh?"

"What; this letter of authority?"

Mr. Solomon nodded in a deprecating, half-apologetic sort of way.

"I thought that the British Government did not issue any Letters of——"

"Listen!" interrupted his companion, snatching up the document. "'In the name and on the behalf of His Britannic Majesty, King George the Fifth——'"

He stopped abruptly and, pushing the parchment across the table with an impatient gesture, pointed to a signature just above the large red seal.

"Look at that," he said.

Mr. Solomon scrutinised the signature as a bank clerk might scrutinise a doubtful cheque.

"Yes," he murmured at last, "it is not a forg—I mean," he corrected himself hastily, happening to catch the Captain's eye, "it seems quite genuine. Oh yes, quite. Still, I would like to know——"

"How I came by this authority—eh?" broke in the other with a contemptuous laugh. "And you'd like to know why I'm referred to there as John Brighthouse and not as Captain Calamity. You're itching to know, aren't you, Solly?"

"Merely as a matter of pissness."

"Exactly. Well, as a matter of business, I'm not going to enlighten you. How I obtained the Letters of Marque is my concern; the reason why I am referred to therein as John Brighthouse is not your concern. For the rest, to you and to every one else in these parts, my name remains what it always has been—Captain Calamity. Savvy?"

"A tree is known by its fruit—eh, Captain?" And Mr. Solomon laughed—that is to say, his throat emitted a strange, creaking noise which suggested that his vocal organs needed oiling, while his lips twitched convulsively.

"And your ship," he went on when this mirthful mood had passed, "vere is she?"

"That is a question which you can answer better than I."

Mr. Solomon's face was eloquently interrogative.

"I mean that, if you intend to join in this little venture with me, you must solve the problem."

"But I don't understand," said the other anxiously. "You tell me you have a ship called the *Hawk*, and now——" he shrugged his shoulders with a helpless gesture.

"I'm afraid your enthusiasm's carried you away, friend Solomon. I never said anything of the sort. The *Hawk* referred to in that document is a legal fiction—an illegal fiction some might call it. If you want to go in for pigeon-plucking, you must provide the bird of prey," and Captain Calamity chuckled grimly at his own facetiousness.

"Me! Provide a ship! Out of the question!" cried Mr. Solomon, backing nervously from the table as though the mere suggestion alarmed him.

Calamity reached across the table and took from a box a big, fat, Burmese cigar. This he proceeded to light, which done, he leaned back in his chair and emitted huge clouds of smoke with obvious satisfaction.

"You must think of something else, Captain," went on his companion, drawing still farther away from the table to escape being suffocated by the Captain's smoke.

"Now see here," said Calamity, taking the cigar from his mouth and speaking with great deliberation. "You're a clever business man; a damned clever business man, or you wouldn't have kept out of jail all these years. Well, here's a business proposition after your own heart. You provide the ship and fit her out, and I'll provide the crew. Then, within three months, I'll undertake to earn a bigger dividend for each of us than you, with all your rascality, could make in a year. Doesn't that tickle your palate, my friend?"

He paused and watched with a smile the obvious signs of perturbation on his companion's face. It was clear to him that in the mind of Mr. Solomon a terrific battle was in progress between exceeding avarice and excessive caution.

"Vat security could you give?" asked the Jew at last. The struggle must have been fierce, for he drew from his pocket a large, yellow silk handkerchief and mopped the beads of perspiration from his face.

"Security!" echoed Calamity fiercely. "Why, the security of my name. Have you ever known me break my word, Solomon? Is there, in the whole of the Pacific to-day, a man living whom I've sworn to kill?"

Mr. Solomon started uneasily and edged towards the window as though to be in readiness to call for help if necessary.

"But there aren't many enemy ships to capture now," he protested in a feeble voice. "They have all been driven off the seas."

"I'll wager there are enough ships left to pay a healthy dividend on your capital, Solomon. Besides, if the supply does run short we're not dainty and——" He concluded his sentence with a grimly significant laugh.

For some moments there was silence, broken only by the Captain's puffing as he exhaled cloud after cloud of fierce tobacco-smoke. Mr. Solomon's expressive countenance was again exhibiting signs of deep mental agitation, and his brow was wrinkled by a perplexed frown. Suddenly this cleared away and into his shifty eyes there came the triumphant look of one who has unexpectedly found the solution to a seemingly impossible problem. The change was so marked that Calamity regarded him with undisguised suspicion, for when Solomon looked like that it generally meant that somebody was going to be made wise by experience.

"I vill dink it over," he said at last.

A bland smile came over Calamity's face. He had not had intimate business relations with his companion during the past ten years for nothing, and knew that this was mere bluff, a sort of playful coquettishness on Mr. Solomon's part. But he, also, was an old hand at this game as his next remark proved.

"Please yourself," he answered indifferently, rising as if to go. "You think it over as you say, and in the meantime I'll trip over to Johore and see your pal Rossenbaum. He may be glad of the chance to——"

"Vait a minute! Vait a minute!" interrupted Mr. Solomon, starting to his feet. "Vat you in such a 'urry for?"

In moments of excitement he was apt to drop the *h*'s which at other times he assiduously cultivated.

"Well, you don't suppose I'm going to hang about Singapore and get drunk on the local aperients while you make up your mind, do you?" inquired Calamity.

"Now just you sit down, Captain, and ve'll talk the matter over," said Mr. Solomon in a mollifying tone. "Make yourself at home now."

With an appearance of great reluctance, Captain Calamity reseated himself and took another big, rank cigar from the box on the table.

"Go ahead," he said laconically as he lit the poisonous weed.

"Vat I propose," began Mr. Solomon, "is that you give me a bond...."

He continued for over half an hour to state his conditions, Calamity never once interrupting him. When he had got through the Captain threw the stump of his third cigar out of the window and drew his chair closer to the table.

"Now you've used up your steam, and, I hope, feel better, we'll talk business," he said in a cool, determined voice.

Two hours elapsed before Captain Calamity rose to his feet and prepared for departure. It had been a tremendous battle, for Mr. Solomon's demands had continued to be outrageous and he had resisted every reduction tooth and nail. But they had at last come to an agreement, though, even so, each felt that he was conceding far too much to the other. The main points were, that Isaac Solomon was to procure a ship and fit her out; that the profits of each privateering expedition were to be divided into four equal shares, of which the partners each took one. The remaining two shares were to be used for refitting, victualling, bonuses for the crew, wages, and so forth. Mr. Solomon's connection with the venture was to be kept secret from every one but his partner, for, with a modesty that had its root in wisdom, the ship-chandler avoided publicity as much as possible.

"I suppose you're going to wet the contract?" remarked Calamity as he picked up his hat.

Mr. Solomon affected not to understand.

"Vet it?" he inquired innocently.

"Yes, drink to the prosperity of the venture, partner."

With no great show of alacrity, Mr. Solomon crossed to a cupboard and was about to bring out a bottle of red wine, when Calamity stopped him.

"Damn you!" he cried. "I'm not going to drink that purple purgative; save it for your fellow Sheenies. Come, out with that bottle of rum, you old skinflint!"

Mr. Solomon made a chuckling noise in his throat, and, replacing the red fluid, brought forth a square bottle and two glasses. He was about to dole out a modest measure, when Calamity took the bottle from him and more than half filled one of the glasses.

"Now help yourself, partner," he said, handing back the bottle.

The other carefully poured out about a teaspoonful of the spirit, deluged it with water, and then held up his glass.

"Long life and success to Calamity and Co!" cried the Captain, and tossed off the raw spirit with no more ado than if it had been milk.

"Calamity and Co!" echoed Mr. Solomon in a thin, shrill voice.

CHAPTER II

THE DEPARTURE OF THE "HAWK"

Captain Calamity appeared to be one of those men who, for various reasons and often through force of circumstances, have drifted into the backwaters of civilisation to a life of semi-barbarism. Men of this sort are to be found all over the New World, but more particularly in the luxuriant islands of the South Pacific, where life can be maintained with a minimum of effort. Some are mere beachcombers, derelicts for whom the striving, battling world has no further use. Some are just "remittance men," social outcasts, bribed to remain at a safe distance from their more respectable relatives.

A few, a very few, are men obsessed by a spirit of adventure; men who can find no scope for their superabundant energy and vitality in the overcrowded, over-civilised cities of the world. Of such as these was Captain Calamity. Yet his past was as much a mystery to those who knew him as was the origin of the suggestive name by which he was known throughout the Pacific. No one—until to-day, not even Isaac Solomon—had the slightest inkling of his real name. And, as might be expected under such circumstances, various stories, each more incredible than the last, were current among the islands concerning him. Still, the one most generally believed, no doubt because it sounded romantic, described him as an ostracised member of an aristocratic English family upon whom he had in earlier years brought disgrace.

But, whatever the truth might be, Calamity never by any chance referred to his past, and, as to the stories concerning himself, he did not take the trouble to deny or confirm them.

For some days after his interview with Mr. Solomon Calamity was busily engaged in collecting a crew—a crew which, as the *Hawk* was to be a fighting ship, would have to consist of about thrice the number which she would have carried as a merchantman. So far as deck-hands and firemen were concerned this was fairly easy, but when it came to finding officers and engineers the task proved much more difficult. Men of this class, who, for some reason or other, found themselves adrift in Singapore without a ship, fought shy of the notorious skipper. They believed—and probably with very good reason—that to sail under him would ruin all prospects of getting a job with a reputable firm again. So, while willing enough to absorb "pegs" at the Captain's expense, they politely declined his offers of a berth on the *Hawk*.

Eventually, he ran across an engineer who had made several voyages with him on trading and pearling expeditions; one Phineas McPhulach, a little, red-haired Scotsman with no professional prospects, but an unlimited capacity for death-dealing drinks. McPhulach, being in his customary

state of "down and out," and having no future that necessitated consideration, eagerly accepted the berth of chief-engineer which Calamity offered him. Moreover, he was able to introduce a companion in misfortune named Ephraim Dykes. Mr. Dykes was a lean, lanky individual, with a cast in one eye, and an accent that proclaimed him a native of New England. He had once held a master's certificate, but this, it appeared, had been suspended indefinitely owing to his ship having piled herself up on a reef off New Guinea. Therefore, when Calamity proposed that he should ship as first mate, he was quite willing, as he put it, to "freeze right on."

Partly through the instrumentality of this latter acquisition, Calamity was able to secure a second mate in the person of Mr. Sam Smith, a little Cockney of unsober habits. A second engineer named Sims, a taciturn man of middle age, was also picked up, and thus Calamity succeeded in collecting a ship's company suitable in quantity if not in quality.

In the meantime, Mr. Solomon had also been busy. On the day following his entry into partnership with Calamity, he went to Johore and paid an afternoon call on Mr. Rossenbaum, a gentleman of similar persuasions to his own. For some weeks past they had been haggling over a business deal, which, up to that day, had not been settled. Mr. Rossenbaum possessed a steamer which he wanted repaired, and Mr. Solomon had the docking facilities necessary for the job, and the only thing which had so far stood between them was a difference of opinion as to price.

The meeting between these two gentlemen afforded a magnificent piece of acting. Both appeared to have forgotten all about the subject over which they had been negotiating, and conversed amicably on neutral topics. The war, of course, came up for discussion, and this led Mr. Solomon to remark that money was scarce. Mr. Rossenbaum agreed, not only because it was the truth, but because he had always maintained this view, even when money was plentiful.

Mr. Solomon went on to say that, in consequence of the said scarcity of coin, he was now obliged to undertake contracts on unremunerative terms, simply for the sake of the cash. Mr. Rossenbaum expressed his sympathy and added, as though the matter had never before been mentioned between them, that he had a steamer laying up, solely because he was unable to pay the extortionate prices demanded by ship-repairers for overhauling her.

This was tantamount to a challenge, and Mr. Solomon accepted it. For a time they fenced and dodged, but at last, casting aside all pretence, came to grips over the bargain. It was a combat of wits between two men as well matched as any in the world, and it lasted well into the afternoon. Eventually Mr. Solomon made a great business of giving way and agreed to accept the contract on the amended terms if half the money were paid in advance. Mr. Rossenbaum reluctantly consented on condition that he was allowed 5 per cent discount on the advance. Mr. Solomon nearly fainted, and, with tears in his eyes, declared that if he agreed ruination would stare him in the face. Finally, he consented to a 2-1/2 per cent discount, and the business was concluded at last. Each, on parting, assured the other that he had spent one of the most enjoyable days of his life, and this was probably the only truthful statement either had made throughout the interview.

Over a week elapsed before Calamity and his partner met again, and, contrary to the Captain's expectations, Mr. Solomon evinced no desire to back out of the venture. On the contrary, he exhibited an almost painful desire to see the expedition set out with as little loss of time as possible—a fact which his partner regarded with not unreasonable suspicion.

"It depends on the ship," he said in reply to Mr. Solomon's eager inquiries. "How long am I to wait for her?"

"No need to wait at all; the ship is waiting for you," said the other, pointing towards a newly painted steamer in the harbour.

Calamity gazed at the vessel and then at his companion with an air of mistrust. Such promptitude on Mr. Solomon's part was, to say the least, unusual.

"What about provisions, coal, guns, and so forth?" he demanded curtly.

"Everything's ready, and as to guns——" Mr. Solomon put his hand on the Captain's shoulder and whispered the rest in his ear.

"H'm," grunted Calamity, "I hope she's not some cursed old derelict you've picked up for a song."

"Picked up for a song!" echoed Mr. Solomon indignantly. "Vat you mean? She cost me——"

"Well?" inquired Calamity with interest as the other paused abruptly.

"Nodding—I mean," Mr. Solomon corrected himself hastily, "it has noddings to do with the matter. She is a beautiful ship."

"We shall see," said the Captain, rising to leave. "I'll go and have a look at your hooker now and see what she's like. Meet you this evening."

Mr. Solomon nodded, and stood watching the short, squat figure of his partner disappear in the direction of the harbour. Then, rubbing his hands together and chuckling wheezily, he turned away from the window.

On reaching the harbour, Calamity engaged a sampan and was taken to the steamer. There being no one on board, he was able to make an uninterrupted and very thorough examination, and, to his surprise, found that she was all that Solomon had claimed her to be. She was comparatively

new—not more than five years old at most—of about 3,000 odd tons and with every indication of being seaworthy and sound. The food, too, was not as bad as it might have been; some of it, indeed, seemed quite eatable. Moreover, Mr. Solomon, in an extraordinary fit of liberality, had not only re-painted the ship, but had also caused the name *Hawk* to be emblazoned on her stern in letters of gold—which, by the way, Calamity had painted out the very next day. Nor had Solomon forgotten the primary object of the expedition, for in the after-hold were six machine-guns—rather antiquated as such weapons go, perhaps, but most decidedly serviceable. Ammunition and small-arms were there in plenty, the latter a somewhat miscellaneous collection of varying degrees of deadliness.

The Captain, as he noted all this, felt a growing sense of perplexity. It was so utterly unlike Mr. Solomon to do anything thoroughly—always excepting his clients, of course—that he felt almost apprehensive. He was like an animal, sniffing an appetising morsel, while fearing that it was merely the bait of some concealed trap. For some time he stood leaning on the bulwarks thinking hard, but at last the worried expression left his face and was succeeded by a smile; a smile that would not have made Mr. Solomon any the happier had he seen it.

Having made himself acquainted with the ship, Calamity decided to waste no further time. Going ashore again, he collected his crew and sent them aboard under Mr. Dykes, the mate. Those who were not sober enough to walk were carried by those who were and flung unceremoniously into the boats—a joyful, polyglot crowd with complexions as varied as their sins. On reaching the *Hawk*, the firemen were kicked below to get up steam and the deck-hands set to holy-stoning and polishing.

When Calamity came on board a little later, he sent for Mr. Dykes, and the two had a brief conference appertaining to the work of the ship.

"What's the crew like, Mr. Dykes?" asked the Captain presently.

"Like!" echoed the mate. "I reckon the devil's opened hell's gates somewheres around here and we've picked up a few of them what's got out. There'll be red, ruddy, blazin' mutiny before a week's out, and, with the number we've got on board, we shan't stand a yaller dog's chance."

Calamity smiled.

"Don't worry yourself, Mr. Dykes, I don't think we shall have very much trouble with them. One or two, I know, have sailed with me before and they, probably, will give the others the benefit of their experience."

Mr. Dykes having been dismissed, chief-engineer McPhulach was summoned to the cabin. Asked his opinion of the men under him, his reply varied in terms but agreed in spirit with that already given by the mate.

"The scum of the bottomless pit," was how he put it.

"They may not be a liner's crew exactly," said Calamity in an almost gentle voice, "but I think we shall understand one another before long."

Whereat McPhulach departed with an almost happy smile and knocked down an insolent fireman for the good of his soul.

That evening, according to his promise, Captain Calamity arrived at Mr. Solomon's store, accompanied by Mr. Dykes, whom he duly introduced. This done, he informed his partner that he was sailing that night.

"Vat, so soon!" ejaculated Mr. Solomon.

"You don't want your capital lying idle longer than necessary, do you?"

"No, no, but——"

"Then sign these bills of lading and don't waste my time."

Mr. Solomon turned up the smoky little oil-lamp which inadequately illuminated the room, put on his spectacles, and proceeded to examine the papers Calamity had thrust before him. He scrutinised each one so long and so carefully that at last the Captain lost patience and swore he would not sail at all unless the remainder were signed without delay. So, much against his better judgment, Mr. Solomon put his name to the rest without doing more than glance over the contents.

That night the *Hawk* weighed anchor and steamed unostentatiously out of Singapore Harbour without troubling the customs authorities or any other officials whatever.

CHAPTER III

MUTINY

By dawn the *Hawk* was churning her way at full speed towards the Java Sea and a destination

unknown to any one but the Captain. It was too early to judge of the qualities of the ship, but those of the crew were already becoming manifest. Indeed, it looked as if the prophecies of the mate and the engineer were likely to be fulfilled sooner than even they expected. The men did not work with a will; worse still, they didn't even grumble. They maintained a solid, stolid, sullen silence that had the same effect on the nerves as a black and threatening cloud on a still day. They quarrelled amongst themselves, but for the officers they only had lowering glances and threats muttered below the breath. One would imagine that they had all been shanghaied or shipped under false pretences. Besides the boatswain, his mate and a couple of quartermasters, there were very few white men amongst them, and between these and the rest of the crew a state of hostility already existed.

When the boatswain's mate put his head inside the fore-castle door to call the morning watch no one swore at him, and that was a very bad sign indeed.

"Now then, my sons, and you know the sons I mean! Show a leg, show a leg, show a leg!" he called.

Nobody threw a boot at him, nobody consigned him to the nether regions, nobody told him what his mother had been. The men tumbled out of their bunks with surly, glowering faces and with scarcely a word spoken.

"Rouse out! Rouse out! You hang-dog, half-caste, loafing swine!" roared the boatswain's mate, hoping that he might thus goad them into cheerfulness and induce a homely feeling.

He failed, however, and though one man made a tentative movement with his hand in the direction of a sheath-knife at his hip, nothing came of it.

The matter was reported to Mr. Dykes, who shook his head gloomily.

"You ought, by rights, to be half-dead by now," he said, looking resentfully at the boatswain's mate.

The latter evidently felt his position and tried to look apologetic.

"Can't even get an honest curse out of 'em," he said. "They've had three feeds already, and the cook says not one's threatened to kill 'im. He don't like it because, of course, he feels something's wrong. 'Tain't natural that men should just fetch their grub and go away without telling the cook just what they think of 'im. I've never see'd anything like it before."

"Something's going to bust, and pretty soon," remarked the mate. "An' it'll be a gaudy shindy when it does."

Later on he reported the state of affairs to Calamity, who merely smiled.

"The men are doing their work, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"The fact is, sir, things ain't settlin' down as they ought to. The ship feels like a theatre when the boys are loosenin' their guns before the curtain goes down. I've been in the foc'sle and there ain't so much as a photo nor a picture-postcard nailed up. There's nothing homely about it, sir, like you'd expect to see; no cussin' nor rowin' nor anything cheerful."

"Probably the men will be more cheerful later on, Mr. Dykes," answered the Captain. "They are new to the ship, remember."

The mate went away in deep dudgeon. So this was the notorious Captain Calamity; the man whose name, he had been told, was sufficient to cow the most disorderly ruffians that ever trod a ship's decks. Here he was, with a crew who were on the very verge of mutiny, making excuses for them and talking like some mission-boat skipper with the parson at his elbow. It was disgusting.

That evening he confided his opinions to McPhulach, in the latter's cabin.

"I reckon we've got this old man tabbed wrong," he said. "He ain't no bucko skipper as they talks about; a crowd of Sunday School sailors is about his mark. When I told him the men were only waitin' a good opportunity to slit all our throats, he jest coo'd like a suckin' dove. 'Remember they're new to the ship,' says he, as soft as some old school-marm."

"Aye, but he's a quare mon till ye ken him," remarked the engineer thoughtfully.

"Queer! He'll let us all be dumped into the ditch before he raises a finger."

"I wouldna go sa far as tae say that. Yon's a mighty strange mon, I'm telling ye, and the lead-line hasna been made that can fathom him."

Mr. Dykes gave a contemptuous grunt, and, as he walked away, opined that the skipper and the chief engineer were a pair, and about as fit to control men as their grandmothers would have been.

As he had anticipated, matters were not long in coming to a head. At the machine-gun drill and rifle exercise, which occupied several hours each day, the men grew increasingly slack. On the

fourth day out it was as much as he could do to get the men to obey orders, and if ever a crew showed signs of mutiny it was the crew of the *Hawk*. But, early in the morning of the following day, an incident occurred which, if it served to distract everybody's attention for a little while, had the ultimate effect of bringing about the long-threatened crisis.

The grey mist of dawn still lay upon the waters, when the sound of firing was heard, apparently coming from the eastward. The *Hawk's* course was changed slightly and an hour later those on the bridge were able to make out, with the aid of glasses, a small German gunboat "holding up" a French liner.

"Guess we could sink that little steam can as easy as swallowin' a cocktail," remarked the mate. "Say, Cap'n, do we butt in here?"

Instead of answering, Calamity stepped up to the engine-room telegraph and rang down "Stop!" By this time the Germans could be seen conveying things from the liner to their own vessel, and, somehow or other, the rumour spread among the *Hawk's* crew that they were bullion cases. Presently the liner was allowed to proceed on her way, and the German steamed off in a north-easterly direction. Then Calamity rang down, "Full speed!" to the engine-room and turned to the mate.

"Follow that packet," he said, indicating the German, "but don't overhaul her."

"Then we're goin' to let that square-head breeze away?" asked Mr. Dykes in a tone of acute disappointment. "Durned if this lay-out don't get me stuck," he went on. "We could have froze on to them bars ourselves."

His opinion of Captain Calamity had touched zero by now, and he hardly troubled to conceal his contempt. He, like the remainder of the *Hawk's* company, knew that she was engaged on a privateering expedition, and was eager to "taste blood." And it must be admitted that Calamity had induced many of the men to ship with him by holding out promises of fat bonuses, with, perhaps, the opportunity of a little plundering thrown in. Now, when chance had thrown what appeared to be a rich prize under their very noses, the skipper was calmly letting it slip through his fingers.

It was pretty obvious that the mate's resentment was shared by the crew. For the last half-hour they had lined the bulwarks, watching the Germans transfer their plunder from the liner. Every man-Jack of them felt certain that, in the course of a very short time, that same plunder would find its way on board the *Hawk* with material benefit to themselves. When, however, it was seen that the Captain had no intention of carrying out their notion, scowling faces were turned towards the bridge, and there were angry mutterings. Soon the muttering grew louder, and at last one of the men, a huge serang, stepped out of the crowd, and shook his fist at Calamity, who was watching from the bridge.

Then, urged on by the others, he demanded that the ship should be put back to Singapore and the men discharged with a month's wages. They did not like, he said, being on a ship without knowing what port she was bound for. They did not like the officers, and, more than anything else, they did not like the Captain. The spokesman wound up his peroration in broken English by hinting that, unless the *Hawk* was put about at once, the crew would take charge of her.

All this while Calamity had stood leaning on the bridge-rail, listening to the serang with an expression of quiet, almost anxious, attention. The mate, watching him out of the corner of his eyes, saw no sign of that terrible berserker rage with which he had so often heard the Captain credited. In fact, a member of Parliament could not have listened to a deputation of constituents with more polite attention.

"I reckon if we don't do what they want they'll hand out some trouble," said the mate. "Them that ain't got one knife ready at their hips has got two."

Calamity made no answer, but a peculiar pallor had overspread his face. He turned away from the bridge-rail, and, without any sign of haste, descended the companion-ladder and stepped calmly into the midst of the snarling rabble.

"What are you doing on deck?" he asked the serang quietly. "Your place is in the stokehold."

The man started to make an impudent reply, but before he had uttered two words the Captain had snatched him off his feet as easily as if he had been a child and flung him bodily into the crowd of astonished men, knocking several of them over. Then, as the serang landed against a steam-winch with a terrible crash, Calamity snatched up a capstan bar and dashed into the crowd.

Then the mate, standing on the bridge, witnessed such a spectacle as he had never seen before and devoutly hoped he would never see again. Swinging the heavy iron bar above his head as though it were a flail, the Captain smashed left and right among the men, hitting them how and where he could—on the head, body, limbs—no matter where so long as he hit them. Two or three drew their knives and made a desperate rush at him, but there was no getting through the swinging circle of iron. In two minutes the forward deck bore a horrible resemblance to a shambles, for it was littered with injured men and blood was trickling down the white planks into the scuppers. Groans, shrieks, and curses resounded on all sides; the men scurried for shelter in every direction like rats, and two or three, reaching the fore-castle, locked themselves in. But a couple of blows from the iron bar smashed the door to splinters and then cries rang out again

and with them the sound of the terrible weapon as it crashed against a bulkhead or smashed a bunk to splinters. One man managed to escape out of the fore-castle and was running for his life towards the poop when Calamity, his face distorted with demoniac fury, flung the bar at him. It caught the man on the back of the head and he pitched forward on the deck, where he lay weltering in his own blood.

Then, without so much as a glance at the fearful havoc he had wrought, the Captain returned to the bridge.

"What were you saying before I left, Mr. Dykes?" he inquired calmly.

"Er—I was saying that it looked as if the wind would change round to the nor' west before long, sir," answered the mate in a subdued and extremely respectful tone.

CHAPTER IV

THE CASTAWAYS

The following morning, at eight bells, those of the crew not on duty or on the sick-list were assembled upon the forward hatch. Many of them had heads or limbs in bandages, and they were as meek as little lambs. As the ship's bells were struck, Calamity mounted the bridge, accompanied by the mate, and walked up to the rail.

"I'm not going to waste my breath by telling such a crowd of doss-house and prison scum as you are what I think about you," he said in a harsh, grating voice, that seemed to emphasise the insults. "What I want to say is this: the first man who raises a murmur about anything or hesitates in carrying out an order, that man I'll string up at the end of a derrick with a hawser for a collar. And remember this: I like a cheerful crew, and if I see a man who doesn't look as cheerful as he ought, by God, I'll clap him in the bilboes. Now get out of my sight."

The Captain stepped back from the rail and turned to the mate.

"I always believe in exercising patience and in using persuasion, Mr. Dykes," he said. "If, however, we should have any more trouble—and I don't somehow think we shall—it will become necessary to deal drastically with the offenders."

Without waiting for a reply, he walked into the chart-room, leaving Mr. Dykes and the second-mate gasping.

"What in thunder would he call 'drastic,' I'd like to know?" inquired the former. "He's already maimed half the crew and calls that persuasion. The Lord stand between me and his persuading, that's all I say."

"He's a bloomin' knock-aht, swelp me Bob," replied the second-mate in a tone of subdued admiration. "I thought the yarns I'd heard about him was all kid, but now—help!"

Later on, when Mr. Dykes conveyed his impressions to the chief engineer, the latter merely nodded without evincing the slightest surprise.

"I told ye he was a mighty quare mon," he remarked calmly. "I wouldna advise ye to run athwart him even if ye've got liquor as an excuse."

"You bet I won't, not after this. I guess I'll have to load up pretty considerable on liquor before I try to hand him a song and dance."

"Talkin' about liquor, ye'll find a bottle o' rum under the pillow o' my bunk, Meester Dykes. We'll jest have a wee drappie an' I'll tell ye hoo I marrit me fairst wife."

"Your first wife?" repeated the mate. "Say, how many have you had?"

"I couldna tell ye off-hand, mon. Ye see, the saircumstances in mony cases were compleecated, if ye ken me," answered McPhulach thoughtfully. "Me fairst, now ..."

Mr. Dykes listened for some time to the engineer's account of his matrimonial complications and then turned in. For the first time since leaving Singapore, he closed his eyes without an uneasy suspicion that he and the rest of the officers might have their throats cut before the morning. Indeed, the crew might henceforward have served as a model for the most exacting skipper that ever sailed the seas. The men could not have turned out for their respective watches with more promptitude had they been aboard a battleship, and their language on such occasions was such that even the boatswain's mate had no cause for complaint. And they were cheerful, laboriously cheerful. Whenever Calamity happened to approach a man, that man would start to hum a tune as if his life depended on it; he'd smile if he had a ten-thousand-horsepower toothache; everybody was happy, and only the ship's cat led a dog's life.

"It's a bloomin' wonder," said the second-mate to Mr. Dykes, "that the old man don't put up a blighted maypole and make all us perishers dance round it."

For two days the *Hawk* kept the smoke-trail of the German gunboat in view, but made no attempt

to overhaul her. Every one agreed that the *Hawk*, with her four-inch guns, could sink the German. They were puzzled, therefore, as to the Captain's seeming reluctance to engage her. But never a word of wonder reached Calamity, never a hint or a question from his officers; every one was certain that he knew his business, or, if they weren't, carefully kept it to themselves. And the Captain himself vouchsafed no explanation.

On the third morning the look-out reported that the gunboat was chasing a large steamer. Immediately afterwards the men, even those who were not on watch, came tumbling up on deck, in the hope that at last they were going to sniff the promised booty. But not a word was spoken, not a man so much as glanced at the bridge where the skipper stood with his glasses focussed on the chase. They were patiently cheerful.

Presently there came the faint echo of a shot and the steamer lay-to, apparently waiting for the pirates to board her. At her stern fluttered the red ensign of the British Mercantile Marine.

The *Hawk* had slowed down to quarter speed, and Calamity, through his glasses, continued to watch events. In a remarkably short space of time the Germans transferred a portion of the cargo, whatever it might be, to their own vessel, after which the steamer was allowed to pursue her way. One thing seemed clear, which was that the Germans cared less for sinking enemy ships than for laying hands on the more valuable and portable articles of cargo they happened to carry. The gunboat, having captured and dismissed her prey, continued on her course, and so also did the *Hawk*.

Calamity, no doubt, had fully developed his plans, but he appeared, also, to have developed a very bad memory. For the instructions accompanying his commission contained, among numerous other clauses, one which laid it down that "if any ship or vessel belonging to us or our subjects, shall be found in distress by being in fight, set upon, or taken by the enemy ... the commanders, officers, and company of such merchant ships as shall have Letters of Marque shall use their best endeavours to give aid and succour to all such ship and ships...."

Which, of course, for reasons known only to himself, the Captain of the *Hawk* had not done, nor attempted to do.

The morning had been unusually hot, even for such latitudes, and, as the day advanced, the heat became almost unbearable. The pitch boiled and bubbled up between the deck-seams and the exposed paintwork became disfigured with huge blisters. An awning had been rigged up over the bridge, but, despite this and the fact that it was high above the decks, the atmosphere was like that of a super-heated bakehouse, dry and shimmering, nor was there a breath of wind to stir it. Occasionally a whiff of hot, oily vapour came up through the engine-room gratings and helped to make the air still more heavy and oppressive. Even the sea, calm as a pond, looked oily and hot under the glare of a burning noonday sun set in a sky of metallic blue.

Then, towards eight bells in the afternoon watch, a faint breeze sprang up; the sky changed imperceptibly from blue to grey, and the sun became a red, glowing disc with a slight haze round it. The sea had taken on a yellowish-green tint and angry little wavelets began to chase each other and to dash themselves viciously against the *Hawk's* sides. Presently the breeze died away as suddenly as it had arisen, but the sky became more and more overcast and the wavelets grew into boulders, white-crested and threatening. The sun disappeared behind a bank of black, evil-looking clouds, while the atmosphere became still more oppressive and the decks and awnings steamed. A strange, uncanny silence had settled over everything, so that the least noise sounded curiously distinct. The throb of the engines, usually mellow and subdued, came now in sharp, staccato beats; the clang of the furnace-doors and the rattle of rakes and shovels in the stokehold could be plainly heard on the bridge.

"Strike me pink, if we ain't in for a bloomin' typhoon, a reg'lar rip-snorter," muttered the second-mate as he mopped his perspiring forehead.

The quartermaster set his teeth and gripped the wheel more tightly—something was going to happen. A moment later, Calamity stepped on to the bridge and gave a quick, comprehensive glance around him.

"Everything lashed up and made secure, Mr. Smith?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," answered the second, and added: "We're runnin' into a proper blazer; none of your bloomin' twopenny-ha'penny breezes this time."

Already the awnings had been taken in, spars and loose gear made fast, derricks secured, and ports screwed down. Every moment it grew darker and the *Hawk* was beginning to roll in an uncomfortable fashion.

Suddenly the sky was split by a blinding flash of lightning followed by a crashing peal of thunder that seemed to shake the vessel from stem to stern. There was a moment's interval, during which rain-spots the size of pennies appeared on the deck and a grey haze settled over the sea. Then came another flash of lightning, a terrific roar of thunder, and the storm burst in all its fury. The rain came down now in solid sheets of water, pouring off the bridge and deck-houses in cascades and flooding out the scuppers which could not drain it fast enough. The sea had gained in fury with the hurricane and now broke over the bulwarks, mounted the forecastle, and swept along the decks from bow to stern. One great wave even leapt up to the bridge, tearing away the awning spars, smashing the woodwork to splinters, and very nearly wrenching the wheel from

the quartermaster's hands.

Another great roller struck the *Hawk* amidships and she reeled till her port bulwarks were under water. Gradually she righted, her funnel-guys twisted into a mass of tangled wire, her boats carried away or stove in, her decks, fore and aft, littered with wreckage and gear which had been swept loose. Between the deafening peals of thunder, the shouts and curses of the poor wretches in the stokehold could be heard as they were thrown against the glowing furnace doors, or the firebars slipped out, shooting great masses of red-hot coal and clinker among their half-naked bodies.

Sometimes a wave would catch the vessel under the stern, lifting her so that her bows plunged forward into the boiling sea ahead, her propeller racing high in the air until the plates quivered with the vibrations. Or she would lift her nose to an oncoming billow, and, rising with it, bury her stern in the seething vortex till the wheel-house disappeared from view beneath the turbid, foaming water. It seemed impossible that any ship could live through such a storm.

But at last the lightning began to grow less vivid, the thunder gradually died away in the distance and the sea, little by little, subsided. Firemen, black from head to foot, staggered along the deck to the forecastle and threw themselves just as they were upon their bunks; the second engineer came off duty, a bloody sweat-rag twisted round his head, and reeled, rather than walked, to his cabin. Then McPhulach appeared at the fiddley, mopping his face with a lump of oily waste.

"Are you all right below?" shouted Calamity from the bridge.

"Aye, but some of the pur deils will carry the mairks o' this day upon their bodies as long as they live," answered the engineer. "Hell must be a garden party to what it was down yon a wee while aback."

As he spoke, two injured firemen, the upper parts of their bodies wrapped round with oil-soaked waste, were brought on deck and carried to the forecastle. Their faces, which had evidently been wiped with sweat-rags, were of a corpse-like whiteness that was accentuated by the circles of black coal-dust round their eyes.

"Half roasted," said McPhulach, indicating with a jerk of his head the two injured men. "If they hadna rinds like rhinoceros hide, they'd be dead the noo. Mon, the stokehold smelt like a kitchen wi' the stink o' scorching meat."

The engineer disappeared and Calamity turned to Mr. Dykes, who had relieved Smith on the bridge.

"Serve out a tot of rum to all hands," he said. "It's been a trying experience."

"Trying experience!" echoed the mate. "It was as near hell as ever I touched, sir."

The Captain was about to make some remark when he suddenly snatched a pair of binoculars out of the box fastened to the bridge-rail. He focussed them upon the seemingly deserted waste of tossing grey waters and then handed them to the mate.

"What do you make of that, Mr. Dykes?" he asked, indicating a point on the port quarter.

The mate stared through the glasses for some minutes, then handed them back to the Captain.

"It's a boat with a man and a woman in it, or I'm a nigger," he said.

"So I thought," answered the Captain.

CHAPTER V

DORA FLETCHER

A signal was immediately hoisted to let the castaways know that they were observed and the steamer's course was changed to bring her as near as possible to the drifting boat. But there was still such a heavy sea running that a near approach would have involved the risk of the boat being dashed against the *Hawk's* side before the occupants could be rescued. So the bos'n, standing on the foc'sle head, cast a line which, after three vain attempts, was caught by the young woman in the stern sheets, who made it fast to one of the thwarts. Then one of the steamer's derricks was slung outboard with a rope sling suspended and half a dozen men laid on to the line attached to the boat.

"Catch hold of that sling as you pass under it!" roared Calamity from the bridge.

After some difficult manoeuvring, boat and steamer were brought into such a position that the former passed immediately under the sling.

"Quick now, my girl, or you'll lose it!" shouted the Captain.

But, to the amazement and indignation of everyone, it was the man and not the girl who caught the sling and was hoisted safely out of the boat.

"Oh, the gory swine," growled the second-mate. "Get the derrick inboard, men," he added aloud.

The derrick swung round and the sling was let go with a run that deposited the man on the deck with a terrific bump.

"Outboard again!" cried Calamity. "Stand by, bos'n."

"Get up, you swab!" ejaculated the second-mate, administering the rescued man a heavy kick. "If the skipper wasn't lookin' I'd pitch your ugly carcass back into the ditch."

The fellow staggered to his feet and cast an ugly look at the Cockney. He was a great, hulking brute over six feet tall and broad in proportion, with a sullen, hang-dog countenance that was far from prepossessing.

"What d'you want to kick me for?" he asked truculently.

The second-mate was so astounded at what he regarded as super-colossal impudence and ingratitude, that he just gasped. Then, before he could recover his speech, the boatswain's mate came up, and, gripping the man by the collar of his jersey, ran him into the foc'sle.

Meanwhile two unsuccessful attempts had been made to repeat the first manoeuvre, but at the third the sling passed over the boat and the girl caught hold of it. Next moment she was swung on board and lowered gently to the deck.

"We ain't no stewardesses aboard this packet, Miss," said Mr. Dykes, who had arrived just in time to frustrate the second-mate in assisting the young woman to her feet. "Still, if you'll come to my cabin I'll send you somethin' hot and you can make free with my duds."

"Or you can go to my cabin," put in the second eagerly. "Sorry I 'aven't any 'airpins," he added with an admiring glance at the tawny mane of hair which had become unfastened during her passage from the boat to the ship's deck. "But I've a——"

"The young lady'll find better accommodation in my cabin, Smith," interrupted the mate. "This way, please," he added in the tone and manner of a shop-walker, and departed with his prize.

"Talk about nerve," muttered the disgruntled Smith. "That Yank's got more bloomin' nerve than a peddlin' auctioneer."

Calamity had sent word that, as soon as the survivors had been given food and dry clothes, they were to be brought into his cabin. Half an hour later, the man was ushered in by the mate and stood in front of the Captain with the same hang-dog air that he had exhibited when first rescued.

"Your name and all the rest of it, my man," said the skipper curtly.

"I'm Jasper Skelt, bos'n of the barque *Esmeralda*, London to Singapore," answered the fellow in a surly voice. "We were hit by that there typhoon and so far's I know she's at the bottom of the sea by now."

"What about the Captain and the rest of the crew?"

"The skipper was knocked overboard by a boom. Then the crew took to the boats and only me and Miss Fletcher, the Cap'n's daughter, was left. We tried to keep the ship head-on to the seas, but she sprang a leak and we had to abandon her."

"You don't know whether any of the other boats survived?"

"No, sir."

"And the ship's papers?"

"Miss Fletcher's got 'em."

"And now I want to know why you caught on to that sling before the woman had a chance?"

"She told me to, and anyhow my life's as good as hers," answered the man defiantly.

"I see. Well, by your own confession you're a coward, and by your looks you're a scoundrel," answered Calamity. "Mr. Dykes," he added, turning to the mate, "take this blackguard to Mr. McPhulach with my compliments and tell him to give the rascal the worst job he's got in the stokehold."

"I'm not going into no blasted stokehold!" cried the man fiercely. "You've no right to make me work, damn you!"

"Very good," answered Calamity in that quiet voice which those who knew him dreaded more than the most curseful outpourings. "You shall be a passenger as long as you wish. Take him back to the foc'sle, Mr. Dykes, and send the carpenter to me."

"Very good, sir," replied the mate, greatly wondering.

By the time the carpenter had received his instructions and departed to carry them out, the mate reported that the girl, whose clothes had been dried in front of the galley fire, was ready to be interviewed.

"Fetch her along then, Mr. Dykes," said the Captain.

A few moments later Miss Fletcher entered the cabin accompanied by the mate. She was, without doubt, the most remarkable young woman that either Calamity or his mate had ever set eyes on. Tall, and almost as powerfully built as a man, her face was nearly the colour of mahogany through constant exposure to the weather. Her eyes, a clear, cold grey, had an almost challenging steadiness and directness of gaze, and she held her head high as one who is accustomed to look the whole world squarely in the face. Her whole manner was a curious blending of authority and aloofness, suggesting a very difficult personality to deal with. But, if lacking much of conventional feminine charm, there was a freshness and vigour about her that was eminently pleasing. One womanly attraction she certainly did possess in abundance, and that was a wonderful mass of chestnut hair which she now wore tightly plaited round her head. For the rest, this extraordinary young woman was attired in a short, blue serge skirt, a man's blue woollen jersey, and a pair of rubber sea-boots.

"Sit down," said the Captain.

The girl obeyed, looking at Calamity with an expression of mingled perplexity and resentment. This may have been due to a little feminine pique at his seeming indifference to her sex—for he had not risen to his feet, nor had his face relaxed from its usual stern grimness. Or it may have been due to the fact that his glass eye was cocked fully upon her with its unswerving, disconcerting stare. The other eye—the practical one—was not looking at her at all, but was meditatively gazing down at the table.

"The man who was with you in the boat tells me that you are the daughter of the Captain of a barque," he said. "His story was not altogether satisfactory, so I should like to hear your version—as briefly as possible," he added with a snap.

A slight flush of annoyance tinged the girl's face. Evidently she was not used to being treated in this curt, unceremonious manner, and resented it. Mr. Dykes, who was very impressionable where the opposite sex was concerned, mentally compared the Captain's attitude with what his own would have been under similar circumstances.

"My name is Dora Fletcher, and my father, who was killed during the recent storm by being knocked overboard, was John Fletcher, master and owner of the barque *Esmeralda* of Newcastle," said the girl in a voice as curt as Calamity's own. "We were bound from London to Singapore with general cargo. During the height of the storm, the vessel sprang a leak and the crew took to the boats, but I doubt if any of them survived."

"So you and the bos'n, Jasper Skelt, were left on board?" said the Captain as the girl paused.

"Yes; Skelt would have gone with the men, only they threatened to throw him overboard if he did. He's a damned rascal."

Mr. Dykes started and even looked shocked. It was not so much the expletive itself which had disturbed his sense of propriety, but the cool, forceful manner in which it was uttered; obviously it was not the first time that Miss Fletcher had availed herself of this, as well as of other masculine prerogatives.

"You have the ship's papers?" asked Calamity.

For answer the young woman drew from beneath her jersey a packet of papers which she handed to the Captain. He glanced through them and then handed them back to her.

"I should prefer to leave them in your charge till I am put ashore," said the girl. "What port do you touch first?"

"I can't say. This is not an ordinary merchant ship, but a licensed privateer."

"A privateer! Then you expect to fight?"

"You will arrange what accommodation you can for Miss Fletcher, Mr. Dykes," said the Captain, ignoring her question.

"Yes, sir; I suppose she will have her food in the cabin, sir?"

"Not in this one, Mr. Dykes."

Again the hot, angry blood rushed to the girl's face and she turned a pair of blazing eyes on the Captain.

"Thank you for that privilege, at any rate!" she said with furious sarcasm.

"Not at all," murmured Calamity imperturbably, and made a gesture to signify that he wished to be alone.

As the mate escorted Miss Fletcher from the cabin, he was very nearly as hot and indignant as herself at the Captain's behaviour. Here was a handsome, strapping girl who had unexpectedly come into their midst and Calamity treated her as if she were a derelict deck-hand. He had not even expressed a word of sympathy for the death of her father.

"I'm real sorry you should have been treated like this," he said awkwardly. "The skipper ain't no dude, but I did think——"

"I assure you it makes no difference to me," interrupted the girl. "I am only too glad to think that

I shan't have to see more of him than is necessary."

"An' you ain't the only one who thinks that way, Miss," answered the mate thoughtfully. "I wouldn't envy the man who took the inside track with him; it'd be as pleasant as takin' your grub in a den with a hungry lion."

Passing out of the alleyway, their ears were suddenly assailed by the sound of oaths, curses, and blasphemies, intermingled with threats, groans, and appeals for mercy. They emanated from Jasper Skelt, whose demands to be treated as a passenger were now receiving attention according to the Captain's instructions. Resting on two trestles placed one on each side of the after-hatch was a thick wooden beam, inclined so that one of its sharp edges was uppermost. Astride this unpleasant perch, his feet about six inches from the deck, was the ex-bos'n of the *Esmeralda*. His ankles were tied together beneath the beam, his wrists securely fastened behind his back, and to a cord round his neck was suspended a spit-kid—this last for the benefit of any man who felt a desire to expectorate. To judge from Skelt's condition, there were many indifferent marksmen aboard the *Hawk*.

"That guy was fool enough to sass the old man and now he's learnin' better," explained Mr. Dykes to his companion. "He ain't a pretty sight, is he?"

Seeing Miss Fletcher, the misguided Jasper had suddenly checked his output of assorted profanity and now wildly appealed to her for help.

"Surely you ain't going to stand by, Miss, and see me tortured like this!" he cried.

"You're a coward and it serves you right," answered the girl.

"Oh, you——" began the man, but someone interrupted him by shoving a wet deck-swab into his face.

"He'll be there four hours," said the mate as they walked aft. "By that time he won't have spirit enough to utter a cuss, not if you offered him a dollar for the pleasure of hearin' it. When the skipper does hand out trouble, he does it with both fists."

Mr. Dykes's prognostication was only partly correct, for the ex-bos'n, though a strong man, lost consciousness after the third hour and had to be carried into the foc'sle.

"Repeat the treatment to-morrow and every day until he volunteers to work," said Calamity when this was reported to him.

The "treatment" was not repeated, however, for, on recovering his senses, Mr. Skelt eagerly and anxiously begged to be allowed to share in the work of the crew.

On the following morning they picked up the smoke-trail of the German gunboat and the chase—if chase it could be called—was resumed.

CHAPTER VI

MR. DYKES RECEIVES HIS LESSON

For three days the *Hawk* continued to follow in the gunboat's trail, and everybody was asking everybody else in hushed whispers what the Captain's plans were. The consensus of opinion now was that he intended the German to play the part of the cat in the fable and pull the chestnuts out of the fire: in other words, to wait till the enemy had got all the plunder he could carry and then swoop down upon him. The question was, when would the swooping start?

During all this time, Calamity had not spoken a single word to Miss Fletcher, or, indeed, betrayed any sign that he was aware of her existence. He had never even mentioned her or asked how she was accommodated, and, for all he knew to the contrary, she might have been sleeping on deck under a steam-winch. Mr. Dykes had not told him that he had given up his own cabin to the girl and was sharing the second-mate's. He feared, not without reason, that, had he done so, Calamity would have ordered him back to his own quarters. As to the ex-bos'n Skelt, he had become a very unobtrusive member of the crew, and nothing further had been heard from him concerning his right to be treated as a passenger. It is true that he once let out a dark hint to the effect that he was "biding his time," but no one paid the slightest attention to him.

Meanwhile, a change had come over the lives and habits of the two mates and the chief engineer. The refining influence of feminine society—as McPhulach poetically termed it—was already beginning to tell on them. The mate, for instance, now used up two clean shirts a week and quite a number of white pocket-handkerchiefs; the second followed the good example by having his shoes cleaned every day, and substituting, whenever he happened to think of it, "blooming," for the sanguinary adjective he had hitherto favoured, and the engineer not only washed his face every night when coming off watch, but, on his own confession, changed his socks rather more frequently than he had done in the past.

Whether the lady on whose behalf these sacrifices were made was aware of them, and duly appreciative, the three dandies had no means of determining. McPhulach, who was a practical

man and saw no merit in hiding his light under a bushel, did once suggest that Miss Fletcher should be tactfully made aware of the astonishing changes she had wrought. The suggestion, however, was promptly sat upon by the mates, who wanted to convey the impression that their present exemplary mode of life was in nowise abnormal despite the strain it entailed.

"I've had twa pairs o' socks washed sin' we started, and that's no' a month ago," grumbled the engineer, when his publicity proposition was opposed.

"You've got to remember you're a—bloomin' gentleman nah," answered Smith.

"It's awfu' expenseeve," murmured McPhulach plaintively.

Although Miss Fletcher was the last person to encourage familiarity, she was capable of a certain *camaraderie* through having lived so much among men. She had, it seemed, lost her mother at an early age, and since then had accompanied her father on nearly all his voyages. Therefore she exhibited neither the coy timidity nor coquettish lure which might have been expected from a girl of her age under circumstances like the present. Her manner towards the three men who had, as it were, appointed themselves her hosts was disarmingly frank; as a woman she kept them at arm's length, as a companion she was as free and easy as a man. Smith, when discussing her one day with the mate, remarked that she only remembered she was a woman when something was said which any decent man would resent. Mr. Dykes alone occasionally assumed a patronisingly masculine attitude, towards which, so far, the girl had shown no resentment. This, he sometimes tried to believe, was a tacit admission that she regarded him with special favour, if not with some degree of awe, though at other times common sense prevailed and he realised that it was due to sheer indifference.

But Mr. Dykes was becoming very dissatisfied with things as they were. For no particular reason, unless it was that he had given up his cabin to her, the mate somehow felt that he had a prior claim to Miss Fletcher's respect and esteem. He was, therefore, secretly aggrieved to think that Smith and McPhulach, whose sacrifices on her behalf had not exceeded a little extra personal cleanliness, were as much in favour as himself. In short, Mr. Dykes was in danger of falling a victim to the tender passion—if, indeed he had not already done so—hence the jealous feelings that were beginning to ferment in his bosom. He suffered most, however, when it happened that he was taking the second dog-watch, and, from his post on the bridge, could see Miss Fletcher, Smith, and McPhulach, laughing and chatting on the after-hatch as though he, Ephraim Dykes, had never existed.

It was during one of these "free and easys," as Smith called them, that the girl suddenly began to discuss the Captain of the *Hawk*. Hitherto she had ignored him as completely as he had ignored her, though a keen observer might have noticed that she frequently cast a curious glance towards the bridge when he happened to be on it.

"Bless you, he's a bloomin' bag of mystery, he is; a reg'lar perambulatin' paradox," replied the second-mate in answer to a question which the girl had put regarding the skipper. "There ain't no gettin' the latitude nor longitude of him."

"He's a mighty quare mon," corroborated the engineer.

"But is his name really Calamity?" asked the girl.

"Meybe it is and meybe it isna," answered McPhulach cautiously. "Some say he's a mon o' guid family, and others declare the revairse is the truth; but which is right I dinna ken."

"Well, I've never sailed with him before," put in Smith, "but from the little I've see'd of his gentle habits I should say he'd die of throat trouble all of a sudden."

"Throat trouble?" queried the girl.

"Yes; the throat trouble that comes of wearin' a rope collar too tight. Why, we'd only been out a few days when he starts to half murder the whole bloomin' crew. A roarin', ravin', rampin' lunatic he was," and Smith proceeded to relate, in pungent, picturesque language, the manner in which Calamity had quelled the mutiny single-handed.

"I wish I'd been here to see it," murmured the girl almost fervently, while a light leapt to her grey eyes which made Smith think of firelight seen through a closed window in winter time.

"Blimey! I don't admire your taste, Miss," he ejaculated. "The decks were like a blood—yes, they were—like a bloody slaughter-house. There's no other way of puttin' it."

"At any rate, he's a man," retorted Miss Fletcher with a queer note of defiance in her voice, "and I admire him for it."

Smith gazed at her for a moment in utter perplexity. He had confidently expected that, after the way in which the Captain had treated her, the girl would be only too ready to accept anything that could be said to his disadvantage. Yet she was actually expressing admiration for him and his bloodthirsty methods! Her attitude not only amazed him, but struck him as being shockingly unfeminine. As a woman she ought to have expressed the strongest disgust at the skipper's brutality, and not gloried in it.

"Lummy! You're a queer'n and no error," he murmured.

He rose to his feet, and, going to the taffrail, expectorated over the side with unnecessary

violence. Like most men whose lives have been spent in rough places and whose knowledge of women is limited, he cherished a pathetic belief in their legendary gentleness and timidity. It was true that this particular young woman had not displayed these qualities in any marked degree, but he had never doubted their existence even so. He felt now that, in being a woman, she was living under false pretences, so to speak. It was a very real grievance in his eyes, more especially when he reflected on the noble restraint he had exercised over his speech and manners out of regard for her sex.

He returned moodily to the hatch and sat down. The girl was still discussing Calamity with McPhulach, her voice defiantly enthusiastic.

"If I were a man I'd ask for no better Captain to sail under," she was saying.

"It's a pity you ain't, then," growled Smith, who had returned just in time to overhear this remark.

"I've often thought so myself," she retorted. "Men are getting too soft nowadays."

"Meybe so," put in the engineer soothingly. "But ye'll hae no cause to complain o' the saftness aboard this packet, I'm thinkin'. And gin it's devilry ye're so muckle fond of, ye've no need to fash yersel' about missin' any here."

"Not half you needn't," added Smith with a grim chuckle. "When the old man——" he broke off abruptly as the ship's bell struck. "Holy Moses! eight bells already!" he ejaculated, and, rising to his feet, went off to relieve Mr. Dykes.

As the latter descended the companion-ladder after handing over the watch to the second-mate, he paused suddenly before reaching the deck. He was not an imaginative man and had never made a study of beauty except as represented by the female crimps and spongers who infested the various ports he had visited. But for a moment the sight of the girl sitting on the hatch, her beautiful hair softly radiant in the moonlight, and her figure in its close-fitting jersey so strangely alluring in the half-concealment of the shadows, held him spellbound. The splendour of the night, with its star-powdered sky of deepest, limpid blue; the brilliant moon whose beams made an ever-widening track of molten silver with shimmering tints of bronze, across the blue-black waters; the wake of foaming, sparkling iridescence in the steamer's track,—all these things moved him not one jot for he had witnessed them times without number. He saw nothing, in fact, but the girl, sitting with her face resting on her hands, gazing pensively out to sea. Never before had he realised that she was beautiful and intensely feminine despite all her affected masculinity.

"Durned if she don't look like a picture postcard," he murmured ecstatically.

He walked up to the hatch and sat down near her, but she did not turn her head nor show any sign of being aware of his presence. He coughed to attract her attention, but without result; she continued gazing with sad, thoughtful eyes into the distant mingling of crystal blue and glistening silver-grey which marked the junction of sea and sky.

"Say, ain't it a dandy night?" he observed, unable to keep silence any longer.

The girl made no answer, but the remark aroused McPhulach from the reverie into which he, also, had fallen. Rising to his feet, he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and yawned.

"Gin I bide here any langer, I'll be consooming anither pipe o' bacca; so I'll wish ye a verra guid nicht, Miss Fletcher," he said.

"Good-night, McPhulach," answered the girl, who rarely used the prefix "Mr." when addressing her companions.

The engineer strolled off towards his cabin and the mate, to his great satisfaction, was left alone with her. For some time he sat fidgeting, anxious to speak, yet unable to think of anything to say. He watched her furtively out of the corner of his eye, secretly gloating over the outlines of her shapely figure, the delicate poise of her head, and the fascinating profusion of her wonderful hair.

Suddenly the girl rose to her feet, and, seeing the mate, started.

"I didn't know you were there," she said.

The mate made as if to speak, but uttered no sound. He rose unsteadily, and as the girl was about to move away, strode to her side.

"I want you," he said in a hoarse, quivering voice.

He made a movement as if to encircle her waist with his arm, but, before he could do so, her left fist shot out and, catching him unexpectedly squarely between the eyes, sent him reeling into the scuppers.

When he recovered himself and sat up he was a different man. All the passionate ardour, all the irresistible desire had left him, and he was conscious only of a singing in the head.

"No," he remarked thoughtfully, addressing himself to an iron stanchion, "she ain't no dime novel heroine, she ain't."

CHAPTER VII

THE AGITATOR

It was Sunday morning and those of the crew who were not on watch lay upon the foc'sle head, sat on the for'ad hatch, or still lay snoring in their bunks. A favoured few were lounging round the galley, some peeling potatoes—for which they would receive their reward in due course—and others helping them with good advice. From within the galley came the voice of "Slushy," the cook, bellowing out snatches of hymns intermingled with pungent profanities, each equally sincere.

"There is a fountain filled with blood,
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins,"

he roared. "Get to hell out o' this, you perishin' son of a swab!" he added to a fireman who was making a surreptitious effort to get at the hot water.

"Damn your 'ot water, you pasty-faced dough-walloper!" retorted the fireman.

Then followed a scuffle, more profanities, and the fireman performed an acrobatic feat which landed him in the scuppers.

"Put your lousy 'ead in 'ere again and I'll murder you," said the cook. "I won't 'ave no bloomin' bad language in 'ere," he added warningly to the others. "There's a damned sight too much of it on this bug-trap."

He again lifted up his voice in song.

"And sinners plunged beneath the flood,
Lose all their guilty sta—a—ains."

He paused to administer a cutting admonition to one of his assistants.

"Lose all their guilty stains," he trilled forth, pouring the hot water in which potatoes had been boiled, into the iron kettle that held the crew's tea.

In another part of the ship, under the lee of the forecastle a second and somewhat different meeting was in progress. Jasper Skelt, ex-boatswain of the *Esmeralda*, was addressing half a dozen men in fierce whispers, emphasising his remarks with violent gestures of the head and hands. The men listened, placidly smoking their pipes and occasionally turning a nervous glance towards the bridge to make sure that they were not being observed by the Captain.

"What proof have we that this boat is a licensed privateer?" Skelt was saying—or rather, whispering—"only the Captain's word. We ain't seen his Letters of Marque and ain't likely to. Why?"

The orator paused as if for a reply. It came.

"'Cause the first man 'as asked to see 'em 'ud get murdered," said one of the audience.

For a moment Skelt was disconcerted by the subdued laughter which followed this answer. But he pulled himself together and went on:

"No; and I'll tell you why we ain't likely to see his Letters of Marque: because he ain't got any."

This statement, delivered with all the confidence of one who knew, produced an effect. The men stared at each other with puzzled faces.

"'Ow the blazes do you know?" asked one of the men angrily.

"Because the British Government haven't granted any for this war," answered the agitator. "They're chartering merchant steamers and arming 'em themselves. Commerce-destroyers they call them, but they're really Government-owned privateers."

"Who told you so?" queried a sceptic.

"Don't ask me, read the papers and see for yourself," answered Skelt.

"Ho yus, I forgot all about me Sunday paper!" ejaculated another member of the audience sarcastically. "Boy, give me a *Lloyds* and the *Observer*."

A roar of unrestrained laughter went up at this witticism, and the orator had some ado to master his wrath.

"It's all very well to laugh about it now," he said heatedly. "But wait till later on; wait till this lunatic who calls himself a Captain sinks one or two vessels; wait till he's called upon to show his papers—then you'll change your tune, my merry clinker-knockers!"

"What the 'ell does it matter to us, anyway?" asked someone.

"I'll tell you, my innocent babe. If we start in to sink ships, commit murder and rob the cargoes without having the proper authority—that is Letters of Marque—we're not privateers at all; we're

blooming, God-damn pirates, that's what we are," answered Skelt. "What's more, if any brainless swab here doesn't know what the punishment is for piracy, I'll have much pleasure in telling him."

"Anging, ain't it?"

"Right first time; hanging it is."

"It ain't nothin' to do with us, any'ow," said one of the objectors. "We ain't responsible for what the skipper does."

"P'raps not, but if he orders you to shoot a man and you do it, you're a murderer and will be treated as such. You won't save your neck by telling the beak that you thought you were a privateer. No, my son, it'll be a hanging job, you can take your Davy on that. Maybe they'll put a photo of your handsome dial in the newspapers, but your gal will soon be looking for another jolly sailor-boy to sponge on, and mother'll lose her curly-headed darling."

There was a constrained silence for some moments, during which Skelt grinned at his audience sardonically. Despite the affected incredulity of his listeners, they were evidently beginning to feel nervous. To even the most ignorant among them, piracy was an ugly word, much akin to murder.

"S'posing what you say's right, what are we to do?" asked one of the hecklers at last.

"Ask the skipper to let us get out and walk," suggested someone amidst laughter.

"If any of you had brains a fraction of the size of your guts you wouldn't ask me a fool question like that," answered Skelt. "If a bloke came up and said 'I'm going to hang you in five minutes,' what would you do?"

"Knock 'is bloomin' light out," said a fireman.

"Shove a knife between 'is ribs," suggested another.

"Of course you would," said the ex-boatswain. "But here's a man who gets you on board his ship and then tells you to do something that'll get you hanged as sure as infants eat pap. And you'd sooner risk your necks than tell him that, if he wants any murdering done, he'd better do it himself. You're a perishing set of heroes, strike me blind!"

"Why don't you tell that to the old man yourself?" asked one of the audience. "Your neck's as much in danger as ours."

"Aye, aye, tell 'im yourself," echoed the others.

"So I would if I thought you'd stand by me. But you're such a set of white-livered skunks that, at the first word from this one-eyed skipper, you'd turn on me. Why, if you were men instead of a damned pack of slaves, you'd take charge of this packet yourselves and clap that lunatic aft in irons. Then you'd take the ship into the nearest port and claim salvage, and a nice little fortune you'd make out of it. It'd be every man his own pub then and don't you forget it."

"What about the orf'cers, old son?" inquired someone.

"Treat 'em the same if they refused to come in with us. One of them would have to do the navigating, and if he had any objections we'd soon get rid of them. A bit of whipcord tightened round a man's head is a wonderful persuader."

"So's the wooden 'orse," cried a fireman, referring to the manner in which the fiery orator had been induced to waive his claim to be regarded as a passenger.

There was another burst of laughter at this sally, but the would-be righter of wrongs, though annoyed, was not to be put down.

"Whose fault was that?" he demanded. "One man couldn't fight the whole crowd of you, and if that swivel-eyed swine had given the word you'd have been on me like a pack of dogs. But I haven't forgotten, and I'll lay my life against a mouldy biscuit that I get even before I leave this stinking slave-dhow."

"You oughter be in 'Ide Park, you ought," said the sceptical fireman. "You'd look fine on a Sunday afternoon standin' on the top of a tub."

"If it pleases you to be funny, it doesn't hurt me," retorted Skelt. "But wait till you're up before the beak on a charge of piracy on the high seas; maybe you'll sing a different tune."

He stuck his hands in his pockets and, with an expression of utter contempt on his face, turned away. But, despite the scornful incredulity with which his remarks had been received, they had not fallen on entirely barren soil. As a general rule, the sailor-man is hopelessly ignorant of the law, and, in consequence, has a vague but very real dread of it. For him, it possesses all the terrors of the unknown; its very jargon crows him, and the wording of a summons sounds more terrible in his ears than the worst abuse of the worst skipper that ever sailed the seas. Skelt, it was true, had not served out any fear-inspiring legal phrases, but he had mentioned piracy, which is an ugly word to use on a ship whose character and mission savour somewhat of that offence.

So, while they pretended to laugh at the ex-boatswain's words, those who had heard them began

to feel a new and unpleasant sense of dread. This quickly communicated itself to the rest of the crew, and before the first dog-watch was called that day there was hardly a man who was not obsessed by it. Many of them would have cut a person's throat for the price of a drink; not a few had seen the inside of a prison for some offence or other, but piracy, the greatest crime of which a sailor can be guilty, made them shudder. It belonged to the highest order of crime, and, though the punishment could not be greater than that meted out for stabbing a man in the back, the fact that it was vaster and infinitely more daring than anything their coarse minds had ever conceived, made it seem appallingly stupendous.

During the afternoon those who were off watch discussed the subject in whispers. Some were for sending a deputation to the skipper, but no one could be found whose courage was equal to the task. Skelt, who was approached on the subject, flatly declined to act as the crew's representative. He had done his part, he asserted, by warning them of their danger; let somebody else have the privilege of bearding Calamity.

"You didn't help me when I was strung across that damned spar and I'm not going to help you," he said. "Still," he added, "I'll give you a bit of advice. When the time comes for you to man the guns and start blazing away at some ship or other, stand fast. Let the swivel-eyed blighter do his own murdering."

"That's all right," growled a voice, "but 'e'll start doin' it on us."

"Yes, and you'll ask his kind permission to take off your jumpers so's he can cut your throats easier," sneered Skelt.

"No, by God, we won't!" exclaimed someone truculently.

The new note of defiance was taken up. It was one thing to face the terrible skipper in his cabin, but quite another to swear to disobey his orders, when there was no immediate prospect of those orders being given. Their courage went up by leaps and bounds, and they discussed plans for defying the Captain's commands—in whispers.

"That's the right spirit," said Skelt encouragingly. "This skipper may be a holy terror, but he can't murder us all if we stick together. Just show him that you don't mean to put your necks in the hangman's rope for his sake, and he'll soon calm down, I'll swear. I know them bucko skippers: all froth and fury so long as they think you're afraid of 'em; but once they see you don't care a Dago's damn for all their bullying, they become as meek as lambs. Oh, I know 'em! Sailed with one——"

The ex-boatswain's reminiscence was cut short by the sound of a whistle on deck. Next moment the foc'sle door was flung open and the second-mate put his head in.

"To your stations, every man!" he shouted. "Uncover the guns and stand by for orders!"

There was a rush from the foc'sle, and the first man to take his station and start peeling the tarpaulins off the machine-gun, was the fiery and defiant Jasper Skelt.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRIZE

A slight haze hung over the water, so that sea and sky were merged in a film of brooding grey. Through this, looking strangely flimsy and unreal by reason of the mist, could be seen a large cargo-steamer of about five thousand tons. She was steaming in the opposite direction to the *Hawk* at something like ten knots, and from her triatic stay fluttered a hoist of signal-flags indicating the question: "What ship are you?"

"What shall I answer, sir?" inquired Mr. Dykes of Calamity.

"British steamer *Hawk*. Singapore for London."

The signal was hoisted and the reply came: "British steamer *Ann*, Rio for Hongkong." At the same time the red ensign was hoisted at the stern.

"You say that when you first saw her she was flying the German flag?" Calamity inquired of Mr. Dykes.

"Yes, sir. I think she must have just passed another German ship, for the ensign was being hauled down when I sighted her."

"H'm, she was German a few minutes ago; now she's British. Signal her to stop, Mr. Dykes."

The signal was duly hoisted, but the steamer paid no attention and proceeded on her course, while from her funnel arose a thick cloud of black smoke, showing that the stokers were firing up. Although the skipper of the *Ann* might resent being called upon to stop by what looked like another merchant vessel, this sudden attempt to accelerate speed, coupled with an unusual freedom in the use of national flags, was suspicious to say the least of it.

"Put a shot through her funnel, Mr. Dykes," said Calamity.

With his own hands, the mate sighted the quick-firer on the bridge and then nodded to the boatswain, who was also chief gunner. Next moment a sheet of flame leapt from the muzzle, there was a terrific roar, and a shell struck, not the *Ann's* funnel, but the supporting guys and passed through a ventilating cowl above the engine-room. Despite this unequivocal hint, the steamer did not stop, and the foam under her stern showed that she was putting on speed.

"Aim for the chart-room and make a better shot of it," said Calamity.

Mr. Dykes, greatly chagrined at his first shot having gone wide of its mark, again sighted the gun. Meanwhile the Captain was bringing round the *Hawk* in the arc of a circle to get her in the wake of the retreating steamer.

Bang!

This time the mate had better luck, his second shot smashing through the chart-room and completely wrecking it.

"That ought to bring them to reason," he remarked complacently.

It did. Before the thin veil of smoke had drifted away a man was seen on the *Ann's* stern, frantically calling up the *Hawk* in the semaphore code. A man on the privateer's bridge answered and then the other started to flap his flags about.

"Don't fire, stopping," read the message.

The foam under the stranger's stern was subsiding and an arrow of white steam shot into the air out of her exhaust-pipe. Already the distance between the two vessels was rapidly diminishing and soon they were within hailing distance. The skipper of the *Ann* was the first to avail himself of this, for, making a funnel of his hands, he demanded to know what the sanguinary blazes was meant by this hold-up.

"I demand to see your papers," bellowed Calamity.

The other appeared to execute a sort of complicated war-dance on the bridge, wildly waving his clenched fists above his head. No words came for a second or more, and then a burst of raw, pungent, and kaleidoscopic profanity hurtled across the intervening space, evoking by its wonderful variety the admiration even of the *Hawk's* crew.

"Blimey!" murmured Smith in an awed tone, "it's a treat to 'ear a bloke handle cuss-words like that."

Even Mr. Dykes, who rather prided himself on his mastery of the refreshing art of invective, was moved to wonder. Indeed, he made a mental note of several vituperative combinations whose force and originality impressed him.

When, at last, the master of the *Ann* paused, presumably for want of breath, the crew of the *Hawk* looked expectantly towards Calamity. Would he be able to rise to the occasion and wither his opponent by a scorching blast of even deadlier profanity, or would he humiliate them by using the commonplace swear-words of everyday life? He did neither.

"I'm going to board you!" he shouted. "Make one attempt to hinder me and you go to the bottom."

His words, backed by the guns which were trained on the *Ann*, brought an immediate reply:

"Come aboard if you must, but for the love of God don't sink me."

"Fizzled out like a damp squib," muttered Smith.

"I guess he's played his long suit," remarked the mate, who also felt disappointed at the ignoble collapse of the *Ann's* skipper after such brilliant promise.

A boat was quickly lowered from the *Hawk*, and the Captain, before getting into it, gave Mr. Dykes certain instructions.

"And remember," he added, "if you see any sign of trickery put a shot under her water-line amidships."

"Very good, sir," answered the mate.

A few minutes afterwards Calamity had reached the deck of the *Ann*, where he was met by the Captain and the first mate.

"I demand an explanation of this outrage!" blustered the former. "Are you aware that you are committing piracy? that—"

Calamity cut him short.

"I know perfectly well what I'm doing, or I shouldn't be here. Your papers, Captain."

"By what right do you ask for my papers?" demanded the other, who showed signs of again becoming truculent.

"That," answered Calamity shortly, pointing to the *Hawk's* guns.

"This is outrageous, and I shall——"

"Your papers, Captain," interrupted Calamity peremptorily.

There was something in his voice which made the *Ann's* skipper realise that argument was not only useless, but probably dangerous as well. He shrugged his shoulders and led the way to his cabin, where he invited Calamity to sit down. Then he unlocked a drawer and took from it a metal deed-box which he placed on the table.

"Where the devil are the keys?" he muttered, and, stooping over the box, began to fumble in his pockets.

Suddenly stepping back, he raised his head, and, as he did so, gave a sharp exclamation of mingled rage and fear. He was staring right into the barrel of a nasty-looking automatic pistol which Calamity was pointing directly at him.

"I've seen that game played before," said Calamity with a quiet smile. "Hand me your pistol; butt first, please."

And the discomfited skipper of the *Ann* reluctantly handed over a fully loaded revolver, which he had been in the act of drawing from his pocket when he chanced to look down the barrel of the automatic pistol.

"Thanks," said Calamity as he took it. "Now for those papers, if you'll be so kind."

Without a word, the other unlocked the box and handed over a bundle of documents. Calamity glanced over them hastily and then smiled.

"Your other papers, Captain," he said.

"Other papers! What other papers d'you mean? They're all there."

"I think not. If you wish to avoid trouble, you will fetch out your alternative papers at once. You didn't hoist the German ensign without having something to justify it."

"I swear that——"

"Don't," broke in Calamity. "I can do all the swearing I want for myself."

"But I can't give you what I haven't got!"

Calamity leant across the table till his face almost touched the other's.

"The papers," he said in a low, menacing voice. "Understand me?"

The other did, apparently, for, with a muttered curse, he unlocked one of the table drawers and took therefrom a second bundle of documents.

"Take them and be damned to you," he said, flinging them on the table.

Calamity picked up the papers, and, as he glanced at them there was a look of grim satisfaction on his face.

"Will you be good enough to explain to me, Captain Noel, how it is that you happen to have two different sets of papers?" he inquired. "The first state that the *Ann* is a British ship, owned by Masters and Ready of Sunderland, and that she has cleared for Hongkong from Rio. The second batch declare her to be a German vessel, cleared for Bangkok from Bremen. They give the owner as——"

He stopped abruptly as he glanced again at the paper he was holding. A look of incredulous astonishment appeared on his face, but it was almost immediately succeeded by one of the keenest satisfaction.

"——Isaac Solomon of Singapore," he concluded.

The other made no answer, and for a moment or two Calamity regarded him thoughtfully.

"It's a clever trick and how you managed to obtain these two sets of papers I don't pretend to guess," he went on. "It may interest you, however, to know that the esteemed Mr. Isaac Solomon is a dear—one might almost say, expensive—friend of mine, and no doubt he will let me into the secret later on. What is your cargo, Captain?"

"Sand ballast and Portland cement," growled the other.

"No doubt the cargo you took out was rather more interesting. But what's this?" he added, holding up a document heavily sealed.

"I don't know."

"Still, it would be as well to find out," and without hesitation he calmly broke the seals.

To the astonishment of them both, the document was absolutely blank; to all appearances a virgin sheet of paper.

"H'm, this is strange," murmured Calamity. "It is not usual to enclose and seal a blank sheet of paper with the ship's documents. Have you got a candle?"

Captain Noel produced one from a shelf and lit it. He seemed as eager to find out the meaning of this mysterious enclosure as Calamity himself. The latter held the paper in front of the flame and, as he had expected, writing began to appear. When the whole communication became legible he spread the document out on the table and commenced to read.

It was, in effect, a letter from a German official to Mr. Isaac Solomon of Singapore, informing him that his last cargo had reached its first destination, a neutral port, without mishap. This was followed by some very valuable advice concerning the manner in which another cargo—referred to as "Eastern merchandise"—might be delivered at the same port. There were also other matters of even greater interest, but Calamity decided to study these at a more convenient time.

"I have only one more question to ask you, Captain," he said. "What was the exact nature of this 'Eastern merchandise'?"

"Copper and nickel," answered the other.

"A very profitable cargo, I should imagine; yet not as profitable as this one little piece of paper should prove to me—eh, Captain Noel?"

"I'll take my oath I knew nothing of this," answered the latter eagerly.

"You knew about the cargo, at any rate. However, that's a matter which doesn't concern me. I shall hand you back your German clearance papers, but the English ones, together with this interesting little document, I shall keep."

"You—you're going to keep the English papers?" faltered the other.

"Yes."

"But, good God, man, I shall be captured! I can't reach a port with German papers. I'm at the mercy of the first British cruiser I meet!"

"Exactly. And dear Isaac Solomon, bless his gentle heart, will have his ship confiscated. Still, I'll wager he'd sooner the authorities took his ship than this piece of paper."

Calamity rose to his feet, and, leaving the German papers on the table, put the others in his pocket.

"I'll wish you good-day, Captain Noel," he said. "I may capture a few prizes during my cruise, but I can never hope to get another like this. If you should meet Mr. Solomon during the next week or so kindly remember me to him. Captain Calamity; he'll not have forgotten the name."

He left the steamer, and, returning to the *Hawk*, told Mr. Dykes to continue the original course.

"Very good, sir," answered the mate. "I suppose," he added, "there weren't nothin' worth freezin' on to aboard that packet?"

Calamity made no answer, and, going to his cabin, locked himself in. Meanwhile, to the surprise and disappointment of the crew, the *Ann* was permitted to proceed on her way and the *Hawk* resumed her course.

"Don't savee what it means, don't you?" Jasper Skelt was saying in the foc'sle. "It means this, my jolly sailor-boys. The skipper's helped himself to the money-chest on that blooming barge and he's going to stick to it. Yes, my festive deck-wallopers, all the prize-money and plunder that comes your way you'll be able to stick in a hollow tooth."

A low, angry murmur went up, and then a man, bolder than the rest, rose to his feet.

"If I b'lieved you, Jas Skelt, I'd 'ave a go at that un'oly swine aft, and chance it."

"Aye, aye," growled some others. "We ain't goin' to be done out of our rights."

"Then you stand by me," answered Skelt, "and I'll see that you get 'em."

"We'll stand by you, mate," said the first speaker. "And, what's more, we'll make you skipper of the 'Awk. Ain't that so?" he added, turning to the others.

There was a low murmur of approval.

CHAPTER IX

TRAGEDY

As Calamity sat in his cabin reading the secret document which had so unexpectedly fallen into his hands, he chuckled grimly. It proved, beyond any vestige of a doubt, that Mr. Isaac Solomon was playing an extremely profitable, but also extremely hazardous game. It was not simply a case of blockade-running, it was a matter of trading with the enemy—in effect, treason. He was, by devious tricks and dodges, supplying the enemy with war material, and, it went without saying, making a gigantic profit on each rascally transaction. His method was wonderfully ingenious, for,

by providing German and English clearance papers for his ships, he was reasonably sure of their getting through, whether stopped by British vessels or those of the enemy. Moreover, the cargoes were shipped to neutral ports and their real nature disguised, to lessen further the risk of discovery. But how the astute Solomon had managed to get these papers Calamity could not imagine; still, he had done so.

This remarkable document also shed a light on the character and variety of some of Mr. Solomon's numerous business activities, and seemed to show that he was even wealthier than rumour had alleged. Until now, Calamity himself had never guessed that his partner possessed any ships, and certainly Singapore knew nothing of it.

"Inscrutable are the ways of Solomon," he murmured with a smile.

He would not have parted with the incriminating document for a fortune because it meant that, henceforward, Solomon would be in his power. In all his transactions with the wily ship-chandler, he had always been made to feel that it was the latter who held the whip-hand. He had been conscious of it when he left Singapore on this privateering expedition and had more than suspected that Solomon's motives for financing him had been only partly concerned with the making of a profit out of possible prizes. He felt even more sure of it now, but it only increased his sense of grim satisfaction. The tables had been turned, and it was he who held the whip-hand, for it was in his power not only to ruin his partner financially, but to have him sent to prison for what, in all probability, would be the term of his natural life.

While Calamity was gloating over these matters, and while Jasper Skelt was doing his best to incite the crew to mutiny, Mr. Dykes was ventilating a grievance to the chief engineer. What puzzled and irritated him, as it did nearly everyone else on the *Hawk*, was the Captain's seeming folly in letting the *Ann*, admittedly an enemy ship, get away. Even if she carried no cargo of any value, she could have been escorted into Singapore and claimed as a prize. The Admiralty award would surely have been generous, and well worth all the trouble.

This view he explained at some length to McPhulach, who was absorbing a fearful concoction of gin and rum. The engineer was not a very sympathetic listener at any time, but as both the second-mate and the second-engineer were on watch, there was no one else to whom Mr. Dykes could unburden himself with anything like freedom.

"I ain't saying but what he mayn't have his reasons, and very good ones," said the mate; "but, if he has, he ought to tell us. The crew are startin' to look nasty again, and who's to blame 'em? Three times already we've had a chance to rope in a prize and he's let every one breeze away. It gets by me, and that's a fact."

McPhulach, who had been dozing between drinks, opened his eyes as the speaker paused.

"He's a mighty quare mon; a verra mighty—hic—quare mon," he murmured, and closed his eyes again.

"Mind you," went on the mate, "I ain't grouchin', but, all the same, I'd like to know where this dance is going to end. Is he goin' to tote us all over the Pacific for the fun of stoppin' ships and lettin' 'em go again? And where's the prize-money that we were goin' to get such lashings of?"

A stentorian snore was the only reply, and Mr. Dykes, realising that the engineer was fast asleep, suppressed a desire to administer him a hearty kick, and left the cabin. Outside he came upon Miss Fletcher sitting on a camp-stool at the door of the cabin that had once been his.

"What's the matter? You're looking very serious," she said.

Mr. Dykes paused, and, leaning his back against the opposite bulkhead, stuck both hands in his pockets and assumed an air of weary resignation.

"I was jest tryin' to figger out whether we're on a yachtin' trip or whether the old man is jest dodgin' about for the sake of his health," he answered.

The girl looked puzzled.

"I don't understand," she said.

The mate heaved a sigh and sat down on the cabin step beside her. In spite of that past episode when he had forgotten himself, they were on very friendly terms. She did not appear to resent or even to remember the incident, probably because she knew that Mr. Dykes had learnt his lesson and would be more discreet in future. Certainly she had not reported the matter to Calamity, as he had at first feared she would, and this fact raised her in his esteem as much as the blow between the eyes had done. In fact, he had a very healthy respect for this self-possessed young woman.

"I don't understand what you mean," she reiterated.

Whereupon Mr. Dykes repeated more or less what he had said to the engineer concerning the Captain's apparent want of enterprise.

"You may be sure he knows what he's about," she said, when the mate had finished.

"I'm willin' to allow that," he answered; "but it don't help us any. We didn't sign on this packet for a pleasure cruise, and good intentions don't cut no ice."

"Then you don't trust the Captain?" she inquired, with a touch of scorn in her voice.

"Now you're gettin' a hitch on the wrong cow. I didn't say anything of the sort. What I want to know is, when are we goin' to start biz, the real biz? I ain't out to study the beauties of the deep; none of us are; we've seen 'em too often, and they ain't none too beautiful neither."

"Why don't you ask the Captain?"

"That ain't all," went on Mr. Dykes, ignoring the question, "it won't do to bank too much on this here crew. They're gettin' ugly, and when they do stampede it won't be like last time. There'll be real, genuine trouble accompanied by corpses—you can put your shirt on that."

"But you told me he quelled a mutiny single-handed when you were only a few days out."

"Yes; but this is different. Then the men were unprepared, they didn't know what to expect, and so the old man was able to raise Cain before they'd got their bearin's. This time it'll be different; it'll be a real, genuine, bloody mutiny, with hell to pay."

"Personally, I have no fear. I would back your Captain against any number of such scum," answered the girl a little contemptuously.

Mr. Dykes shook his head gloomily.

"This ain't the sort of ship for a woman to be on," he remarked.

"I am quite capable of taking care of myself."

The mate made no answer, and, realising that his forebodings were not meeting with any sympathy, rose slowly from the step and yawned.

"Guess I'll turn in for a spell," he said; "mine's the middle watch."

She made no attempt to detain him, and he lounged away towards the second-mate's cabin to get some sleep before going on duty.

The brief twilight of the tropics had given place to night, and, though there was no moon, the sky was ablaze with myriads of brilliant stars, some in clusters like groups of sparkling gems, others strewn, as it were, promiscuously over the translucent blue dome and a few isolated and outstanding by reason of their wonderful brilliance. The cool night-air was filled with a subtle, intoxicating perfume, and the sea was like a vast steel mirror save for the expanding streak of bubbling, foam-flecked water in the steamer's wake. And the only sounds to be heard were the steady, rhythmic beat of the engines and the gurgling swish of the water as it swept past the ship's sides, clear, cool, and enticing. The mast-head light shone out steady and bright like a star of enormous magnitude and on either beam the navigating lights cast red or green reflections on the placid sea.

Dora Fletcher retired to her cabin, where she sat watching, through an open port, the beauty and wonder of the starlit night. She had extinguished the lamp the better to enjoy this and the sense of peace which the darkness induced. Presently, however, she turned away with a sigh to prepare for bed, and, as she did so, glanced carelessly out of the port which looked across the deck towards the foc'sle. The door of the latter was shut, but through the chinks a yellow ray of light penetrated, and, listening intently, she caught the murmur of voices.

For a moment she forgot all about the beauty and peacefulness of the night, and her thoughts turned to the lugubrious forebodings of the mate. On such a night, and under such conditions, it was almost impossible to imagine a scene such as he had hinted; impossible to picture the silent and deserted decks aswarm with savage, bloodthirsty men, intent upon murder and destruction. Yet she, who had been afloat before most children have left the nursery, knew that it was possible, just as she knew that it was only the iron mastery of one man which kept this horde of ruffians in check. Since babyhood, almost, she had listened to tales of mutiny and crime on the high seas; had sailed with men who had witnessed such things, and some who even boasted of the parts they had played therein.

Suddenly she was roused from the vague, waking dream into which she had fallen by the sound of a man's voice raised almost to a shout. It dropped abruptly as though the speaker had suddenly recollected himself and was conscious of having committed an indiscretion. It was evident, however, that something unusual was going on in the foc'sle which, ordinarily, should have been silent till the relief watch was routed out and the off-going watch tumbled in. After a while she again heard voices, and then sounds that seemed to suggest subdued quarrelling. These sounds again died down, all was silent, and soon afterwards the light in the foc'sle was extinguished.

For some moments the girl lingered at the port, wondering what the commotion for'ad portended, wondering also whether the officer on the bridge had noticed it. The chances were that he had not, for the noise of the engines coming through the gratings would probably have drowned the sounds in the foc'sle, and the fact that it had been lighted up was not in itself suspicious; a dim light was always kept burning there.

She was just about to move away and turn in, when she saw the foc'sle door open and a man creep stealthily out. Had he stepped out boldly she would have thought nothing of it, but his furtive movements at once roused her curiosity. Keeping well in the shadow of the bulwarks, he

crept forward till at last he reached the alleyway between the cabins amidships and disappeared. Next moment the girl heard soft footsteps approach her cabin, pass the door, and die away.

She kept quite still for a few seconds in order to let the man pass, then softly opened her door and peered out. At the other end of the alleyway, giving upon the after-deck, she caught sight of the shadowy figure making its way aft, and still keeping well in the shadows. Stepping noiselessly out of the cabin, she followed him in obedience to an insistent desire to find out what he was about to do. On reaching the deck-house aft which led to the Captain's quarters, the man stopped and the girl had barely time to sink behind a steam-winch before he turned round and gazed furtively about him.

Then, apparently satisfied that he was not being watched, the man did an extraordinary thing. Climbing over the taffrail, he began to lower himself gently towards the water. A wild fear that he intended to commit suicide took possession of the girl, and she was about to cry out, when his next action arrested her. With his feet on the iron wind-shoot that projected from the scuttle of the Captain's cabin, he lowered himself still farther and then, grasping the shoot with his hands, let himself down till he was nearly up to the waist in water.

Then, and not till then, the girl guessed what his intention was. The Captain's bunk was situated immediately beneath the porthole, a fact she had noticed during her first and, so far, last interview with Calamity. From his present insecure position, the man could, by putting his arm through the open port, reach the Captain as he lay asleep, and, providing he had a weapon, a knife for instance, stab him before he could utter a cry for help or defend himself.

And, even as she looked, Dora Fletcher saw the gleam of a knife in the man's hand; saw it raised for the murderous blow. Involuntarily she closed her eyes and was about to shriek for help when she felt herself seized from behind and a hand pressed tightly over her mouth.

CHAPTER X

THE CAPTAIN'S "APPEAL"

"Not a word," whispered a harsh voice which, to her astonishment, she recognised as belonging to Captain Calamity.

He removed his hand from her mouth.

"Go back to your bunk," he said in a low tone. "And not a whisper of what you have seen to a soul. Understand?"

She nodded.

He jerked his head in a manner signifying that she was to go, and the girl crept back to her cabin, feeling very much like a school-boy who has been discovered breaking bounds. What she had thought to be a horrible tragedy had, so far as she was concerned, turned out to be a farce. Yet, with feminine inconsistency, her secret admiration for Calamity was increased a hundredfold. His extraordinary preparedness, his calm, unshakable self-reliance, his independence of everyone else, fascinated her. There was nothing picturesque or heroic in his manner or appearance, yet he had proved himself a match, and more than a match, for the desperadoes who surrounded him. There was not a man on board his equal in resourcefulness, watchfulness, or strength of purpose; he was master of them all.

Even while she felt deeply humiliated at his treatment of her, she realised the absurdity of such a feeling. To him she was of less consequence even than the most inefficient fireman or sailor on board; for all she knew to the contrary, he had, until this brief and unexpected encounter, forgotten her very existence. She felt that to nourish resentment on this account would be childish; a wave might as well nourish resentment against the rock on which it ineffectually dashed itself. For the first time in her life Dora Fletcher had met a man who was as indifferent to her feelings as he was to her sex, and, curiously enough, she was not altogether displeased by this.

Calamity, meanwhile, was playing his own game in his own way. Withdrawing into the shadows, he awaited the return of Skelt from his murderous errand. He had not long to wait. A moment or two after Dora Fletcher had been so curtly ordered back to her cabin, the head of the ex-boatswain appeared over the taffrail. He cast a hurried glance right and left, then cautiously clambered over the rail and lowered himself on to the deck. As he did so a hand shot out from the darkness and clutched his throat with a grip of steel. Not until he was on the verge of being suffocated did the choking grip relax, and then a hand fastened upon his shoulder.

"Silence. Come with me," said a voice which sent a thrill of terror through him.

Skelt had no alternative but to obey, and so, with the Captain's heavy hand still upon his shoulder, accompanied him into the cabin.

"Now," said Calamity as he seated himself and surveyed his prisoner, "be good enough to explain this disobedience to orders."

The fellow looked at him in astonishment. It was disconcerting enough to find himself a prisoner in the hands of the man he had intended to murder, but it was amazing to be accused by him of what sounded like a minor offence.

"I don't understand," he answered sullenly.

"Is that how you have been in the habit of addressing your Captain?"

"Sir," growled the man.

"Remember that the next time you speak. Now then, what is your excuse for being on the after-deck when, as you know, no men are allowed there after sunset unless by express command?"

Something akin to hope arose in the ex-bos'n's breast. Could it be possible, he thought, that the Captain was unaware of his real intention and thought that he had merely disobeyed one of the ship's regulations? And, being wholly ignorant of the extraordinary methods of the terrible skipper of the *Hawk*, Jasper Skelt permitted himself the luxury of a little secret contempt.

"I didn't know anything about the orders, sir," he answered.

"Indeed? Do you know the penalty for disobedience on board a privateer?"

"No, sir."

"Death."

The man started nervously and turned a shade paler. Things were not going quite so well as he had thought, after all.

"I've never been aboard a privateer before, sir," he replied humbly.

"So I presume. What's more, I don't think you're likely ever to be aboard another."

Again the ex-boatswain glanced nervously at the skipper. The last remark struck him as being unpleasantly ominous. The question which followed confirmed his worst fears.

"Did the men know why you came aft to-night?"

"I—I can't say, sir," faltered Skelt.

"You mean to say that you told none of them what you intended to do?"

The man's knees were trembling. He made an attempt to speak, but seemed to choke before he could get the words out.

"Answer me!" rapped out the Captain, and Skelt started as if at the sound of a pistol-shot.

"N—no, sir," he faltered, hardly realising what he said.

"Then I am to understand that they didn't know you intended to murder me?"

Skelt's last hope deserted him. His face turned an ashen grey. He tried to speak, but only a dry sob of abject terror escaped him.

"If you don't answer my question, you die inside two minutes," said Calamity quietly.

"Not all of them, sir," replied the wretched man.

"You admit that you meant to kill me, then?"

"God forgive me, sir, I——"

"Never mind about God," interrupted the Captain grimly. "It's me you're up against at the moment. Answer me, did all the men know of this?"

"Yes, sir."

"And they were all quite willing you should do it."

"Only two objected, sir."

"Who were they?"

"Li Chang and Brunton, sir."

"But they made no effort to warn me."

"The others said they'd kill them if they did."

"I see."

Calamity leant back in his chair and surveyed his prisoner with the calm, questioning scrutiny of a scientist surveying some new and interesting specimen.

"So," he remarked at length, "it never occurred to any of you that I might be acquainted with everything that went on in the foc'sle; you even felt sure that I knew nothing of the little indignation meeting you held last Sunday. You were actually such fools as to suppose that, having shipped the worst gang of port vermin that ever soiled a ship's decks, I should remain quietly in

my cabin in the hope that they were behaving themselves like decent men. I never thought that rascality and faith went hand in hand."

Skelt made no answer, and the Captain rang a little hand-bell on the table. Next moment the steward, a huge Chinaman called Sing-hi, entered the cabin.

"You lingee?" he inquired.

"Yes." Calamity turned to the prisoner. "Have you anything to say?" he asked.

"For God's sake don't be hard on me," implored the would-be murderer with abject piteousness. "Give me a chance, sir, and I'll do anything for you. Only one chance, sir, only one, and, before Christ, I'll be your slave."

A queer smile came over Calamity's face as he regarded the cringing servility of the ruffian.

"You would, would you?" he observed. "If I asked you to kill a certain man fora'd while he was asleep, would you do it?"

"Yes, sir, if you'll spare my life. I'll do anything, sir!" cried the man, with grovelling eagerness.

"You'd swear to do it?"

"I'll take my oath on the Bible, sir."

"I thought you would," answered the Captain grimly. "Steward, lock the man up in your room and don't hesitate to kill him if he tries to escape. Savee?"

"Savee plenty muchee," answered the huge Chinaman with a grin, whereupon he caught hold of the ex-boatswain's collar, swung him round, and hustled him out of the cabin. When they had gone, Calamity arose and made his way to the bridge, where Mr. Dykes was on watch.

"Anything to report?" asked the Captain.

"No, sir."

"How are you managing with the crew?"

"Well, sir, they ain't quite as peaceful as they might be; not since we met the *Ann*."

"Indeed? why?"

"They seem to think we might have made her a prize and taken her into port. In fact," added the mate, warming up, "I may as well tell you there's going to be trouble, sir."

"Mutiny, you mean?"

"Yep, and when they start there'll be blue murder. It's that swine we picked up that's been workin' the mischief."

"Then we must deal with him, Mr. Dykes."

"I guess it'll be a stiff proposition, Cap'n; he's gotten all the crew behind him. D'rectly you lay hands on him, it'll be like a spark in a powder-barrel."

"Then you regard him, virtually, as Captain of the ship?"

The mate made no answer, but shrugged his shoulders significantly. He believed that, in utterly disregarding the wishes of the crew, and, at the same time, maintaining an iron discipline, Calamity had bitten off "a bigger chunk than he could chew." However, he considered it prudent to keep this opinion to himself, and therein he was undoubtedly right.

"By to-morrow morning," went on the Captain after a pause, "all signs of mutiny will, I think, have disappeared."

"I hope to God they will, sir."

"I feel sure that an appeal to the men's reason, such as I shall make to-morrow, will not fail in its effect."

"An appeal to their reason, sir!" gasped the mate.

"Yes. A mild demonstration of the absurdity of attempting to mutiny."

"I don't get you, sir."

"No? Well, muster all hands on deck at eight bells. Good-night, Mr. Dykes."

"Good-night, sir," answered the mate, and, walking to the bridge-rail, expectorated over the side. "Well," he muttered, "if it ain't enough to make a feller spit blood. An appeal to their reason! Gee, he'll be holdin' family prayers in the cabin next."

At six bells, which was an hour before his watch was up, the mate perceived a man mounting the bridge-ladder.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, "who are you?"

"Brunton, sir," answered the man.

"Well, what d'you want? It's not your watch."

"Have you seen Skelt, sir?"

"Seen Skelt!" roared the mate. "What the hell do you take me for? D'you think I know where every perishin' son of a cock-eyed monkey aboard this packet is?"

"He was going to murder the Captain, sir. I couldn't get away before, as all the others were watching me. I only got out now because they think he's funk'd it."

"Goin' to murder—here, fetch the second-mate up, quick!"

The man hurried to Smith's cabin and roused out the sleeping occupant, who stumbled up to the bridge vomiting profanity of varied hues.

"Get aft!" shouted the mate, "they're murderin' the old man."

Smith turned and dashed off to the Captain's cabin, which he entered without even the ceremony of knocking. It was empty, but from a small room adjoining came the sound of stentorian snores.

"Blimey!" muttered Smith, glancing round him. "He don't sound as if he were dead."

His eye fell on the ship's log which lay open on the table. Instinctively he glanced at it and, under the entry for the day, read the following:

"Jasper Skelt, boatswain of the barque *Esmeralda*. Died at sea. Cause, misadventure."

He slowly returned to the bridge and told the mate what he had seen.

"You're sure he was alive?" asked the latter.

"Well, he was makin' a noise like a motor-'bus climbin' a hill," answered Smith.

At eight bells that morning Mr. Dykes, in quite a different frame of mind to that of a couple of hours ago, sent the bos'n to muster all hands on deck. The men tumbled out sullenly, muttering among themselves in a manner which seemed to justify the mate's recent warning to the Captain.

Suddenly one of them gave a cry.

In the clear, grey morning light, they beheld, hanging from one of the derricks, the lifeless body of Jasper Skelt. His hands and feet were tightly bound with cords, and he was suspended from the boom by a rope round his neck.

Judging from the men's faces as they stared at the ghastly spectacle, Calamity's "appeal" was not likely to prove a vain one.

CHAPTER XI

THE FIGHT

The German gunboat, that the *Hawk* had been following so assiduously, had disappeared in the fog of the Sunday on which the *Ann* was stopped. Nevertheless, Calamity set the course each day with an unhesitating decisiveness which seemed to suggest that he had some definite plan in view. A day or two after that encounter a large steam-yacht painted war-grey, and flying no ensign, was sighted steaming in a northerly direction. Calamity, who was on the bridge at the time, examined her through his glasses and then handed them to Smith, the mate being below.

"What do you make of her?" he asked.

The second-mate, after a long and careful scrutiny, handed the glasses back.

"Looks like a commerce-destroyer," he said, "but blowed if I can tell what nationality she is."

"H'm, we'll soon find out," answered the Captain. "Go for'ad and send a shot after her as soon as I've altered the course."

Smith left the bridge, and, mounting the foc'sle, took the tarpaulin cover off the quick-firer which was mounted there. Meanwhile Calamity had brought the *Hawk's* nose round so that he was now in the wake of the strange ship.

"All ready, sir!" shouted Smith.

"Then let her have it."

The second-mate carefully laid the gun and next minute a shell went hurtling over the yacht's stern; too high to do any damage, yet near enough to make any nervous persons on board feel more nervous still. The noise brought the privateer's crew tumbling on deck, eager to see what was happening. Then, before the sound of the shot had died away, the yacht was observed to be changing her course—steaming round in the arc of a circle to starboard of the *Hawk*. Obviously

she was not running away, and the inference was that she intended to fight.

"Pipe to quarters!" cried Calamity from the bridge; but before the bos'n had time to obey the order the men were rushing to their places. It seemed as if there was going to be a fight at last.

The yacht, a steamer of about 3,000 tons, came round with her bows pointing towards the *Hawk's* starboard quarter, and, as she reached that position, there came the sullen boom of a gun. A shell whistled above the privateer's upper works, smashing to splinters one of the boats which the carpenter had been repairing on the davits. A second shot followed hard upon the first, and then a third, which smashed one of the raised skylights above the engine-room, sending a shower of broken glass upon the men below.

"Blimey!" ejaculated Smith as he stood by his gun, lanyard in hand, "this looks like the real thing—not half it don't."

The damage done by the last two shots would have been greater still had not Calamity thrust the quartermaster away from the wheel and taken it himself. Under his control, the *Hawk* slewed round so that she presented only her bows as a target for her opponent. As the sound of the latter's guns died away, she was seen to hoist the German naval ensign at her stern, while a signal hoist was run up to the mast-head signifying "Surrender or I sink you."

There was a lull, the two vessels facing each other bows-on like a couple of fierce dogs about to fight. Then a little bundle trundled up to the *Hawk's* triatic stay, broke, and two burgees, one blue and white, the other red, fluttered out in the breeze. It was Calamity's answer: "Stand by to abandon ship." As his men looked up and read the signal there was a burst of hoarse laughter, followed by a ringing cheer. They realised the grim humour of the message, and thoroughly appreciated it.

During the next half-hour the engagement consisted only of the exchange of a few shots, one or two of which did damage on both sides. The belligerents were manoeuvring for position, each trying to force the other to fight facing the sun, which would, of course, place him at a serious disadvantage. While these tactical evolutions were in progress, a couple of the *Hawk's* men received wounds and Miss Fletcher, who had been watching the spectacle through her cabin porthole, rushed on deck, in spite of the risk she ran of being hit herself. She was helping to remove one of the injured men, when Calamity caught sight of her.

"Send that fool-woman to her cabin!" he roared to Mr. Dykes.

The mate hesitated. He was extraordinarily impressed by the girl's plucky act, but the Captain's order, though a wise one, struck him as being unduly harsh. Besides, he was loth to miss such a unique opportunity of, perhaps, doing daring deeds under her very eyes.

"D'you hear what I say?" shouted the Captain.

"Excuse me, sir," he answered; "but who's to look after the wounded if Miss Fletcher doesn't?"

"If the girl wants to make herself useful she can dress the men's wounds in the hold. But I won't have a woman on deck during a fight."

It was an ungracious order, but Mr. Dykes had nothing for it but to leave the bridge and acquaint Miss Fletcher with the Captain's instructions.

"The skipper's compliments," he said, "and would you attend to the wounded when they're taken down to the hold?"

The girl glanced at him sharply; probably the hesitating manner in which he spoke roused her suspicions.

"That's not what he said?" she challenged.

"Well, I guess it's as near as no matter."

"You mean he has ordered me off the deck?"

The mate made a deprecatory gesture and turned away. For a moment the girl hesitated, half inclined to defy the Captain's orders and remain on deck. Then the futility of any such act of defiance occurred to her, and she returned to her cabin, locking the door behind her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot with rage, "I hate him!"

She continued to hate him ardently for a while, and then, as this gave little real satisfaction, she opened her cabin door and peered out just as Smith was passing.

"Are you going on to the bridge?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered, pausing.

"Then be good enough to tell the Captain that he can tend the wounded himself," she burst out, and slammed the door before the astonished second-mate could recover from his surprise.

He duly delivered her message, but it was doubtful if Calamity heard it; certainly he made no comment, and Smith thought it wise to let the matter go at that.

The two vessels were still fencing and manoeuvring, getting a shot in when and wherever they

could. But at last both the commanders tired of these fruitless tactics, and then the engagement began in real earnest. The yacht was armed with lighter guns than those of her opponent, but she had more of them, and, in addition, possessed the advantage of speed, being capable of answering her helm twice as quickly as the privateer. This enabled her to swing round at all angles, catch the *Hawk* broadside-on and sweep her decks fore and aft. Notwithstanding this, she by no means had it all her own way, for the privateer kept up a steady, well-trained fire that made things aboard her adversary more than lively.

As only those men who served the guns were allowed on deck, the casualties were relatively small on the *Hawk*. Whenever a man fell, his place was taken by another from the reserve men in the foc'sle and thus unnecessary losses were avoided. A hospital of sorts had been rigged up in the forehold and here the wounded men were carried and placed on mattresses until such time as they could be attended to.

Calamity had thrown off his jacket, and, with arms bared to the elbows, was working the quick-firer on the bridge, three of the gun's crew having been killed or wounded.

"Hit her amidships, in the engine-room!" he shouted to Mr. Dykes, who had charge of the gun on the poop.

A minute or two later there was a loud explosion on the yacht, owing to one of her guns being hit while loaded, by a shell from the *Hawk*. A wild cheer went up from the privateers' men, and Calamity, thinking he might board his adversary in the confusion, bellowed an order to the quartermaster.

"Hard a starboard! Quick, damn your eyes!"

"Hard a——" the quartermaster started to echo, but before he could finish a fragment of shell struck him, and Calamity, swinging round to see what had happened, was bespattered with blood and brains. He sprang to the wheel, and, pushing aside the dead body with his foot, altered the helm. But it was too late, the other had divined his purpose and was drawing off. Instantly the *Hawk* started in pursuit, but, as she came round in the yacht's wake, a ricocheting shell dropped through the engine-room skylight and there was an explosion below which shook the vessel from stem to stern. Volumes of hissing steam ascended through the gratings and ventilators, while, above the roar, came the agonised shrieks of some wretched firemen who were being scalded to death in the stokehold.

A man, his face a wet, shapeless, raw mass of flesh, stumbled out of the fiddley, staggered a few paces, and fell sprawling on the deck. Another followed whose hair, still attached to the skin, was falling off in lumps, and he, too, collapsed on the deck. At the same moment the steady throb of the engines ceased and the *Hawk* began to lose way. Meanwhile the German had drawn off, and, for the time being, firing ceased on both sides. The enemy, it would seem, was in little better condition than the privateer, for she was steaming at a rate of certainly not more than five knots. Calamity, watching her from the bridge, cursed aloud as he saw his hoped-for prize slowly but surely getting away while he was unable to prevent her or to go in pursuit.

"Send for McPhulach!" he cried; but, before anyone could obey, the chief-engineer mounted to the bridge.

"I'm sair dootin' we'll hae to bide where we are," he remarked placidly.

"Do you mean to say the engines are wrecked?" demanded Calamity.

"I wouldna go sae far as tae say that," answered the engineer. "Ye might speak o' them as assorted scrap-iron."

The Captain laid a firm hand on McPhulach's arm.

"You've got to repair those engines," he said quietly.

"Eh!"

"You heard me."

"Losh presarve us, mon, the A'michty Himsel' couldna do it!"

"The Almighty's not chief engineer of the *Hawk*, so you needn't worry about that. Get those engines going or I'll string you up at the end of a derrick."

"Guid God, are ye mad, mon!" gasped the engineer.

"Mad or sane, I'll do what I say."

"I tell ye the engine-room's like a steam-laundry," wailed McPhulach. "There isna a pipe that isna squairting steam out of some crack or itha, and it'll take all the cotton-waste in the ship to bind up the leaks. It's a plumber's job, no' an engineer's."

"Well, if you can't do your job, I'll undertake to do mine," said the Captain grimly.

McPhulach emitted a groan, then took from his pocket a short and very rank briar pipe. A look of phlegmatic resignation had come over his face.

"Maybe ye're richt, skipper," he said. "Hae ye got sic a thing as a plug o' tobaccy on ye'r

pairson?"

Calamity handed him a pouch of tobacco. McPhulach filled his pipe, and, remarking that he might run short, also put some tobacco loose in his pocket.

"Gin ye hae a match, I'll go below and see what can be done," he said.

The Captain produced a box of vestas. The engineer lit his pipe, and, absent-mindedly dropping the matches into his own pocket, left the bridge.

The mate, meanwhile, had been superintending the removal of the wounded and the washing down of the decks. Three men had been killed, not including two firemen scalded to death in the stokehold, and the wounded numbered eleven. The latter were made as comfortable as possible in the hold and the former were carried into the wheel-house pending burial.

Gradually the commerce-destroyer became smaller and smaller, until, by evening, all that was visible of her was a feathery smoke-trail on the horizon.

Soon after eight bells that night, McPhulach succeeded in performing a miracle—the *Hawk's* engines began to move.

CHAPTER XII

A DESPERATE VENTURE

Slowly, like a convalescent taking his first walk and as yet doubtful of his strength, the *Hawk* began to push the seas aside and move ahead. The engines, instead of working with rhythmic regularity, were banging and thumping in jerky spasms—still, they were working—the bridge shook with their ponderous vibrations, while the wire funnel stays tautened and slacked as the smokestack quivered.

The first duty accomplished after the clearing up of the decks was the disposal of the dead, which were placed in canvas bags weighted with firebars to ensure their sinking. There were no prayers, services, or ceremonies of any kind; they were simply dropped over the side....

In the hold Calamity and the mate were at work with their coats off and shirt-sleeves rolled up. Some of the hatch-covers had been removed to secure better ventilation and a couple of lanterns suspended from the girders flickered feebly in the semi-twilight. Against the bulkheads were two rows of mattresses arranged so as to leave a passage between them, and on some of these lay wounded men, each with a coarse, black blanket thrown over him. The Captain, assisted by Mr. Dykes, was attending to the more serious cases in a manner which caused the mate considerable secret astonishment. He had expected to see the skipper perform the duties of surgeon in a rough and ready if not a brutal way, and had felt a strong sympathy for his prospective victims. Instead, Calamity handled the men with almost professional skill, performing even serious operations with deft, quick fingers, and without either nervousness or hesitation. A smile, a cheery word of encouragement, a full-flavoured joke worked wonders, and a man, even in excruciating pain, would grin feebly at some broad jest uttered by the Captain.

Dora Fletcher, who had thought better of her first hasty decision, was dressing some of the minor wounds. To her, Calamity's new rôle came as a startling revelation of a hitherto unsuspected phase of his character. She, who had seen him commit acts of unquestionable brutality, now watched him pass from bed to bed with an air of quiet assurance that inspired even the worst cases with new confidence and hope. Men flinched apprehensively as he approached to examine their injuries, but his touch, though firm, was as gentle as a woman's, and their fears were quickly set at rest.

He scarcely even glanced at the girl, and when he did so it was to give some curt directions as from a surgeon to a nurse. Yet she felt strangely happy and triumphant, for at last he had been forced to recognise and to demand her assistance. She felt herself necessary to him, and the terse orders, involving her co-operation in the work of succour, seemed to her a tacit admission of the fact. Henceforth she would at least be an entity in his eyes; he would have to acknowledge her existence, even if he resented it.

After the Captain and Mr. Dykes had gone; throughout the whole night, indeed, the girl remained at her post. She found plenty to do; giving cooling drinks to those whose throats were parched with fever, readjusting dressings which had worked out of place, and performing the hundred and one offices which fall to the lot of a watcher of the sick. At intervals during the night the mate or Smith would enter the dim hold, which now reeked with the pungent odour of antiseptics, to proffer their services, and once Mr. Dykes tried to persuade her to turn in. But she rejected the suggestion indignantly, and ordered him out of the place, whereupon he departed sheepishly. At about five o'clock in the morning Calamity looked in again and seemed surprised to find her there.

"How long have you been on watch?" he asked.

"Since you left," she answered.

"Then you'd no right to. Dykes or Smith should have told off a man to keep watch. Get off to your bunk. I don't want a sick woman aboard."

Without a word she left the sick-bay, and then, for the first time, realised how exhausted she really was. Without troubling to undress, she flung herself upon the bunk and was asleep almost before her head touched the pillow.

All that day and the next as well, the *Hawk* chugged her way in a northerly direction, her speed never exceeding six knots and sometimes falling below that. How McPhulach had contrived to patch up her engines sufficiently to do even so much was a mystery no one but himself could have explained. Still, they might break down again at any moment, and it was absolutely necessary to find some port where the repairs could be carried out more thoroughly, and with the proper appliances. In the meantime much of the damage sustained in the encounter with the yacht had been repaired. Paint and canvas had done much to cover the effects of shot and shell, and outwardly, at least, the *Hawk* had resumed her normal appearance. But it was merely superficial, like the creams and cosmetics used by a faded beauty to hide the ravages of time. In fact she was, as Smith put it, "a whited bloomin' sepulchre."

On the second morning, as Miss Fletcher was going down to the hold, she met Mr. Dykes.

"The skipper's orders are that you're to take four-hour watches, so that you'll have a rest between each spell," he said.

She merely nodded and passed into the hold. The dim, yellow glow of the lanterns was fading in the growing daylight, making the surroundings more gloomy and depressing than even the half-light. She moved from bed to bed with noiseless steps, performing various little services for the sufferers. One man, who knew that he was dying, asked her to write down and witness his last will and testament—a curiously pathetic document—and for another she wrote a letter that was to be posted at the first port the ship touched. In a far corner she found a man making feeble efforts to undo the front of his shirt. He was too weak to speak, and, wondering what he wanted, the girl unbuttoned it to find a small silver crucifix suspended from a piece of string round his neck. Divining his need, she placed it in his hand, and the coarse, misshapen fingers closed over the Symbol; thus he died.

Soon afterwards the Captain entered and passed between the beds, stopping to ask each of the patients how he was getting on, and giving a cheery word of encouragement to everyone. At last he reached the bed where Dora Fletcher stood over the dead figure, whose fingers still clasped the little silver crucifix.

"H'm," he grunted, "another loss. Anything to report?"

In a few words the girl described the condition and progress of the various patients. At the conclusion Calamity nodded, but made no comment.

"I should like to ask you a favour, Captain," she said quietly.

"A favour? Well, what is it?" he demanded in a tone that was the reverse of encouraging.

"Do you think you could give this poor fellow"—she indicated the dead man on the bed—"a Christian burial? I—I think he would have wished it."

A look of mingled surprise and annoyance came into the Captain's face as he glanced at the unconscious figure.

"The man's dead, isn't he?"

"Yes, of course," answered the girl, puzzled by the question.

"Then what difference can it make to him how he's buried?" demanded Calamity, and, without waiting for an answer, walked away.

Later on that day Mr. Dykes urged the request again at Miss Fletcher's desire.

"I can't make distinctions," replied the Captain. "The man's got to take his chance of paradise with the rest. I'm not going to give him an unfair advantage over the others. Besides, this is a cheerful ship, and I don't intend to depress the living by reading burial services over the dead. They'll get their proper ratings without my assistance."

So that evening the corpse, sewed up in canvas and weighted with a piece of pig-iron, was cast over the side without ceremony.

Early on the following morning the look-out upon the foc'sle head reported land on the starboard bow.

The news brought the men rushing on deck at once, for the sight of land to sailors at sea is always an interesting event, savouring of adventure, women, and wine. The news was immediately reported to the Captain, who hurried on to the bridge and scrutinised the seeming cloud for some time through the glasses which Smith, who was on watch, handed to him.

"H'm," grunted Calamity, "an island."

"One of the Palau Group I should say, sir."

"Which means that it's German—eh?"

"Was German, sir," corrected the second-mate.

"There's no knowing; among so many scattered islands it's quite possible that one or two may have been overlooked by our cruisers."

"Maybe, sir," answered Smith doubtfully.

Calamity again focussed the glasses on the dark smudge in the dim distance. As he had just pointed out to the second-mate, it was quite possible that some of the small islands which went to make up what was once called the Bismarck Archipelago had escaped official annexation. This seemed the more probable since two German vessels, the gunboat and the commerce-destroyer, were apparently still at large in these waters. Both ships, particularly the former, would require a coaling station not too far away, and what more likely, therefore, than that there should be one hidden away among these innumerable islands?

The *Hawk* slowly bore down upon the land, but her speed was now so reduced that night had set in before those on board were able to get a really good view. By the following morning, however, they found themselves within a mile of it, and its palm-fringed beaches could be seen plainly from the deck. There was nothing about the island to excite wonder or interest, save that it just happened to be dry land amidst a boundless waste of blue waters. Numbers of such islands, many of them far larger, were to be met with in these latitudes.

Yet, because it was land, and suggestive of illicit pleasures, there was an air of suppressed excitement aboard the *Hawk*. Throughout the day she coasted slowly round it, but never once did a canoe or a catamaran put off to trade; indeed, not a vestige of human life was to be seen. At last, after they had nearly completed a circuit of the island, a small harbour was sighted at the eastern extremity. On a hill, overlooking the entrance, was a structure which suggested a fort, and this at once gave Calamity the idea that the gunboat which had hitherto eluded him was probably ensconced within this harbour. To "dig out" the pirate and take possession of her spoils was the first thought which occurred to him, but another and a stronger motive made him decide to enter the harbour at all costs. This was the fact that the *Hawk's* engines were next door to useless, and, unless they could be more effectually repaired, would become entirely so. It was quite possible, he reflected, that if the island really was a German station, there would be appliances for dealing with engine-room mishaps.

So, towards sundown, he steered boldly for the harbour, even blowing the steam syren to call attention to his visit. The flagstaff on the fort, he noticed, was bare, although as the *Hawk* drew nearer it was possible to make out an inconspicuous wireless installation.

"German without a doubt," he remarked to himself. "If it were British the Union Jack would be floating up there."

He turned to Mr. Dykes and in a few words explained what he wanted done. The *Hawk* was to pose as a harmless American merchantman which had put in for the purpose of trying to obtain some coal. The large crew, totally out of proportion to the number required to man a peaceful "tramp," were to remain in the foc'sle, except one or two who were to lounge about the deck for show purposes. Therefore in a very few minutes the decks were deserted except for the look-out and a couple of grimy firemen who leant over the bulwarks expectorating into the water. Half an hour later, the *Hawk* reached the mouth of the harbour and the syren emitted three ear-piercing shrieks.

The sound had scarcely died away when a boat, manned by natives and with a white man seated in the stern-sheets, put off from a small, wooden jetty beneath the fort. When within hailing distance, the man in the stern stood up and put both hands to his mouth.

"Wie heisst das schiff?" he bawled.

"Don't get you," answered Calamity; "have another try."

"Vot schip vos dot?" bellowed the other, who was evidently some sort of port official.

"This is the American steamer *Hawk*, Singapore for Valparaiso."

"Vy you no show your flarg?" inquired the official, his boat coming nearer the *Hawk* every moment.

"Sorry; if I'd known it was your birthday, guess I'd have hoisted a bit of bunting," replied the pseudo Yankee skipper, and gave an order which resulted in the Stars and Stripes fluttering out astern.

The reply, however, did not appear to please the official.

"You 'eave-to!" he commanded. "I vant to see your papers."

Calamity rang down "Stop," the engines ceased thudding and a couple of men came out on deck and threw a rope-ladder over the side. A moment later the boat came alongside and the official, a short, fat little man, ascended the ladder with some difficulty, alighting on deck hot and breathless. Meanwhile his coffee-coloured cox'n having made the boat fast to a rung of the rope-ladder, sat down and lighted a cheroot.

"You vas der Captain?" asked the newcomer of Calamity, as soon as he had recovered his breath.

"Yes."

"You must produce your papers."

"If you'll come with me, sir, I'll show them to you," answered Calamity politely, and led the way towards his cabin.

Suddenly he stopped near the after-hatch, from which a couple of the covers had previously been removed.

"Like to have a squint at the cargo?" he asked. "Guess it'll interest you."

The fussy little man looked surprised at the question, but he stepped up to the hatch, and, leaning over the combing, peered into the obscure depths below. While he was still in this convenient attitude an impelling force caught him in the small of the back, and he shot downwards into the hold, alighting head foremost on a heap of sand-ballast. Then, before he had recovered sufficiently to raise a shout, the hatch-covers were promptly clapped on again and he was left there in the dark to meditate on the ups and downs of a port official's life.

Having satisfactorily disposed of this inquisitive person, Calamity returned to the bridge and the *Hawk* began to steam slowly past the fort into the harbour. Two or three sentinels on the hill watched her progress, but they having seen her boarded by one of their officials doubtless concluded that all was well. Meanwhile Mr. Dykes had managed to convince the dusky cox'n in the waiting boat alongside that his master would remain on board, whereupon the man saluted, cast off the painter, and steered his boat shorewards.

When the *Hawk* had rounded the bend which hid the upper portion of the harbour from view, Mr. Dykes gave vent to a sudden exclamation of astonishment.

"Durned if that ain't our old bug-trap?"

Looking in the direction indicated by the mate, Calamity saw the pirate gunboat beached just beyond the jetty and lying on her side, evidently for the purpose of being repaired. His assumption, then, had been correct: this island was a secret coaling station and place of refuge for the very few German vessels which were still at large. However, he made no comment aloud, and in a few more minutes the anchor was let go and the *Hawk* swung peacefully at her moorings.

The situation in which Calamity had voluntarily placed himself by entering this harbour was, as he fully realised, fraught with infinite peril. He knew that if he now attempted to escape he risked being sunk by the guns on the fort, yet he could not remain where he was much longer without being subjected to investigations which would result in capture, if not worse. Under the circumstances, therefore, there was only one thing to do, and that was to attack the fort and capture it. This plan, viewed impartially, seemed hopelessly impossible, especially if, as appeared highly probable, the fort were strongly garrisoned. Still, Calamity did not hesitate between this and the only alternative—surrender.

He sent for the two mates to whom, in a few curt sentences, he outlined his plan of action. It was simple in the extreme, and, by reason of its amazing boldness, might even be successful. The Germans, he argued, though regarding the vessel with suspicion, would hardly anticipate the landing of an armed party, which was what he contemplated. The brief twilight would soon descend, and, the *Hawk* being safely bottled up in the harbour, the enemy would probably not worry much about her till the morning; therefore the attack was to be carried out as soon as darkness fell.

When this had been explained Calamity and his officers set about making preparations for the landing. A party consisting of as many men as could be packed into the ship's boats was to effect a landing under cover of the darkness, while those left on board were to open fire on the fort with the machine-guns directly the enemy discovered the attack. By this means it was hoped to cover the landing operations and prevent the defenders turning their heavier guns on the storming party. To this end Mr. Dykes was placed in temporary command of the *Hawk*, Calamity himself undertaking to lead the attack from the shore.

In a remarkably short space of time the preparations were complete, and the only thing they waited for now was darkness—the swift, enveloping darkness of the tropics.

CHAPTER XIII

THE EBB TIDE

At last night came. Calamity gave the word and the men streamed out of the foc'sle, some rushing to the falls ready to lower the boats from the davits, others stowing arms and ammunition under the thwarts. Every man had his own particular duty to discharge; there was no confusion, no shouting of orders, no wild and objectless rushing about—everything was done

quietly and systematically.

"Stand by!"

The Captain's voice was low but penetrating. Everyone stood still at his post.

"Slip!"

The boats dropped from the davits, the falls were cast off, the oars flung out, and the bowmen stood up, ready to push off at the order. Quickly, and with scarce a sound, the landing party swarmed down the rope-ladders and took their places in the boats.

"Give way!"

As one man, the rowers bent to their oars, the boats shot out into the darkness, and were lost to view by those left on board. The oars had been muffled, so that the only sounds which could be heard were the soft splash of the blades as they dipped into the water and the creaking of the thwarts and stretchers. But soon these noises died away in the distance, and then all seemed perfectly still to the dark figures crouching beside the guns on the *Hawk's* decks.

About five minutes after the boats had left a tongue of flame suddenly leapt from the fort, followed by a dull boom. Evidently the Germans had just discovered the attack, and were attempting to sink the boats before they reached the shore. The sound of the gun had scarcely died away when Mr. Dykes passed the word to open fire on the fort, and there ensued a lively duel between the latter and the *Hawk*. As it was a pitch dark night, each side had to guide its fire by the flashes of the enemy's guns, so that, at first, the shooting was somewhat erratic. But, after a while, the Germans began to get the range of the *Hawk* and to make such good practice that Mr. Dykes had to order some of his men to fill bags with sand ballast and stack them along the bulwarks to afford additional protection to the gun crews. Unfortunately, the enemy's guns were of much heavier calibre than the *Hawk's*, so that, when a shell struck the vessel, it did considerable damage.

"By Gum!" ejaculated the mate, "this is getting durned hot."

He had not reckoned upon receiving such a tremendous fusillade from the fort, and, though by no means a timorous man, began to fear that the *Hawk* would be sunk at her moorings. So far as he was able to tell at present, there had been only a few casualties on board, the bulwarks and sandbags affording an excellent protection for the men working the guns, although, had it been daylight, these would probably have been of little avail. But the steamer herself had suffered considerably; the deck-houses were mostly in splinters, all the skylights had been smashed, and where the funnel had once stood there was now only a jagged stump. Once the enemy succeeded in battering down the defences, his guns would simply annihilate every living thing on board.

"I wish some of them shells would cut our cables," he murmured to himself, "then we could just skidoo out of the harbour, and the old man couldn't say a word."

The notion of slipping the cables himself and creeping out of the harbour occurred to him more than once, but each time he dismissed it from his mind. It would certainly savour of cowardice to leave Calamity and his men on the island without a chance to retreat, while, if the Captain should ever succeed in getting within reach of him afterwards, the consequences would be very far from pleasant.

By this time one of the *Hawk's* machine-guns had been put out of action, and still the fort kept up an unceasing bombardment. Mr. Dykes was now fervently hoping that Calamity would abandon the attack, return on board, and get out of this hornet's nest with all possible speed—if, of course, the steamer was not already too battered about to get under way. With this possibility in view, he sent a man to fetch McPhulach and was exceedingly surprised to learn that the engineer could not be found.

"Ain't he in his cabin?" he inquired.

"No, sir, nor yet in the engine-room," replied the messenger.

"But he must be, the skipper said he was to stand by the engines."

"'E's not there," repeated the man.

"See if he's in the alleyway."

The man departed but returned with the information that McPhulach was not in the alleyway. Moreover, nobody on board had seen him since the landing party left.

"Fetch up Mr. Sims," said the mate.

Mr. Sims was the second-engineer, a melancholy man with watery eyes, a pallid face, and chronic dyspepsia, who never mixed with the other officers or uttered a word if he could possibly help it. He was, too, an indifferent engineer; but, as McPhulach had once said, the biggest success as a nonentity he had ever met.

"How long will it take us to get under way?" inquired the mate when Mr. Sims appeared.

"Half an hour, may be."

"What!" ejaculated Mr. Dykes.

Mr. Sims nodded in confirmation of his statement.

"Ain't there no steam, then?"

Mr. Sims shook his head.

"Then what in thunder have you been doing down there? Didn't you have orders to keep up a full head of steam?"

Mr. Sims nodded.

"For God's sake use your tongue, man," roared the mate. "Why ain't there no steam?"

"Because all the firemen are on deck."

Mr. Dykes almost danced with rage, yet this time he could say nothing for the simple reason that he now recollected having ordered all hands on deck for the purpose of serving the guns and passing up ammunition out of the hold.

"Oh, get to hell out of it!" he spluttered and Mr. Sims vanished back into obscurity.

Having despatched some firemen below to get up steam, the mate again fell to considering the advisability of drawing off since the enemy's fire showed no signs of slackening. To do him justice, it was not from fear of being himself hit at any moment, but rather from a vivid anticipation of the fate in store for him and the others on board if they fell into the hands of the enemy. Still, if Mr. Sims's report was correct, nothing could be done for at least half an hour.

In order to assure himself that the firemen were doing their utmost, Mr. Dykes left the bos'n's-mate in charge of the deck and descended to the stokehold—a thing he would not have dared to do had McPhulach been on board. Having ascertained that there was already a fair pressure of steam, he returned to the deck and personally tested the capstans used for hauling up the anchors.

"I'm goin' to get out of this death-trap," he said to the bos'n's-mate, "so stand by to pick up the anchor. Keep the men at the guns till I give the word to cease firing, else them durned Germans will smell a rat and butt in before we can quit."

"Ow about the Cap'n, sir?" asked the man doubtfully.

"Damn your eyes, do what I tell you, and don't ask fool questions!" snapped the mate.

The man walked away, somewhat unwillingly Mr. Dykes thought, which made him all the more angry and determined to carry out his plan. He wasn't going to be dictated to by a swab of a bos'n's-mate or anyone else so long as he was in charge of the ship.

Having rung down "Stand by" to the engine-room, he went on to the foc'sle head to superintend the weighing of the anchor. When all was ready and he was about to pass the word to the man at the steam capstan, Miss Fletcher suddenly appeared on the foc'sle.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Get under way," he answered curtly.

"And leave the Captain and his men in the lurch?"

"There ain't any Captain, nor men either, by now, so just quit this foc'sle," answered the mate in a voice of suppressed rage.

"That's as it may be," said the girl quietly, "but you're not going to heave that anchor."

"Eh!" exclaimed Mr. Dykes, scarce able to believe his ears.

"I say that you shan't leave this harbour till the Captain comes on board."

For a moment Mr. Dykes was so overcome with mingled astonishment and indignation that he could not speak. Then, uttering an oath, he sprang towards her, apparently with the intention of thrusting her off the foc'sle. Suddenly, however, he stopped dead as he caught sight of a revolver in the girl's hand. Then, while they still stood eyeing each other, the vessel gave an unexpected lurch which nearly threw them off their feet. The mate sprang to the side and gazed down into the dark water below.

"Euchred!" he ejaculated. "The tide's runnin' out and we're fast aground."

CHAPTER XIV

THE ATTACK

Having failed in his attempt to effect a landing without discovery, Calamity regarded the crossfire between the fort and the *Hawk* as the next best thing, as it would to some extent

distract the attention of the Germans from his own operations. Nevertheless, the defenders did not concentrate their fire wholly on the steamer, and some of their guns were firing, more or less promiscuously, into the harbour. Fortunately, they did not appear to have either searchlights or illuminating shells, for it was only the darkness and consequent inaccurate aim of the gunners that prevented the little force from being annihilated before a single boat touched the shore. Even as it was, the water around them was constantly sending up cascades where shells or fragments of bursting shrapnel struck it.

"Pull like hell!" roared Calamity above the din.

The men needed no urging and the boats leapt through the water with oars that bent under the strain. Suddenly, above the thunder of the guns, a terrible cry was heard, and where there had been a boatload of men a moment before, there was now only some splintered wreckage with a few wounded men clinging to it. Yet none dared go to their assistance for that would have meant inevitable destruction now that one, at least, of the enemy's guns had found the range. So, deaf to the shrieks of their comrades, the men in the remaining boats pulled like demons, expecting every moment to be blown out of the water by a well-placed shot. But at last the first boat, which was under the charge of the Captain himself, grounded. The men leapt out, waist-deep in the water, and, grabbing their rifles and cartridge belts, waded ashore. The other boats quickly followed, and Calamity, collecting his force, led it up the beach at the double towards some warehouses or "go-downs" that served to screen the enemy's fire.

Here he let them have a few minutes "stand-easy," while he consulted with his lieutenants, Smith and the bos'n. He had already formed a fairly accurate idea of the nature and strength of the defences to be overcome, and had arranged his plans accordingly. The fort, so far as he had been able to ascertain with the aid of glasses when steaming past it, appeared to be built principally of mud and shale with an outer defence consisting of a tall bamboo stockade. The approach from the harbour side consisted of a very steep incline which seemed totally devoid of any sort of cover and without anything in the nature of a road or track. But the fact that it was so steep placed the defenders at one disadvantage, because it made it practically impossible for them to train their big guns on the attacking force, although a well-directed musketry fire could not fail to cause fearful havoc in the latter's ranks. Still, Calamity's chief asset was the darkness, which, for one thing, prevented the Germans from seeing what a ridiculously small force he had with him.

Calamity gave the order to advance, the party left the shelter of the "go-downs," and moved towards the hill in open order. It was not till they started to climb that the enemy showed himself to be aware of their presence on the island. Then a brisk rifle-fire was opened on them from the fort, but the aim was too high, and the bullets flew harmlessly above the sailors' heads. Even by the time they were halfway up, only one man had been hit, and his wound was so slight that he continued to advance with the others. But now with each forward step the danger increased, and, as the attackers drew nearer and nearer to the stockade the bullets came perilously near, one or two men dropping out of the advance. But the long, thin line of creeping figures never wavered, though not one of them had as yet fired a shot. For the last fifty yards or so they simply crawled forward on their bellies, while a hail of bullets whistled above their heads.

Then, high above the din, there arose the long, shrill call of the bos'n's pipe. This was the signal to storm the fort, and the men, leaping to their feet, rushed across the few remaining yards that separated them from the stockade. While some, slinging their rifles across their backs, made prodigious efforts to scale the bamboo defences, others, provided with dynamite cartridges, tried to blow gaps in it to enable their comrades to enter. For a few minutes there was a terrific struggle, those of the attacking party who had succeeded in getting over or through the stockade, engaging in fierce hand-to-hand encounters with the defenders, using whatever weapon came handiest, rifle-butt, sheath-knife, or simply bare fists. But eventually the seamen, finding themselves hopelessly outnumbered, began to waver and fall back, fighting desperately all the time. At last they were forced to abandon the hardly-won ground altogether and then, as if acting on a common impulse, they turned and fled.

The Captain made a vain attempt to rally them, but they were unnerved, and, heedless of his shouts, fled in panic down the hill, till they reached the shelter of the "go-downs" at the bottom of the slope.

"To the boats!" cried someone. "We've 'ad enough of this 'ell. To the boats!"

But just as the men were about to make a move towards the water's edge, there came the sound of a terrific explosion and a great flame shot upwards from the fort on the hill, lighting up the landscape with a weird, lurid glare that must have been observable for miles around. Calamity's first thought was that a shell from the *Hawk* had exploded the magazine in the fort, but, whatever the cause, he saw here an opportunity to convert a rout into a victory.

"Fall in!" he shouted.

At sight of the disaster which had overtaken the enemy, the men regained their courage, and, forming into line once more, followed their Captain up the slope. On this occasion no deadly fire swept down upon them, and, in the light of the flames, they could see small bodies of terrified soldiers scrambling over the stockade or forcing their way through the gaps, in panic-stricken endeavours to escape from the blazing enclosure.

"Steady, lads!" cried Calamity. "Now give it them."

The straggling line of seamen halted, and next moment a hail of lead swept through the chaotic mass of Germans with fearful effect. Another volley followed, and some of the fugitives, in their terror, dashed back towards the blazing fort while others, more cool-headed, flung themselves flat upon the ground. Even so, a heap of dead and wounded lay around the stockade, and the few who had escaped threw up their arms in token of surrender.

Since it was impossible to enter the fort here owing to the flames, Calamity led his men round to the other side which, so far, had escaped the fire, and gave the word to attack. With a wild yell of triumph, the party rushed up to the palisades and those who could not scale them, smashed a way through with their rifle butts. So far there had been no resistance, but, as Calamity reformed his men inside the enclosure, some twenty or thirty soldiers advanced upon them, led by an officer who appeared to be the commandant of the fort. The space was too confined for an exchange of rifle-fire and so the two parties immediately engaged in a close encounter with whatever weapons came handiest. The defenders fought with the desperate courage of men determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible, the seamen with the savage ferocity of men still smarting under defeat and eager to avenge it. Yet so fierce was the resistance that it seemed as though the *Hawk's* party might even now be forced to retreat, when, from the dense smoke in the Germans' rear, there came the sound of shots. The defenders, believing themselves attacked by another force from behind, threw down their arms, and their officer called out that he surrendered unconditionally.

There was a brief lull while Smith and the bos'n took charge of the prisoners. Then suddenly above the crackling of the flames, there arose, from amidst the smoke, a hoarse, stentorian voice bawling:

"Oh I'll tak' the high road,
An' you'll tak' the low——"

The voice ceased abruptly and there staggered into the open the figure of Phineas McPhulach, a revolver in one hand and a gin-bottle—which, at the moment, he was holding up to his mouth—in the other.

"For the days of auld Lang Syne!"

bellowed the engineer as he removed the bottle from his lips.

Then, heedless of the sensation he was causing among friend and foe alike, he commenced to dance a Highland fling, at the same time waving the revolver above his head and firing it to the peril of all beholders. Suddenly he threw the weapon from him, tried to execute a complicated step, failed, and collapsed on a heap of smoking timber.

"How the devil did you get here?" demanded Calamity.

A beatific but uncomprehending smile illumined the engineer's face and he made a vain effort to raise the gin-bottle to his lips.

"It's a—hic—mighty square bus—hic—iness," he murmured.

"Get up," commanded the Captain.

"Eh, mon, but will ye no hae a wee sup o' this—hic—cordial. It's a verra——"

His voice died away into an incoherent murmur, his eyes closed, and he emitted a lusty snore. Calamity seized his arm and dragged him to his feet; but McPhulach, still snoring, slid gently back into his former recumbent position. Suddenly, however, he sat up with a jerk and his expression changed from befuddled contentment to genuine horror.

"Mon!" he cried, pointing a trembling finger in front of him, "D'ye ken yon snake? An' losh presairve us, there's anither beastie, a pink ane, wi' thairty legs!"

He raised the bottle above his head and threw it with all his might at the imaginary reptile, narrowly missing Calamity.

"Smith!" called the latter, "take this drunken sot back to the ship and pour a bucket of cold water over him."

With the assistance of a couple of men, the inebriated engineer was raised to his feet. After a vain attempt to embrace Calamity, whom he addressed as "me ain dear mither," and to kiss one of the German prisoners, he burst into tears and was carried away by four seamen, who ducked him in the water before depositing him in the bottom of one of the boats. Here, although soaked to the skin, he fell into a peaceful slumber, from which he did not awake till the morning, when he found himself back in his bunk.

In the meantime, the prisoners were marched down the hill and placed in the "go-down," except the commandant, whom Calamity wished to question concerning the place where the booty taken by the gunboat was stored—for it was pretty certain the Germans had not left it on board her. He was, however, unable at first to elicit any satisfactory reply, the prisoner declaring that he knew nothing about it.

"Very well," said Calamity, "since you refuse to tell me, I must take measures to induce you to change your mind."

"What is that?" asked the prisoner, starting. Like most German officers, he understood English perfectly.

"I mean," answered the Captain suavely, "that if your memory is at fault concerning the disposal of the gunboat's plunder, I shall try and find some means of refreshing it."

"You would not dare to torture me, sir!" exclaimed the commandant, turning pale.

"There are a few things I wouldn't dare, perhaps, but that's not one of them."

At last the commandant, fearing that his captor was in earnest, reluctantly gave the required information, and Calamity, with the bos'n and half a dozen picked men, made his way to the place indicated. There they found, on the side of the hill, a strong iron door, in front of which was a narrow foot-track about twenty yards long, evidently the result of sentinels pacing up and down. This door, of course, was securely fastened, but a charge of dynamite sufficed to blow it in, and Calamity, followed by the others, who carried storm lanterns, entered. There was nothing romantic or suggestive of Aladdin's cave about the place; in fact, it looked much like an ordinary store-house, with cases and packages stacked around it.

"Open that," said Calamity, indicating one of several heavily sealed cases, edged with metal.

After some little difficulty, for the case was very stoutly made, the top was knocked off, revealing bars of bullion.

"Very good," murmured the Captain, "very good."

From the marks on the cases, he judged that the gold had been sent out from England to a Colonial bank. Obviously the ship carrying it had been stopped and robbed by the German pirate-captain, who, taking one thing with another, appeared to have been both industrious and successful in the profession of his adoption. A methodical search showed that there were quite a number of these cases, not all of them bearing the same marks, for some were French, and must have been taken from a different ship. There were other things besides bullion: bales of cloth, cases of wines and spirits, tobacco and cigars, and so forth. A money-chest, well stocked with English, American, and German notes and gold, was probably the property of the German Government for use in paying wages, purchasing coal, ammunition, and such-like necessaries, while the Kaiser's cruisers were still at large in the Pacific.

Dawn was breaking and the fires which had consumed the fort were dying down as if satiated, when the treasure, strongly guarded, was taken on board the *Hawk*, where, under Calamity's personal supervision, it was carefully stowed away.

CHAPTER XV

MCPHULACH EXPLAINS

On the following morning Calamity went ashore, Mr. Dykes having preceded him for the purpose of finding out what stores, coal, and so forth had escaped the fire. Of coal there proved to be an abundance stored in a "go-down" near the little jetty that ran out into the harbour, and so arrangements were made to replenish the *Hawk's* bunkers, which were running low.

"By the way," said the Captain after Mr. Dykes had made his report, "have you come across any natives? Surely there ought to be some on an island like this."

"Well, sir, I guess if there ever were any they've been cleared out by the squareheads," answered the mate. "I ain't seen a sign of one."

"Well, come with me and bring half a dozen men with you," said Calamity, and led the way up the hill to the smoking remains of the fort. Upon the very summit a spar was set up on end with the Union Jack nailed to it, and Calamity formally annexed the island in the name of His Britannic Majesty, King George the Fifth. This done, the Captain, accompanied by Mr. Dykes, paid a visit to the beached gunboat and found that, although her propeller had been damaged, the work of repair was all but completed. Moreover, in a shed near by they found a forge and a well-fitted engineer's workshop, with all the tools and machinery for repairing damaged engines.

"This is better than I could have hoped," said Calamity. "They seem to have established a regular small dockyard here."

"German thoroughness, sir," answered the mate. "You see, if any of their small boats in the Pacific got knocked about they could put in here for repairs. I'll bet the *Emden* would have quitted business long ago if it hadn't been for this little cosy corner."

"Well, we'll take over the gunboat since we can't cram all the prisoners on board the *Hawk*, otherwise I should blow her up."

"Don't know how you're going to officer her, sir."

"We must manage somehow," answered Calamity.

Mr. Dykes, however, mildly protested. He pointed out that there were only himself and Smith available to take command of her, and, since only one of them could be spared from the *Hawk*, the whole work of navigating the gunboat would fall on one man.

"It would mean that he'd have to be on the bridge practically night and day, sir," he concluded.

"You'll have to make the best arrangements you can, that's all."

"Me, sir!" ejaculated the mate.

"Yes, I shall place you in command of the gunboat with some of the *Hawk's* men. You must divide the watches with the bos'n's-mate and any other man you like to select. You may pick your crew."

Mr. Dykes groaned, but decided that it was not safe to offer any further objections. To be placed in command of a steamer without even one reliable officer under him, and with, perhaps, twenty or more prisoners on board, was a great deal more than he had bargained for.

"What about an engineer, sir?" he asked.

"You can have Sims."

The mate choked back the remark he was about to make concerning the qualities of Mr. Sims. But inwardly he vowed that, if the second-engineer had no conception of what hell might be like, he would be in possession of a good working theory before he left the gunboat.

"Now that's settled," went on the Captain, "you had better go aboard her and make preparations for coaling and victualling."

"Very good, sir," answered Mr. Dykes in a spiritless voice, and departed in deep dudgeon. Had the Captain shown any inclination to listen to his advice, he would have suggested leaving the prisoners on the island under a strong guard, till the British authorities were informed and could send a vessel to take them away. However, to argue with Calamity would be about as cheerful a job as trying experiments with a live shell, and so the mate wisely accepted his burden with what fortitude he could muster.

Having acquainted himself with what resources the one-time German colony possessed, Calamity returned to the *Hawk*. He was anxious to consult McPhulach concerning the repairs to the engines and other parts of the ship which had suffered from the fort's guns on the preceding night. There was to be explained, also, the mystery of the engineer's presence in the fort, when, according to orders, he should have been in the engine-room of the *Hawk*.

"Where is Mr. McPhulach?" asked the Captain as soon as he stepped on board.

"In his cabin, sir," answered one of the men.

"Then go and fetch him—no, stay though, I'll go to him myself," and Calamity made his way to the engineer's abode.

"Wha's there?" inquired a feeble voice in answer to the Captain's knock.

Calamity, instead of answering, opened the door and stepped in. The cabin was darkened by having the curtains drawn across the ports, but he could make out the figure of McPhulach propped up in his bunk with the aid of a battered leather bag and a pillow. The engineer presented a sorry spectacle; his head was enveloped in a wet towel, and on a locker by his side stood a cup of tea and a half-eaten slice of dry toast.

"How are you?" inquired the Captain, drawing the curtains apart to admit the daylight.

"I'm no verra weel, an' I thank ye," replied McPhulach, still in a feeble voice. "Ma heid is like a footba' filled wi' lead."

"Naturally," remarked the Captain coldly.

"Aye, I ken it weel," groaned the sufferer.

"What I want to know is, how the devil you got into the fort and what you did when you got there," went on Calamity.

"It's a mighty quare business, skeeper, an' I dinna a'together ken it mesel'."

"You were ordered to remain on board, instead of which, I suppose, you smuggled yourself into one of the boats when they put off."

"Weel, I didna swim," answered McPhulach testily, and held his aching head in both hands.

"You disobeyed orders."

There was an ominous ring in the Captain's voice which made the victim of alcoholic excess pull himself together sharply.

"It was a' due to a nightmare I had, d'ye ken?" he said, thinking as hard as his befuddled brain would permit.

"A nightmare! What in hell are you talking about?"

"Weel, I must ha' walked in ma sleep. I thocht ma second—or mebbe 'twas ma thaird—wife was after me...."

McPhulach rambled on till Calamity, losing patience, pulled him up and demanded to know the truth. It came out gradually, and the Captain learnt that, just as the boats were putting off from the *Hawk*, McPhulach had been seized with an irresistible desire to feel dry land under him again. So, unobserved in the darkness, he had slipped into the last boat and been taken ashore. There he mingled with the men and advanced with them in the first attack. During the fight which followed, he succeeded in scaling the stockade and had just landed safely on the other side when a soldier sprang forward and clubbed him with the butt-end of a rifle. For a time he lay there unconscious, but, on coming to, quickly realised that he was inside the stockade and might be killed at any moment. As this latter contingency did not figure on his programme, he started to crawl away and at last came to an orderly-room which was untenanted. Taking careful observations, he noticed on the table several bottles of spirits, and drew the conclusion that the place was a sort of smoking-room used by the officers of the fort; at any rate, he decided to sample the contents of the bottles.

By the time he had finished what must have been nearly two pints of mixed spirits, he felt equal to taking the fort single-handed; in fact, as he now confessed to Calamity, he would have charged a whole battalion.

"I didna quite ken what to do," he said, gazing dreamily out of the porthole, "so I sat doon on the doorstep an' waited for ma temper to rise."

Apparently it rose pretty quickly, for soon afterwards he wandered out into the dark enclosure—having first placed the remains of a bottle of gin in his pocket—to see what he could do. As a start, he drew his revolver and one of the first shots, fired at random, hit a charge of powder as it was being removed from the magazine.

"An' after that," concluded the engineer wearily, "I kened no mair."

"I see," murmured Calamity, for now the mysterious explosion which had resulted in the capture of the fort was explained. "I suppose," he added, with unwonted geniality, "you don't remember trying to kill pink snakes with an empty gin-bottle?"

McPhulach slowly shook his head.

"I ca' to mind seein' a green spider an' a blue centipede creepin' across yon bulkhead a whiles since," he replied. "But ye meet wi' unco' quare animals in these latitudes."

Calamity rose to his feet.

"I've a good mind to log you a week's pay for disobeying orders," he said.

The threat did not seem to impress the engineer, who suddenly leant over the side of his bunk and stared fixedly at the floor.

"I'll hae to get a rat-trap," he murmured.

CHAPTER XVI

CALAMITY KEEPS HIS WORD

The next day a number of sampans and canoes loaded with fruit, vegetables, and flowers, came alongside the *Hawk*. Mr. Dykes had been in error when he stated his belief that the Germans had cleared all the natives out. As it was discovered afterwards, the people had fled to the interior on hearing the guns and had only come back that afternoon.

Smith, walking along the deck, caught sight of Dora Fletcher leaning over the taffrail, just below which was a sampan loaded with wonderful tropical flowers. Its owner had been endeavouring to sell these, but without much success, because none of the crew wanted flowers, being chiefly concerned with the eatables.

"How much?" asked the girl of the native in the sampan.

The man did not understand English, but he comprehended the girl's gestures, and made some unintelligible reply.

Miss Fletcher, seeing Smith, asked if he would help her.

"Like a bird," answered the second-mate cheerfully, and, addressing the owner of the flowers, shouted something in the vernacular.

"Well?" queried the girl, when the man had answered.

"He says," answered Smith, "that you can have all those flowers for a pair of old trousers."

The girl stared at him with a look of astonishment that gradually gave place to amusement.

"It's the truth, straight," went on Smith, as though she had questioned the accuracy of his translation.

"What am I to do?" she asked helplessly. "I wanted those flowers."

"I dunno, unless—half a mo' though. I'll be back in a jiff," and the second-mate darted off towards his cabin.

He returned a couple of minutes later with a pair of greasy, paint-daubed trousers over his arm.

"Here, corffee-dial," he said, and flung the garments into the sampan.

The native's face expanded into a broad grin, he cast an approving eye over the discarded trousers, and then started to hand up the flowers.

"How's that?" demanded Smith triumphantly, when the sampan had been emptied.

"It's very kind of you," answered the girl. "How much do I owe you for the trousers?"

"Owe me!" ejaculated the other. Then he smiled. "Well, I reckon I could have got a bob for them from a Whitechapel Sheeny."

"Then I owe you a shilling."

Smith nodded. He knew she would insist on paying him that shilling and was wondering how on earth she would raise it. He helped her to carry the flowers away and heap them on the bunk in her cabin.

"Oh, aren't they lovely?" she murmured.

"Um—m, I s'pose so," answered Smith, eyeing them critically, "but I'd rather have a cokernut myself," whereupon he departed.

Dora Fletcher, susceptible to beauty herself, was amused at the second-mate's polite contempt for the flowers. She began to arrange them about the cabin, and, while doing so, was struck by a whimsical thought.

What, she wondered, would the grim and taciturn Captain think if he came back and found his cabin full of tastefully arranged flowers?

She paused for a minute with one finger on her underlip, considering the startling proposition. Then her mouth curved in an ironical little smile, and, half-amused, half-contemptuous of her action, she gathered up some scarlet hibiscus into a bunch and made her way towards the Captain's cabin. Descending the companion quietly, she found herself for the second time in that mysterious sanctum. It was not very large, and there were none of the homely decorations—photographs, pictures, and so forth—with which some skippers decorate their quarters. Some maps and charts, a pair of pistols, one or two bracket-shelves with books hung from the bulkheads, and the sideboards were littered with odds and ends—tobacco-pipes, half-empty boxes of matches, and other masculine lumber. The place reeked, too, of strong tobacco, and there were two or three cigar-butts lying on the table.

The girl glanced around her with an expression of mingled amusement and perplexity, then took a tumbler from the rack and filled it with water. Having arranged the flowers in it to her satisfaction, she stood for a moment surveying the effect, with that half-ironical smile still playing about her lips.

As she stood thus, the cabin door opened softly and she swung round, the blood mounting in a crimson flood to her face. But, with a gasp of relief, she saw that the intruder was Sing-hi and not the Captain, and her heart ceased beating tumultuously.

The imperturbable celestial showed not the slightest sign of surprise at finding her there, and merely greeted her with his usual urbane smile.

"Sing-hi, I have been putting some flowers here for the Captain," she said; "but you're not to tell him I've been here—savee?"

"Savee," answered Sing-hi, and the girl left the cabin feeling tolerably sure that the Chinaman would not betray her.

She was quite correct in this assumption, for, after watching her disappear up the companion, Sing-hi shuffled back into the cabin, emptied the flowers out of the port, dried the glass, and returned it to the rack.

During the afternoon McPhulach, who had recovered from the effects of his debauch, went ashore to meet Calamity. The engineer wished to inspect the workshop and the plant it contained, in order to make arrangements for repairing the *Hawk's* engines as speedily as possible. Also, since the Captain had decided to convey some of the prisoners to Singapore in the gunboat, the latter had to be examined and overhauled before she could be floated; thus, in one way and another, McPhulach and his staff were likely to be kept busy for several days to come.

Leaving the engineer to attend to these matters, Calamity went in search of Mr. Dykes, whom he found superintending the loading of lighters with coal for replenishing the *Hawk's* bunkers. To facilitate this work, the mate had pressed some of the German prisoners into his service and

these were employed in transferring the coal from the "go-down" to the jetty.

"Thought I might as well make use of these squareheads, sir," he explained when the Captain came up.

"Where are the others?"

"Still in the shack yonder, sir. Before rations were served out this morning I made 'em all take a bath in the harbour. One of 'em, who speaks English, said he should complain to you."

"On account of the bath?"

"Yes, sir. Called it cruelty towards defenceless prisoners."

"We'll see about that later. How many have you got, Mr. Dykes?"

"Somewhere between thirty and forty I guess, sir. One of them—the slob who complained about the bath—reckons that the explosion and the fire did for about the same number, not countin' those who were killed and wounded in the fighting."

"Which means that there must have been about a hundred men in the fort all told."

"That's how I figger it out, sir."

"Well, you'd better fetch the prisoners out, Mr. Dykes, and I'll have a look at them," said Calamity.

Accordingly they were marched out of the "go-down" under an armed guard and paraded before the Captain. Most of them were soldiers, but a few had formed part of the gunboat's crew and belonged to the German Naval Reserve.

"Which is the man who wishes to make a complaint?" asked Calamity, when the prisoners had filed past him.

"You with the grouch, fall out!" cried the mate.

A man in sailor's uniform stepped out of the ranks, and, drawing himself up stiffly, saluted the Captain. The latter, as he glanced at him more closely, started, and a look of recognition flashed between the two.

"Your name?" asked Calamity.

"Fritz Siemann, sir," answered the prisoner.

"Mr. Dykes," said the Captain, "have this man sent aboard the *Hawk*, and see that he's kept away from the other prisoners."

"Very good, sir," answered the mate, who supposed that Calamity was going to deal with the grumbler in a manner that would check any further display of discontent.

When, later on in the day, the Captain returned on board the *Hawk*, he ordered Fritz Siemann to be brought to his cabin. The prisoner was brought in by a couple of sailors, who, at a word from Calamity, left them together.

"This is a strange meeting, my worthy Fritz," said the Captain, looking at the man with an ironical smile.

The prisoner shrugged his shoulders, but made no answer. He was a man of between thirty and forty, very fair, tall, and with a pair of small, cunning eyes.

"Well, how is it that I find you out here in the Pacific, a sailor instead of a valet?" asked the Captain after a pause.

"I came out on a cruiser as a Naval Reservist, and was afterwards transferred to the gunboat," answered the fellow.

"When did you leave England?"

"A day or two before war was declared."

"You were recalled by the German Government?"

"Yes."

"H'm; and how was your master when you left?"

"He died about three months before I went," answered the man.

"Died!"

"Yes, sir, he fell from his horse while hunting."

Calamity was silent for some moments, and then he turned once more to the German.

"Did he ever mention my name in your presence?"

"Not often, but he was always trying to find out if you were dead."

A grim smile stole over the Captain's face at this. Somehow it seemed to amuse him.

"But, so far as you know, he was never able to find out for certain?"

"I don't think so, but everyone thought you were dead, except Mr. Vayne."

"Yes, Vayne was the only friend I had," muttered the Captain. He turned sharply to the prisoner. "Did my brother pay you well for assisting him in his rascality?"

"I—I don't understand," faltered the German nervously.

"Nevertheless, I should advise you to try," answered Calamity quietly, "it may save you considerable discomfort. Now, answer my question."

"He paid me well enough while I was in his service," growled the man reluctantly; "but, as for rascality——"

"I'm referring to the forged cheque," broke in the Captain.

The prisoner started and shot a keen glance at him.

"Forged cheque?" he repeated as if puzzled.

"I am perfectly aware of the part you played in that little affair, so don't risk your neck by trying to prevaricate. As it is, I'm half inclined to hang you here and now, but you shall assuredly swing, my lad, if you utter a single lie."

The ex-valet turned deathly pale, for he realised that the threat was no empty one. He shifted uneasily from one foot to another, glanced furtively round the cabin as if considering the possibilities of escape, and finally let his gaze rest on the Captain.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked sullenly.

"I want you to tell me the truth, and bear in mind that your life depends on it."

"About the cheque?"

"About the cheque."

"He forged it."

"How do you know?"

"I was in the room with him?"

"You helped him, in fact?"

"I suppose so."

"By God, you deserve to be hanged if ever a man did," exclaimed the Captain.

"You asked me to tell you the truth, sir," said the man, shrinking back.

"Get on with your story."

"There's nothing much to tell, sir. The scheme worked without a hitch, and everyone was deceived—except Mr. Vayne; he was always doubtful."

"Well, and what did you get out of it? Such assistance as you gave was invaluable."

"Five hundred pounds."

"H'm, a very profitable stroke of business on your part, especially as it placed you in a position to levy blackmail at will. Now what fee"—an ugly expression crossed the Captain's face as he uttered this—"do you require in consideration of your writing down a full account of that interesting transaction and signing it in the presence of witnesses?"

The other hesitated a moment.

"A thousand pounds in cash and a guarantee that I shall not be handed over to the British authorities as a prisoner of war."

"Agreed. You shall have the money in English and American notes as soon as you have prepared the document."

"And if I change my mind?"

"Why, then," answered Calamity with a genial smile, "it'll be the last time you ever change it on this earth," and, rising, he laid pen, ink, and paper before the prisoner.

"Call the steward when you have finished and he will send for me," said Calamity as he left the cabin.

For nearly an hour the German wrote steadily, pausing every now and again to read what he had written. When at last he had finished he called for the steward.

"Tell the Captain I'm ready," he said as Sing-hi appeared in the doorway.

The Chinaman nodded and a few minutes afterwards the Captain entered, accompanied by Smith and McPhulach.

"Be seated, gentlemen," said Calamity, himself taking a chair. "I have brought you here," he went on, "to witness the signature of a document which this man has written. He will read it over first, and when I tell you that every word is absolutely confidential, I feel sure you will both observe the strictest secrecy. At least," he added significantly, "it will be to your advantage to do so."

The two witnesses murmured assent and settled themselves down to listen. Then, at a nod from the Captain, Fritz picked up the paper and began to read. At the start, the engineer and the second-mate looked mildly surprised, but as the man read on their expressions changed to amazement and they stared from the reader to Calamity with looks of mingled incredulity and awed wonder. At length the prisoner, having finished reading the document, laid it on the table and signed it.

"Blimey!" muttered Smith under his breath.

"A mighty quare business," remarked McPhulach.

"Now, gentlemen," said Calamity, "I will ask you to append your signatures as witnesses of this interesting confession."

Smith picked up the pen, and, after a preparatory flourish, signed his name. Then he handed the pen to McPhulach, who took it somewhat gingerly.

"I'm no incurrin' ony liabeelity?" he asked cautiously.

"None whatever," answered the Captain.

"I dinna hauld wi' signing papers mesel'," went on the engineer, "it's producteeve of unco——"

"Are you going to sign that paper or not?" interrupted the Captain.

McPhulach hesitated no longer, but hastily scrawled his signature underneath Smith's.

"Thank you both," said Calamity; "that's all I shall need."

Smith and the engineer, taking the hint, departed and left the Captain with his prisoner.

"Now you want your reward, I suppose," remarked Calamity, and, stepping into his little sleeping cabin, he brought out the money-chest which had been taken from the treasure-house in the fort. From this he counted out the equivalent of one thousand pounds, most of it, at the prisoner's request, in American notes.

"You must give me a receipt for these," he said.

The man wrote out a receipt, signed it, and took in exchange the parcel of notes.

"You've promised not to hand me over to the British, remember," said he.

"I shan't forget it," answered the Captain. "There are quite enough scoundrels in English prisons already, without adding to their number."

"And I can't go back to the island."

"I suppose not. Well, I will see what can be done, and in the meantime you had better stay here."

Calamity locked the document in a steel deed-box, placed it under the bunk in his sleeping-cabin, and then went on deck, having previously told Sing-hi to keep watch outside the cabin and not to let the prisoner leave it. He was somewhat puzzled with regard to the promise he had made Fritz Siemann, for, should he be taken to Singapore with the other prisoners, he would certainly be interned. The only way out of it, seemingly, was to put in at some neutral port and land the man there.

Some two hours later he returned to the cabin and found the prisoner seated on the settee ostensibly reading a book.

"I hope," said the Captain quietly, "you find the book entertaining, Mr. Siemann?"

"Ye—yes, thank you," answered the man rather nervously.

"May I ask, purely as a matter of curiosity, whether you always read your books upside down?"

The volume slipped from the German's hand and he muttered a guttural oath.

"I just picked it up as you came in," he said.

"And did your investigations meet with success?"

"My—I don't understand."

"I mean," went on the Captain, "did you succeed in your efforts to force that deed-box and abstract your confession?"

The prisoner's face changed colour, but he tried to bluster out a denial.

"I—I haven't touched the box," he said.

"Then it's rather strange that your jacket should be smeared with white paint. You see, my bunk was re-painted only this——"

The Captain's remark was cut short, for the German suddenly sprang to his feet and aimed a terrific blow at him with a short, pointed sheath-knife. Calamity was just in time to avoid the weapon, which struck the table with such force that the point snapped off, while the would-be murderer stumbled forward under the impetus of the stroke. Before he could recover himself, the Captain had seized him by the throat, at the same time calling for Sing-hi.

"The irons out of my drawer," he said when the Chinaman appeared.

Sing-hi opened a drawer, took therefrom a pair of handcuffs and slipped them over the prisoner's wrists.

"You'd better lock the fellow in your pantry for the time being," said Calamity as he went out.

The same night Mr. Fritz Siemann—that is to say, his mortal remains—was lowered into the sea, sewed up in a canvas bag. And, inside that bag, besides the firebars used as sinkers, was the thousand pounds in notes.

Captain Calamity was not the man to break his word.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CONFESSION

During the next three days the work of repairing the *Hawk's* engines went on unceasingly under McPhulach's supervision. The gunboat, which, it was found, had already been repaired by the Germans, was floated, and arrangements were made for accommodating the prisoners she would have to carry. Calamity christened her *Satellite*, and the name was painted on her stern in big white letters over the word *Gnesen*, which had formerly been there.

On the afternoon of the day preceding Calamity's departure three of the guns in the fort which had escaped damage from the fire were rendered useless, while such stores, ammunition, and coal as could not be taken away were destroyed or flung into the sea. This seeming waste was necessary in order to prevent any stray vessel that might put in there from re-coaling or victualling with what would otherwise have been left.

On the following morning, McPhulach, grimy of person and half-dead from want of sleep, reported that the engines were in working order and that he had a full head of steam in the boilers. A few hours afterwards everything was ready for the departure; the prisoners had been divided into two lots, one being sent aboard the *Satellite*, now under the command of Mr. Dykes, and the other transferred to the *Hawk*, whose after-hold had been fitted up for the purpose.

A blast from the *Hawk's* syren gave the signal to weigh anchor; the winches rattled, the cables came rumbling up through the hawse-pipes, and the privateer slowly steamed towards the harbour mouth with the *Satellite* in her wake. As she passed the ruined fort with the Union Jack fluttering above it, she fired an irregular salute of three guns, while the *Satellite*, not to be outdone, dipped her flag.

Leaning over the *Hawk's* stern rail, watching the hissing water being churned into foam by the propeller, was Dora Fletcher. She was still there when the trees which lined the shore had dissolved into a vague green outline that presently took on a bluish tint, and finally became merged in the hills beyond. When the hills themselves faded, became blurred, and melted into the horizon leaving against the sky-line nothing but a dark smudge resembling a low-lying cloud, the girl had not moved from her post, but still continued to gaze with wistful eyes into the distance. Long before the brief twilight cast a cooling shadow across the flaming sky the last vestige of the island had faded out of sight and nothing was to be seen save an unbroken vista of sea that changed from green to grey, was for a few moments transformed into a shimmering expanse of molten gold in the rays of the dying sun, then slowly changed to purple, and so to a deep, unfathomable blue. Darker it grew as the twilight deepened, and when night abruptly blotted out the soft half-lights, the sea became a vast and trembling mirror, reflecting in its depths a thousand twinkling points of light.

It was not by any means the first time that Dora Fletcher had seen sea and sky swallow up the land, but for a reason she could not explain even to herself, there seemed to be something unusually depressing in this departure from the island. It was not that it had possessed any particular charm for her; she had seen lands far more beautiful and islands infinitely more picturesque—no, it was not this.

To add to her unaccountable depression came thoughts of her dead father and the great, empty future which lay before her. Now that her father had gone, she reflected, there was no one in all the world to whom she mattered, or who would miss her were she never to return. A sensation of utter loneliness descended upon her, and with it a strange foreboding, none the less disquieting

because it was so vague. She felt an urgent desire for human companionship, and, looking round the deck, saw that it was deserted. Smith was on the bridge, but she had no wish to speak to him, even had it been possible. And Mr. Dykes, now aboard the *Satellite*, would not have satisfied this hunger of her soul for fellowship. Her thoughts turned to the Captain, and him she did not dismiss from her mind, but lingered contemplatively upon this strange, taciturn man; so vital, so dominating.

Illogically, she found herself wishing that this cruise might last for ever; there was something soothing in the thought of her utter dependence on this man's will. For a moment she lingered luxuriously upon the thought of her life ordered and controlled by him, and gave herself up to a delicious feeling of absence from care and responsibility. Suddenly she experienced a revulsion of feeling, and flushed vividly with a sensation of shame. Was it possible, she asked herself angrily, that she was no stronger than some bread-and-butter miss who had lived sheltered all her days? Was she so dismayed because she must start life for herself, that she must needs wish for dependence and protection; in short, a master?

The cool night-wind fanned her hot cheeks and she made an effort to compose herself and reduce the chaos of her thoughts to some sort of order. Unfortunately for her efforts in this direction the door of the little deck-house above the companion-way opened, and turning, she saw the Captain himself.

"Good evening," she said, but for some reason her voice was half-choked and utterly unlike her own.

Something about her, perhaps the unconscious appeal of her graceful figure or the unusual note in her voice, arrested him as he was about to pass on.

"Good evening," he answered, a little less curtly than was his wont.

She hoped he would go on, but, as if recollecting something, he paused.

"I suppose you know we are bound for Singapore?" he said.

"Yes."

"Have you, by any chance, friends there?"

"No."

"I gathered from the papers you placed in my charge that your home is in England."

"My home is not in England," she answered; "it is here," and she waved her arm dramatically as if to indicate sea and space.

"At any rate, I presume you will go to England," he said, in nowise affected by her poetic suggestion.

"If I must."

"I can't force you to go anywhere against your will," he answered in the tone of one trying to keep patient. "If you take my advice, you will consult the British Consul."

"You seem very anxious to get rid of me!" exclaimed the girl with sudden bitterness. "Have I been such an encumbrance since I came on board?"

Calamity gazed at her flushed and angry face with surprise.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean this," she replied impulsively. "Ever since I have been on this ship you've either ignored me or else treated me as if I were a nuisance which had to be tolerated somehow. Yet I've done my share of the work, haven't I?"

The question was flung out like a challenge, and some moments elapsed before the Captain spoke. It was, perhaps, the first time he had ever considered this girl as an entity, as anything but an unwelcome passenger forced upon him by circumstances.

"What has all this to do with your destination?" he asked at last.

"Everything," she answered, in a voice that trembled with anger and indignation. "You ask me where I want to be sent, as though I were a—a—" her voice failed, and to the Captain's astonishment no less than her own, she burst into a passion of tears.

"You had better come to my cabin," said Calamity, when she had regained control of herself, and he led the way down the companion.

She felt abashed and humiliated now, and, metaphorically, kicked herself for her foolishness. Yet even so, she realised that this sudden burst of emotion had not been anger at his treatment of her, so much as despair at the thought that she must soon pass out of his life as utterly as though she had never been; that to him, henceforward, she would be something less, even, than a memory.

On reaching the cabin, Calamity shut the door and swung a chair round for her to sit upon.

"Now," he said, "just tell me what you want me to do. You say you have no home, and you object, apparently, to being placed in charge of the British Consul. What then?"

He spoke very quietly, almost gently, and because of this, perhaps, a feeling of utter hopelessness came over the girl.

"You must do as you think best," she answered in a voice from which all fire and spirit had gone.

"But just now you refused to let me do this."

"I know. I—I was foolish and unreasonable, I suppose."

Calamity remained silent for a minute or two, regarding her curiously. He read her better than she guessed. When he spoke again she recognised a new quality in his voice. It made her feel as if they two, though so near, were yet miles apart. There was a note of pity in it which hurt her more than anything she had ever known before because it demonstrated so positively the distance between them.

"You and I, Miss Fletcher," he said slowly, "can never be friends; at least, not in the sense I am thinking of, for our paths lie wide apart. If my assumption is wrong—and you have sense and discrimination enough to know what I mean by that—you must pardon me and put it down to lack of insight on my part, not to any presumption or vanity. If it is not wrong, you will understand without my saying more, why it is necessary that you should leave this ship for good at Singapore."

The girl was looking at him with large, startled eyes. What, she wondered, was that unnamable something about him which she had never observed before? Why was it that, of a sudden, he seemed to have assumed the guise of another class—a class about which she had read, but with which she had never come into contact? The bold, fearless sea-captain, the man of infinite resource, unscrupulous and even brutal, had disappeared. In his place was a quiet, self-contained gentleman, speaking in a low, kind voice; chiding her while he apologised for doing it.

In some subtle way he had made her feel pitifully small and ignorant; he awed her; but in a way she had never been awed before. It was impossible to resent this, because she did not know how to do so; it was something outside her experience. For the first time in her life she felt herself up against that indefinable power which for centuries has made the masses of the world subject to the few. It was something more than the power to command, it was the power to be obeyed.

There was a long pause, and then the girl, too proud to deny her love for him, spoke.

"You have not misunderstood me," she said, with a frankness that lent dignity to her confession. "Without knowing it I have come to love you. I think I would willingly and gladly have followed you to the uttermost ends of the earth; I would have suffered with and for you. I believed that I was meant for such as you; but you have made me see how foolish I have been. Don't think that I am ashamed you should know this. I'm not."

She stopped, her eyes fixed on his defiantly as though daring him to misunderstand her. In any other man but Calamity her words would have produced a deep impression, but he, to all appearances, was perfectly unmoved.

"We will forget all this," he said quietly. "The thing still to be settled is this matter of what's to become of you when we reach Singapore."

CHAPTER XVIII

DORA FLETCHER'S CHANCE

"From what you have told me, I assume you have no mother," Calamity went on. The note of pity had left his voice, and his manner, if not brusque, was cold and judicial.

"No," answered the girl, "my mother died when I was four years old." Her manner, too, had changed; all the heat and defiance had left it and she spoke in a subdued, colourless voice, as though these matters hardly concerned her.

"And you have no relatives living?"

"I have a couple of aunts in Sunderland. I stayed with them until I was eight years old. I—I hate them!" She made a passionate gesture as though the very mention of these people aroused bitter memories. "It was not that they were unkind exactly; but—well, it doesn't matter now. Soon after my eighth birthday my father took me away with him on a voyage to the East, and after that I went with him on nearly all his voyages. He educated me, too; taught me French, mathematics, navigation, and so on."

"Navigation, eh?" remarked Calamity with a note of surprise in his voice.

"Yes; if I had been a man I could have passed for mate and got my master's ticket long ago. I'd pit my knowledge of seamanship against that of any man on this ship," she concluded defiantly.

"That wouldn't be a very hard test," answered the Captain with a cynical smile. "But what did your father intend you to be; surely he didn't suppose you would eventually command a ship?"

"I don't know what his intentions were; but the trip before this last one, he bought a fruit farm near Los Angeles, California, and I think he meant to settle down there when he retired from the sea."

"Probably he thought it might provide you with an occupation."

"Perhaps so; but he never spoke of it."

"Then he had no home of his own in England?"

"No. The house my aunts occupy and several others in Sunderland were his, but he never lived in any of them."

"He made a will, I suppose?"

"Yes, it's among those papers that I handed over to you. I know everything's left to me, because he told me so when he made his will."

"H'm, then you're not so badly off after all. I should strongly advise you to go to California and see what you can do with the fruit-farm. It's both a healthy and remunerative occupation I've been told."

The girl nodded, but made no answer.

"What I propose to do is to take you to Singapore and place you under the protection of the British Consul, who, no doubt, will advise you concerning the proving of your father's will and so forth, for I know nothing of such matters."

"It's very kind of you," murmured the girl.

"Well now, I think that's all we can arrange for the present," said Calamity in a tone which intimated that the interview was at an end.

She rose, and, with a murmured "Good-night," left the cabin and mounted the companion-way to the deck. Slowly, as one in a dream, she made her way to her cabin, casting no glance at the unruffled sea with its millions of scintillating reflections. Her bold statement to Calamity, admittedly a declaration of love, had met with a rebuff which would have induced in most women a feeling of intolerable shame and, in all probability, inspired them with a lasting hatred of the man who had so humiliated them. But this was not the case with Dora Fletcher; she felt neither shame nor anger. Indeed, she would have been puzzled to say exactly what her feelings were, so incoherent and altogether strange were they. But she knew she had met a hitherto unrecognised force; that she had been awed not so much by a man as by a mysterious something inherent in him; by a quality rather than an individual.

During the next few days she avoided the Captain in every possible way. Not that he ever attempted to seek her out, for, since that memorable interview he seemed to have forgotten her existence as completely as though she had ceased to be. He had again become the grim, taciturn, and mysterious individual she had first encountered. Yet, despite the girl's avoidance of him, there was gradually developing in her mind a desire to do something which would exalt her in his eyes. She wanted to bridge that vague gulf between them; to achieve something which would prove her worth. It was a delightfully ingenious dream, only possible to a girl as unsophisticated and natural as this young Amazon of the Seas.

In due time and through no effort of her own, the hoped-for opportunity did occur and the girl was able to play the part she had so often pictured in her waking dreams. It came about, as such things usually do, in quite a fortuitous manner.

One day, about a week after her interview with Calamity, the weather, which had been remarkably fine since they left the island, showed signs of a change and before mid-day the sun had disappeared behind a curtain of sombre-tinted clouds. A wind sprang up and freshened as the day wore on, the sea became choppy, and a great bank of black clouds spread over the sky till there was barely sufficient light by which to read the compass on the bridge. Soon the *Hawk* was rolling and pitching in a nasty fashion and shipping seas over her weather-bow every time she ducked her nose. In view of the approaching storm, hand-lines were rigged across the decks, the prisoner in the wheel-house was transferred to the hold, and a couple of men stationed at the hand steering-gear in case the steam-gear should break down at a critical moment.

Swiftly and with ever-increasing violence the hurricane swept down upon them. The seas, a turbid green, with great, foaming crests, had increased in fury and every moment grew higher, while the valleys between them, streaked and mottled with patches of foam, became deeper and more engulfing. In the midst of the *mêlée* of raging waters, the *Hawk* lurched and rolled and pitched, curveted and plunged as though she were on gimbals. Blacker and blacker grew the sky, higher and higher leapt the waves. Now they rose in front of the straining ship in solid walls of inky water, to plunge down upon the fore-castle with a roar like thunder and a force which made her reel and stagger. Then a great wave would leap high above the weather-bow, and, rushing past her listing beam, descend with a mighty crash upon the starboard quarter, filling the wheel-house waist-deep with seething water.

Night came on, scarce darker than the afternoon which had preceded it, and with never a friendly star nor a rift in the solid blackness. Above the wild, devouring waste of tumbling seas the mast-head light tossed and circled—a dim, luminous speck in the fathomless darkness. The wind howled and shrieked and moaned like a chorus of lost souls in torment.

Throughout that seemingly endless night Calamity and Smith kept the bridge together, drenched and cold despite their oilskins; their faces whipped by the stinging wind, their eyes sore with the salt spray that was flung in ghostly eddies against them. Two bells struck—four—six—eight; the two relief quartermasters fought their way along the sea-swept fore'deck and took over the wheel from the worn-out men who clutched it. Two—four—six—eight bells over again; another four hours had passed, and another two quartermasters had come upon the bridge to take their "trick" and release the exhausted men at the wheel.

Soon after this—it was four o'clock in the morning—Calamity staggered up the inclined deck to the spot where Smith was standing.

"You'd better get below," he yelled above the roar of the gale. "You've been up here over twelve hours."

"I'm all right, sir," answered the second-mate, as he clung to the bridge-rail.

"Never mind, get to your bunk."

Though well-nigh exhausted and shivering with cold, the little Cockney obeyed with reluctance, being loth to leave the Captain up there to con the ship alone. But he knew better than to disobey or argue, and so, grumbling to himself, he crawled down the companion-ladder and sought his cabin.

At last the dawn broke, chill and sombre and leaden. Calamity, weary and heavy-eyed, scanned the forbidding, sullen sky in the hope of glimpsing a break in its glowering expanse. But no break was there; only wind-torn, tattered shreds of black cloud driving across it to assemble eastward in a massed and solid bank of evil aspect.

At six bells—seven o'clock in the morning watch—Smith tumbled out of his bunk after three hours' unbroken slumber, dragged on his oilskins, and stepped into the alleyway with the object of relieving the Captain, who had now been on the bridge over twenty hours. As he reached the deck, still only half awake, he was caught up by a huge sea which came leaping over the bulwarks, swept him off his feet, and dashed him violently against the iron ladder leading up to the bridge. It was a miracle that the wave, as it receded, did not carry him overboard. As it was, it left him a limp, crumpled figure, lying motionless under the ladder with one foot jammed beneath the lowest rung.

Calamity, who alone had witnessed the accident, took the wheel from the quartermasters and sent them to rescue the second-mate from his perilous position. After some difficulty they succeeded in releasing the imprisoned foot and then carried the unconscious man, whose left leg dangled loosely from the knee, to his cabin. Here, after roughly bandaging a wound on his forehead, they stripped him of his dripping garments and laid him in his bunk.

When these details were reported to the Captain he frowned and muttered something under his breath. He dared not leave the bridge, and yet there was no one on board but himself who could set a broken leg or even administer first-aid. No one, that is, except—

"Tell Miss Fletcher," he said curtly.

That order, probably, represented the biggest humiliation he had ever suffered.

One of the men went to Miss Fletcher's cabin and informed her of what had taken place, adding that he had been sent by the Captain.

"What did he say?" asked the girl.

"All 'e says was 'Tell Miss Fletcher,'" answered the man.

"Tell him I will attend to Mr. Smith," she said with a curtness that matched Calamity's own. "Stop," she added as the man was leaving, "send the steward along first."

There was a look of triumph in the girl's eyes as she stepped out of her cabin and went over to the one occupied by the hapless second-mate. He was still unconscious and she at once proceeded to remove the crude bandage from his forehead and bathe the wound properly. While she was in the act of binding it up again Sing-hi entered.

"I want you to help me fix Mr. Smith's broken leg," said the girl. "Do you think you can manage it?"

"Plenty savee," answered the Chinaman with a grin, "two piecee man fixee one piecee leg." He had often assisted Calamity with surgical cases and was proud of his experience.

"Yes, that's right. Can you make me a splint?"

"One piecee leg wantchee two piecee wood?" inquired Sing-hi.

"Yes."

The Chinaman glanced round the cabin, then removed the books from a narrow shelf just above the bunk and took it down. He split this in two with his hands, and, without awaiting further instructions, started to wind a towel round it to form a pad on which the injured limb could rest.

"Excellent," she said, watching him. "You're a splendid assistant."

Sing-hi understood her tone more than her words.

"Plenty muchee helpee," he replied modestly.

At that moment Smith opened his eyes, stared about him in bewilderment, and then uttered a loud groan.

"Gawd, what's happened?" he ejaculated.

"Your left leg is broken and there's a nasty gash on your forehead," answered the girl tersely.

"Just my bloomin' bad luck. As if—" he broke off suddenly, a new thought having occurred to him. "What the devil will the old man do now? He's been on watch over twenty hours, and there ain't a soul to relieve him. Dykes is on that blighted packet astern—leastways, I suppose he is if she's still afloat—and I'm half corpsed. It's a cheerful look-out and no bloomin' error."

"Don't worry," answered the girl calmly as she took the improvised splint from Sing-hi. "I'll relieve the Captain myself presently."

"What—you!" And Smith, despite the pain he was suffering, laughed outright. "Oh my stars, I can see him going below and leaving you in charge of the ship—I don't think."

"Then the sooner you do think, the better," retorted the girl cheerfully.

CHAPTER XIX

AT THE WHEEL

Before Smith had time to recover from his astonishment at Miss Fletcher's remark, the business of placing his broken leg in splints was begun. The operation—no easy one with the ship rolling and lurching incessantly—proved so painful that he swooned before he was able to make any audible comment.

"There," remarked the girl when the difficult task had been accomplished, "it may not be a perfect job, but I think it'll answer till we reach port."

"Heap good doctor pigeon," murmured Sing-hi complacently.

Having made the patient as comfortable as circumstances would permit, the girl left the cabin and stepped into the alleyway. Here she paused for a moment, steadying herself against the bulkhead and gazing at the waves breaking over the bulwarks and flooding the decks knee-deep with a swirling mass of turbid, green water. Then, with an abrupt movement as though she had arrived at some momentous decision, she went to her own cabin and hastily donned sea-boots, oilskins, and sou'-wester. This done, she passed out into the alleyway again, just as the bos'n, with a life-belt strapped over his oilskins, appeared at the entrance, staggering and slithering.

"S'truth!" he ejaculated, "it's 'ell down there."

"Down where?" asked the girl.

The bos'n jerked his head in the direction of the after-hatch.

"In the 'old," he answered. "Jest been down there, and, Gawd, it fair made me sick. Never see'd anything like it since I was aboard a River Plate cattle boat."

"What's the matter there, then?"

"Matter! Why, it's what I said it was just now—'ell. The 'atches are battened down, it's as 'ot as a furnace, and the stink of the bilge water's enough to knock you down. There ain't no light except for a lantern, which don't give no more than a glim, and the air's that thick you could cut it into slabs and 'eave it overboard."

He was about to turn away when the girl's attire arrested his attention.

"You ain't going on deck?" he said.

"I am."

"Well, don't you go; you didn't ought to this weather."

"That's my affair, bos'n."

"It'll be the skipper's, too, when 'e catches sight of you," answered the man grimly. "Still, it ain't no business of mine, and if you wants to try and get drowned, I s'pose you must," with which philosophical reflection the bos'n proceeded on his way.

The storm had reached such a pitch of fury that the girl was half inclined to follow the bos'n's advice, but pride forbade, and, clinging to the handrail, she made her way towards the deck. Experienced sailor as she was, it proved no easy task, for the *Hawk* was rolling to such an extent that at times she seemed to lie on her beam-ends, and the girl had to cling with both hands to the rails to prevent herself from being flung violently against the bulkheads at each terrific lurch. However, she succeeded at last in reaching the deck, where the seas came thundering down with the force of battering-rams.

She paused here because the nearest hand-line had been torn away, and to have ventured further without anything to cling to would have been courting certain death. Yet it was very nearly as dangerous to remain where she was, since at any moment an extra large sea might swoop down, and, tearing her from the insecure handrail, sweep her overboard. And, once engulfed in that inferno of raging waters, rescue would be utterly impossible, even if anyone happened to witness the catastrophe. Therefore, watching her opportunity, she made a dash, reached the iron ladder leading up to the bridge, and clung to it while another huge wave flung itself upon the reeling ship. When it had passed she started to mount, clinging to the rails for dear life. As her head came level with the bridge she saw Calamity gripping an iron stanchion to steady himself, and apparently trying to peer ahead through the swirling spindrift. His back was towards the girl, and he did not even see her as she set foot on the sacred bridge and glanced doubtfully around.

She was still hesitating—none but a sailor realises the extraordinary sanctity of the bridge—when one of the quartermasters uttered a warning cry. Almost before the words had left his lips a terrific sea struck the *Hawk* on the port beam, and, leaping high into the air, discharged itself with a deafening roar upon the bridge. The iron stanchion to which the Captain had been clinging was wrenched from its socket, Calamity was swept off his feet, and, but for the fact that, in falling, he became wedged between the rails and the engine-room telegraph, would certainly have been carried overboard by the receding water. As it was, one of the two quartermasters was swept away and lost for ever in the raging sea, while the other lay stunned against the binnacle.

Trained as she had been in seamanship, Dora Fletcher saw in a flash the peril which threatened the ship. With no one to control the steering-gear, the *Hawk* would fall away into the trough of that tremendous sea and then no mortal power could save her. Even as this thought struck her, the girl sprang to the wheel and brought the vessel round again bows-on to the rollers just as she was about to swing broadside-on.

Calamity, staggering to his feet, saw the girl there at the wheel and the inert form of the quartermaster at her feet. Imbued with the traditions and customs of the sea as she was, Dora Fletcher experienced a momentary misgiving at thought of the sacrilege she had committed and wondered whether the Captain, in his just wrath, would order her to be locked in her cabin for the rest of the voyage. The fact that, by her presence of mind, she had saved the ship and all on board from inevitable destruction did not occur to her at the moment. Involuntarily she clenched her teeth in expectation of the storm of anger she felt sure was about to descend upon her. Then, above the howling of the gale, she caught the Captain's voice, harsh and commanding.

"Port a little! That'll do; steady now, steady!"

And that was all. Her presence there at the wheel seemed to have caused him no more surprise than if she had been one of the deck-hands. It was, in a way, humiliating, because it robbed her of all sense of triumph; all the wilful delight of having committed a daring and unauthorised act.

In answer to a signal from the bridge, a couple of seamen came up from the forecastle and removed the unconscious quartermaster, leaving the Captain and the girl by themselves upon the bridge. Calamity took no further notice of her, but, hanging on to the rail, continued to gaze into the teeth of the gale. Presently, without turning round, he shouted a hoarse command which the girl obeyed, repeating the order as she turned the wheel. Her apprehension had left her now, and she was even conscious of a feeling of pride that the Captain, seemingly, was content to trust the steering to her, and, though he had hitherto kept two quartermasters at the wheel, seemed to take it for granted that she was quite competent to manage alone.

When six bells struck—eleven o'clock in the forenoon watch—Dora Fletcher had been at the wheel over three hours. The storm, far from abating, had increased in fury, and some there were among the crew who began to doubt whether the steamer would live through it.

At eight bells the relief watch came up to take over the wheel. The girl relinquished it thankfully, for she was both hungry and exhausted. Reaching her cabin, she ate ravenously of the food which the steward had left for her, and then turned in, falling asleep almost before she had removed her sea-boots. She did not awaken till eight bells in the afternoon watch, and then, as the crew were keeping "watch and watch," she turned out of her bunk and donned oilskins and sea-boots once more. Whether or no Calamity expected her, she was determined to take it for granted that she should do her "trick" as though she were a regular member of the crew.

Feeling just a little bit apprehensive, she climbed to the bridge, took over the wheel, and was given steering directions by the off-going quartermasters, one of whom paused as he was going and bellowed in the girl's ear:

"Better keep a bright look-out, Miss. The skipper's got one of 'is malaria attacks comin' on. I've sailed with 'im before, and I know."

This was startling, for the girl, somehow, had never conceived it possible that Calamity could

suffer from any of the ordinary ills which flesh is heir to. She watched him more intently after the sailor's warning, and noticed that he moved stiffly as if in pain, and that, whenever he stood still, he seemed to be trembling in every limb.

On the whole, it was not a very cheerful prospect. The Captain sick and likely to become worse, the only officer incapacitated, and the crew, in all probability, ready to break into open mutiny if they felt assured that the one man they feared was unable to raise a hand against them. And there were the prisoners to be reckoned with as well, should there be trouble on board. As for Mr. Dykes, it was useless to count on any assistance from him, for the gunboat had been lost sight of twelve hours ago.

Another two hours passed by, and it was plain that Calamity was growing worse. Though he did not utter a word of complaint, the girl realised that he was fighting with all his might against the fever which was slowly but surely sapping his strength. Once or twice he would have fallen had he not clutched the bridge-rail in time to save himself, and it became evident that even his iron will could not stave off the threatened collapse much longer. Suddenly, as though some sustaining force had snapped, he reeled back against the starboard rail and collapsed against the pedestal of the engine-room telegraph. The girl, who dared not leave the wheel for a second, called to a couple of seamen who were on deck, and, when they had arrived on the bridge, told them to carry the Captain to his cabin and put him to bed.

"When you have done that," she said, "come back here."

They lifted up the senseless form of the Captain, and, with considerable difficulty, carried him aft. When they had done this and returned to the bridge, Miss Fletcher placed them in charge of the wheel with directions concerning the course they were to steer. It was, of course, a somewhat risky proceeding to leave the bridge without any officer there to give orders in case of a sudden emergency; but, under the circumstances, there was nothing else for it.

She went aft and found Calamity in a semi-conscious condition. Having satisfied herself that he had been made comfortable, she unlocked the medicine chest and mixed him a stiff dose of quinine. She had just administered this and was about to give Sing-hi instructions concerning the patient, when there came a knock at the cabin-door.

"Come in," said the girl.

The door opened to admit the bos'n and a couple of able seamen.

"Well?" she inquired curtly, somewhat surprised at this visit.

"We wanted to know if it's true that the skipper's on the sick-list, beggin' your pardon, Miss," said the bos'n.

"He is down with an attack of malaria. Why?"

The men exchanged significant glances.

"Well, Miss," went on the bos'n, fingering his dripping sou'-wester nervously, "we thought we'd like to know who's in command while the skipper's laid up."

"I am," answered the girl without a moment's hesitation.

CHAPTER XX

IN COMMAND

For a moment the little group of men remained standing in the doorway, staring at the girl open-mouthed. Then abruptly and with one accord they left the cabin and she heard the tread of their heavy sea-boots going up the companion-way. Having given the steward directions concerning medicine and a supply of hot-water bottles so long as the patient remained in the cold stage of the fever, Dora Fletcher went up on deck. The weather had moderated considerably, but night was coming on, and it was quite possible that the hurricane might spring up afresh. To her surprise, she found groups of men standing about the after-deck, though their presence in that part of the ship had been expressly forbidden by the Captain.

"What are you men doing here?" she demanded sharply.

They stared at her with sullen sheepishness, but no one answered.

"Get for'ard to your quarters at once and don't let me find a man aft of the bridge unless he has some duty to perform," she went on after a pause.

But the men did not stir, and a low murmur, incoherent but menacing, reached the girl's ears. Suddenly the bos'n, who had been standing by, stepped up to her.

"It's like this 'ere, Miss," he said, in a voice that was half-apologetic and half-defiant, "we want to know where we are, we do. The skipper's took with fever, the mate ain't 'ere, and the second's crippled. Who's going to navigate this packet back to Singapore and take the old man's place?"

"I have already told you that I am."

"I know, Miss, but we didn't take it as you was serious."

"Well, you can take it that I'm serious now."

The bos'n shifted awkwardly from one foot to another, and glanced doubtfully at the sullen figures of the men.

"I'll tell them what you say, Miss," he said at last, "but I don't know how they'll take it. You see," he went on hastily, "maybe some of 'em aren't partial to taking orders from a woman, which don't seem natural, as you may say."

"See here, bos'n," answered the girl, raising her voice so that all could hear, "can you, or any other man on board, navigate this ship to Singapore?"

"No, Miss, I can't say as any of us could."

"Well, I can. I'm a practical navigator, and I will undertake to bring the *Hawk* safely into port. But if there's a man among you who thinks he can do it, let him take command."

"Of course that alters it a bit," answered the bos'n thoughtfully, "we didn't know you could navigate, Miss."

"You don't suppose I should propose to take command otherwise?"

"That's what we was wondering. You see"—the bos'n became confidential—"some of us 'ave sailed in ships where the skipper's 'ad 'is wife aboard, and it's generally she what's done the bossing. Of course we know you ain't this skipper's wife, but all the same we thought as 'ow you might be wanting to try your 'and like."

"Well, you see the position now," said the girl. "Please explain it to the men, and let them understand that, while I am in charge of this ship, I am Captain and will be obeyed."

Without quite realising it, she had copied Calamity's curt and decisive manner, and this, together with the fact that they were really helpless in the matter, was not without its effect on the men. After a short discussion with the bos'n, they trooped off to their quarters, some sullen, others pulling their forelocks as they passed the girl.

"We'll carry out your orders, if you'll take the ship fair and square into Singapore," said the bos'n.

"Then that's agreed; I'll do my part as long as the crew do theirs."

"Very good, Miss," answered the bos'n, and he went for'ad in the wake of the men.

Feeling decidedly relieved, Dora Fletcher was about to go on the bridge when she caught sight of McPhulach standing at the fiddley door, having apparently just come off watch. Seeing her, he came forward, rubbing his hands on a piece of oily cotton-waste.

"You must have been getting a rough time of it down below," she said by way of greeting.

"Rough, d'ye ca' it," he answered; "if I wasna a guid Presbyterian like me fairther before me, I'd be a convairted sinner the noo. Bradlaugh himsel' wouldna hae denied hell if he'd been below during the last four an' twenty hours."

The girl nodded sympathetically.

"I want to have a few minutes' chat with you, if you can spare the time," she said.

"I'm at ye'r deesposal."

"Then please come into the chart-room. I don't want to leave the bridge longer than I can help."

"Leave the bridge!" echoed McPhulach in astonishment. "D'ye——"

"Please come at once," interrupted the girl, and led the way up to the bridge. After first ascertaining that Calamity was not there, the engineer followed, wondering, as well he might, what such an extraordinary invitation portended. When they had entered the chart-room the girl shut the door and pointed to a seat.

"Have you heard about the Captain?" she asked.

"Haird what?" inquired McPhulach.

"Then you haven't. He is down with a severe attack of malaria; and is quite incapable of doing anything."

"Ye dinna say!"

"It's quite true, he had to be carried off the bridge half an hour ago."

"Weel, weel," murmured the engineer, "he always was a mighty quare mon."

"And Smith, as I suppose you know, has broken his leg."

"Aye, ane of the firemen was tellin' me."

"Therefore," she went on, "I have decided to take command of the *Hawk*, since no one, except myself, is capable of navigating her."

She had expected the engineer to show some sign of surprise, even resentment, and was prepared to combat it. But, for all the emotion McPhulach exhibited, she might have been telling him that she had decided to alter her time of getting up or going to bed. He did not even appear interested, but, stooping down, proceeded to take off one of his boots.

"It's verra bad policy to buy ye'r boots second-hand unless ye'r sairtain they'll fit," he remarked, and then remained silently staring at a hole in his sock as though it were a subject for long and earnest meditation.

"I suppose you think I am taking a great deal on myself," she said, wishing to force some comment from him.

The engineer jerked his head in a manner which might have been a nod or a shake, agreement or disagreement. His eyes were still fixed on the gaping aperture in his sock. But at last he spoke, slowly and incisively as a man might who had come to a momentous conclusion after much mental tribulation.

"Yon's the thaird pair o' sacks I've holed at the first wearin'. Gin I go on at this rate I'll no hae a pair to me name by the time we reach Singapore."

"I don't believe you've been listening to a word I've said!" exclaimed the girl, goaded to exasperation.

McPhulach looked up with an expression of mingled surprise and pain on his face.

"Wasna ye tellin' me that ye were goin' to tak' command o' the *Hawk*?"

"Yes."

"Then ye were wrang in saying I didna hear ye," he answered triumphantly.

"The point I want to get at," said the girl, trying hard to be patient, "is this. Can I depend on your support and assistance if necessary? I have made it all right with the crew. Will you be responsible for your men down below?"

The engineer did not answer immediately. Apparently he was turning the matter over in his mind.

"Ye'll be takin' upon ye'rsel' the privileges and powers of a skipper, I'm tae understand?" he inquired at last.

"Yes, since I shall be responsible for the navigation."

Again McPhulach paused meditatively, and the girl noticed, with a feeling of apprehension, that his eyes wandered towards the hole in his sock. But this time it did not monopolise his thoughts.

"Calamity's no said anything tae ye consairning mesel', I suppose?" he asked.

"Certainly not," she replied, rather surprised at the question. "In fact, I've had no opportunity to discuss anything with him."

"Because," continued the engineer, "he's as good as promised me a rise of a poond a month in recogneection of me sairvices. But I've heard naething aboot it syn."

"I know nothing about that. It's a matter for the Captain to consider when he returns to duty."

"Nae, nae, it isna," protested McPhulach. "The captain's the captain whether he wears skirts or breeks. I'd like ye, in ye'r capacity of skipper of the *Hawk*, to confairm that promise of an extra poond a month."

"I will undertake that you shall have the extra money so long as I am in command, even if I have to pay it myself," answered the girl.

"Guid enough. Gin ye hae a bit o' paper handy, maybe ye'd no objec' to putting it doon in writing. I'm no dootin' ye'r word, mind ye, but 'twould be mair satisfactory to hae it in black and white, if ye ken me."

He drew a fountain-pen from a pocket beneath his dungarees and the girl found a piece of paper in one of the table drawers. She took the pen from McPhulach, and, hastily scribbling a few lines, handed it to him.

"Will that do?" she asked.

The engineer took the paper and read it with extreme care. It was to the effect that, during her command of the *Hawk*, Dora Fletcher agreed that Phineas McPhulach, chief engineer of that vessel, should receive a pound a month extra pay.

"Aye," he murmured, handing it back to her, "ye'll be guid enough tae sign it, please."

The girl did so, and McPhulach waved it gently to and fro to dry the ink.

"So ye've made ye'r intentions known tae the crew," he remarked.

"Yes."

"An' hoo did they tak' it?"

"Not very well at first. I shouldn't be surprised if some of them tried to make trouble, especially as they know we have treasure aboard."

"Aye, I shouldna be sairprised. Sic an ungodly lot o' heathen I've never sailed wi' before. But ye're a mighty plucky lassie. Mind, ye're no me ideal of a woman, but gin it wasna that I'm a wee bit confused in me matrimonial obligations I dinna say that I wouldna marry ye mesel'."

"It's good of you, I'm sure."

"Nae, nae, dinna thank me," answered McPhulach hastily, "I wasna meanin' to propose tae ye. It jest crossed me mind like that ye'd mak' a guid wife gin ye was properly trained." He rose to his feet and yawned. "I'm for turnin' in," he said, "so I'll be wishin' ye guid nicht, Miss Fletcher."

"Good-night," she answered, and the engineer left the chart-room. When he had gone the girl took from a drawer a chart, pencil, and parallel rulers, and, sitting down, marked out the ship's course. This done, she wrote up the log and then stepped out on to the bridge, just as two relief quartermasters came up to take the wheel over.

"I shall only want one man at the wheel now," she said. "The storm, I think, has passed over."

A little later on, when she was taking off her sea-boots in the chart-room preparatory to lying down, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," she said.

It was McPhulach, who, with an oilskin over his pyjamas, stood at the door.

"I jest wanted to mak' sairtain, Miss Fletcher, that ye didna misunderstand me a whiles back," he said anxiously.

"Misunderstand what?" she asked in surprise.

"Weel, I'd like tae mak' it clear that I didna propose tae ye. I wouldna like ye tae attach any false hope to what I said about marryin' ye mesel' gin I was able. It were jest a wee bit joke, ye'll ken."

She reassured him concerning her intentions, and the engineer, with a sigh of relief, returned to his bunk.

CHAPTER XXI

THE SIGNAL GUN

The morning dawned bright and cloudless, with every promise of a spell of fine weather. But although the hurricane had spent itself, there was still a heavy sea running which impeded the work of clearing up the decks and repairing the damage wrought by the storm. In the brilliant, penetrating sunshine, the *Hawk* presented a disreputable appearance: her funnel encrusted with dirty grey rime, both her for'ad derricks a heap of splintered wood and tangled cordage, her boats smashed to matchwood, and her decks a depository of wreckage of all sorts.

Dora Fletcher had been able to snatch only a couple of hours' sleep during the night, but when dawn broke she went to see Calamity. She found him tossing in his bunk, and murmuring incoherently. When she spoke to him he showed no sign of comprehension. Sing-hi stood by while she went to the medicine-chest and took out a bottle of sweet spirits of nitre. To him she explained what dose he was to give the patient, and the Chinaman nodded comprehendingly; he had already proved himself a conscientious and trustworthy sick-nurse, albeit possessed of no initiative. He would have gone on pouring medicine down the Captain's throat at intervals long after the latter was dead, unless given instructions to the contrary.

Her next visit was to Smith, who, as Sing-hi had as much as he could do in the cabin, was being attended by one of the deck-hands.

"What cher!" he exclaimed genially as she entered, "how's the old man this morning?"

"In the hot stage now," answered the girl. "But how are you?"

"Not so dusty considerin'. It's a bit orf, though, lying here on a shelf like a bloomin' parcel that's been left till called for."

"But you're not in pain?"

"Oh, nothing to make a shout about. But how are you getting on with the crew? I've been expectin' mutiny ever since the skipper was knocked out."

"I don't think there's much fear of that," answered the girl, and described her interview with the bos'n on the preceding evening.

"You see," she concluded, "the men are helpless."

"There's something in that," Smith admitted. "By crikey, you're a bloomin' knock-out, and no kid," he added admiringly.

"I must leave you now," she said, going to the door, "but I'll look in again later on."

"Right you are, sir," replied the patient jocularly.

When she entered the foc'sle to see the injured quartermaster some of the men, impelled by a rude courtesy, rose to their feet, but there were others who regarded her with an air of aloofness which almost amounted to defiance. Having ascertained that the patient was progressing as favourably as could be expected, she left the foc'sle and was met on the fore'deck by the bos'n, who appeared to be in an agitated state of mind.

"Been looking for you everywhere, Miss," he said breathlessly. "Didn't you 'ear the gun?"

"Gun! What gun?"

"A signal from somewheres astern. Struck me it might be the *Satellite* in trouble, Miss."

The only thing to do under the circumstances was to search for the vessel in distress. The girl went on the bridge, and, telling the quartermaster to stand aside, took the wheel herself. At the same moment she heard the distant boom of a gun, obviously a signal for help. It now became necessary to bring the *Hawk* round in a semi-circle and this, in such a sea, was a task which called for extremely nice judgment and skilful seamanship. Yet the amazing young woman accomplished it without mishap, though once, when broadside on to a beam sea, those on board experienced a few nasty moments with a solid mountain of green water towering above them, and looking as if it must fall upon the ship and crush her under its stupendous weight.

"S'truth!" ejaculated the bos'n softly when the steamer's nose swung round to meet the oncoming rollers, "that was touch-and-go if you like. But she can 'andle a boat, can that gal."

And the carpenter, who stood near him, agreed.

Suddenly the look-out shouted "Ship on the port bow!" and, giving the wheel to the quartermaster, Dora Fletcher snatched up the glasses and looked in the direction indicated. There, sure enough, was a vessel which looked remarkably like the *Satellite*, but, most amazing thing of all, *she was not rolling*, and the seas were breaking clean over her. In a flash the girl divined what had happened; the gunboat had struck some uncharted reef and was firmly wedged aground. Presumably, therefore, she was making water fast and the only thing to do was to get the crew and prisoners off as quickly as possible.

"Signal we're coming to her assistance," said the girl, and the bos'n hoisted the flags, H.F. The reply came immediately, "Want a tow, no damage."

"Gawd, she must 'ave struck a feather pillar instead o' a reef," commented the bos'n *sotto voce*, as he communicated the reply to Miss Fletcher.

Slowly the *Hawk* bore down to leeward of the stranded vessel, signalling the *Satellite* to send a boat with tow-lines, for it was far too perilous to come near enough for the lines to be thrown from one ship to the other. Thanks to Mr. Dykes's foresight in having thrown out oil-bags, the sea around the *Satellite* had subsided considerably and a boat was lowered without much difficulty. But as soon as she got outside the oil radius the frail cockleshell of a boat was tossed about like a cork, and more than once it looked as if she must inevitably be swamped and capsized. But she fought her way manfully, and at last came within hailing distance of the *Hawk*.

"Stand off!" shouted the girl through a megaphone. "Heave from where you are."

The wisdom of this order was apparent to all, for, had the boat come much nearer or attempted to get alongside, she would almost certainly have been swept against the steamer and crushed to pieces. So while the crew kept her head-on to the sea, the man in the bows waited for a favourable opportunity. It came when the boat was carried upwards on the crest of a huge wave till on a level with the *Hawk's* bridge; then he stood up, and, swinging one of the lines round his head, gave it a cast. The thin rope leapt through the air in a long, sinuous curve, and descended on the steamer's deck, where it was promptly caught and secured to the drum of a steam-winch. Then ensued another period of tense waiting before a chance came to send the other line aboard; but it was successfully accomplished at last, and the boat started on its return journey.

As soon as the second line had been secured the steam-winch was started and began to wind in the lines until the hawsers appeared under the *Hawk's* stern, one on each side.

"Vast heaving!" came the order.

Then, with the assistance of the winches, the ends of the hawsers were carried through the hawse-holes and parcelled with chafing-mats to lessen the friction. The *Hawk* was now astern of the *Satellite*, which was to be towed off the reef stern foremost, and the work would commence as soon as the hawsers had been made secure.

At last the bos'n reported all ready and the girl rang down "Stand by" to the engine-room. There was a tense pause, and then she again moved the lever. A faint "ting-ting" came from below, the telegraph pointer swung round to "Slow," and the *Hawk's* engines began to move with a steady,

ponderous beat. All eyes were fixed upon the hawsers, which, as the steamer began to move, slowly raised their dripping lengths from the water. Then the moment arrived when the great ropes tautened till they vibrated under the tension like fiddle-strings when a bow is passed across them. The *Hawk*, which had been slowly forging ahead, seemed to pull up with a sudden jerk, and then gradually slide back, stern foremost, in her own wake, while the hawsers sagged and dipped into the sea. The girl on the bridge waited with her hand on the telegraph, every nerve braced as if for stupendous effort, while she watched the hawsers disappear. Then, as the *Hawk's* stern-way was arrested, she rang down "Half speed" and the engines pulsated with quickened beats.

Again the hawsers grew taut as the steamer forged ahead, only to recoil once more like a straining hound suddenly jerked back by its leash. But this time the recoil was only momentary and then she gathered a little way, while, at the same moment, the *Satellite* was seen to move. Once more Dora Fletcher pressed the lever of the telegraph, the decks vibrated to the thunderous beat of the engines, and, to the accompaniment of a cheer from the anxious watchers, the gunboat slid gently into deep water.

"Gawd!" ejaculated the bos'n, wiping the sweat from his brow, and the monosyllable was more eloquent than an oration.

With a little moan of utter fatigue which was not that of the body only, Dora Fletcher slipped into the chart-room and flung herself on the settee. The terrible nervous strain of these hours when she alone had been responsible for the safety of the *Hawk* and all those souls aboard, added to the strain of the last hour, had been too much for her. She collapsed suddenly in a dead faint, and it was thus that McPhulach discovered her when he put his head into the chart-room some fifteen minutes later.

CHAPTER XXII

MR. SMITH SEEKS A PARTNER

McPhulach, thinking the girl was asleep, shook her gently by the shoulder; but, as this met with no response, he took a closer look at her.

"Losh presairve us!" he ejaculated, "the lassie's fainted."

He took from his pocket a small, flat flask, and, after drawing the cork, placed the bottle to his nose and sniffed the aroma appreciatively. Then, with a sigh, he forced some of its contents between the girl's teeth, pillowing her head on his arm as he did so. In a moment or two she opened her eyes and stared at him with a dull, uncomprehending gaze, which, however, quickly gave place to a look of bewilderment.

"Why, what's happened?" she murmured and passed a hand across her forehead as if trying to remember.

"Ye've jes' swallowed a drap o' unco' guid whusky," answered the engineer, holding up the flask to see how much he had "wasted."

"Why I—I must have fainted!"

"Aye, ye were lying on the cooch like a wax-work figger when I came in."

The girl sat up with cheeks that had suddenly become very red. Obviously she was ashamed of being found out in an essentially feminine weakness.

"I was very tired," she said apologetically, "and—and——"

"Ye jes' swooned," put in McPhulach as she hesitated. "Weel, I'm no sairprised. I'm subjec' tae it mysel', which is why I always carry a wee drappie aboot me pairson. It's likewise a muckle fine thing for stomach troubles, ye ken."

The girl nodded absently and gazed through the chart-room window at the *Satellite*, now steaming about a cable's length astern. Under the bos'n's directions, the towing hawsers had been cast off and hauled back aboard the gunboat. It had not occurred to her till this moment that Mr. Dykes must have been considerably exercised in his mind at seeing her on the bridge, and in command instead of Calamity. She wondered what he thought about it.

"Weel, I'll be ganging below," remarked McPhulach. "It was a mighty guid thing I came up here for a breath o' fresh air an' tae see hoo ye were getting along."

"It was, and I'm very much obliged to you for what you did," answered the girl. "But please don't say anything about it to anyone."

She stammered and blushed as though asking him to compound a felony.

"Nae, nae, I'll no breathe a word, gin ye dinna want me tae," he assured her. "Mr. Smeeth's man tells me a steam-pipe has burstit in his cabin, sae I'll jes' gang doon and hae a speer at it," saying which the engineer left the chart-room, and, descending to the deck, made his way to the second-mate's cabin.

After an amiable exchange of greetings between himself and Smith, he found the leak in the steam-pipe and plugged it with cotton waste.

"'Tis a fine bit o' wark that Miss Fletcher has done," he remarked, preparing to leave.

"You mean gettin' the *Satellite* off?" answered Smith. "Yes, Byles was telling me about it; said it was one of the finest feats of seamanship he'd ever seen."

"Aye, 'twas that. Mon, she'd mak' a splendid wife for a body who could manage her."

"D'you think so?" said Smith thoughtfully.

"Never a doot, lad. But the mon who'd be strang enoo' to marry the like o' her, would be strang enoo' not tae marry at a', I'm thinkin'."

There was a pause and McPhulach made to leave the cabin. As he was about to open the door, Smith called him back.

"Thinkin' it over," said he, "I ain't such a bad-lookin' cove, am I?"

"It's haird tae say," answered the engineer slowly. "Wi' a few alterations an' repairs, some women nicht regaird ye as an Adonis."

"Never met the bloke. But," went on the second-mate, trying to pin the other down to a definite statement, "you wouldn't say I was hideous, would you?"

Again McPhulach regarded him critically before venturing an opinion.

"It's haird tae say," he replied at last.

"Oh hang!" ejaculated Smith in disgust. "Still," he went on, "I'm blowed if I don't have a try."

"Eh?"

"She might do worse."

"D'ye mean that ye're goin' tae ax Mees Fletcher tae marry ye?"

"Why not?"

"You're a brave mon, Smeeth."

"But why shouldn't I?" reiterated the second-mate.

"I wish ye luck," said the engineer dryly. "Hoo-ever, I ken nae reason why ye shouldna ax her."

"D'you mean you don't think she'd have me?"

"Nae, nae, women hae quare tastes, an' it isna always the best-lookin' mon that comes oot the best."

"Look here, Mac, d'you think you could put out a feeler for us?"

"Eh!"

"Jest sound her, so to speak; find out whether she likes me."

"Nae, nae," answered the engineer hastily. "I've enough troubles of me ain, an' I'm no goin' tae do anither body's coorting."

"Tell you what, Mac," went on Smith coaxingly, "you shall be best man at the wedding."

"Ye're verra generous, but it's no' the job I'm speerin' after."

"All right, you can give us a wedding present then."

"Eh! Weel, mebbe I'd be ye'r best mon gin ye were marrit."

"Half a mo, Mac," said the second-mate, as the engineer made another attempt to escape. "You don't think there's any one else in the runnin', do you?"

"It's a verra deeficult question tae answer," replied McPhulach.

"How d'you mean?"

"There is an' there isna'."

"What the devil are you driving at?"

"I mean that she's wishfu' tae marry the keeper, an' he's no wishfu' tae be marrit."

"Crikey!" ejaculated Smith, the look of pleasurable anticipation dying out of his face. "Who told you that?"

"Ony fu' wi' a pair o' een in his held could hae telt ye that."

"I guessed she was a bit gone on him at first, but blimey, I never thought she was in love with him—why, he's old enough to be her father, I should say. Besides, he's only got one eye, and you can't call him handsome, look at him any way you like."

"I told ye women hae quare tastes."

"Well, if I ain't a better man to look at than that one-eyed old crock aft, I'll eat my bloomin' hat."

"I wouldna advise ye tae mak' rash promises," answered McPhulach, and managed to slip out of the cabin before Smith could detain him.

For a time the amorous second-mate lay still, trying to make up his mind as to the best and most effective manner of declaring his passion to Miss Fletcher. McPhulach's reference to the Captain, though it had disconcerted him at the moment, upon mature consideration seemed so preposterous that he had found no difficulty in dismissing it from his mind. The more he thought over his matrimonial scheme, the more convinced he became that, in marrying him, Miss Fletcher would be a very fortunate young woman. Besides, she would have the inestimable privilege of keeping him "straight," which would, no doubt, provide her with an interest in life. Women, he believed, liked reforming, and his future wife would have ample opportunity for indulging in this hobby. She might, in time and with patience, even effect a permanent reform.

Little guessing the good fortune in store for her, Dora Fletcher stood on the bridge with a sextant in her hands, "shooting the sun," it being then exactly at the meridian. This was the first time since they had been overtaken by the hurricane that a chance had occurred for taking observations. For the last two or three days the ship's approximate position could only be ascertained by dead reckoning, and, therefore, it was necessary to correct this at the earliest opportunity. Having concluded her observations, marked the *Hawk's* position on the chart, and laid out the course, the girl lay down on the settee to try and make up a little for the inadequate amount of sleep she had had during the last forty-eight hours. Later on in the day she again visited the Captain's cabin. He was sleeping when she went in, and it was evident that his condition had improved. Having given the steward some further instructions, she went to Smith's cabin to see how he was getting on.

"Well, how do you feel this evening?" she inquired on entering.

"Pretty fair, thanks," answered the invalid with a deep sigh.

"Your leg's not hurting you?"

"Oh no, my leg ain't hurting me."

"Then what's the matter? You seem rather melancholy."

"I've been thinkin'," said Smith still more gloomily, "of me future."

"Your future?"

"Yes. A man lyin' on a sick bed gets queer notions into his head, especially if he's got brains."

"But why should you worry about the future?" asked the girl, puzzled. "Your leg will soon be all right, and you'll be able to go on duty again."

"The fact is," replied Smith, suddenly becoming confidential, "I'm thinking of settlin' down."

"Yes?"

"A man like me, who's always led a rovin' life, so to speak, wants an anchor. A home and wife and kids, and so on."

"Then you're thinking of getting married?" asked the girl innocently.

"That all depends," he answered. "Although you mightn't think it, I'm rather a particular sort of cove. Of course I've got my faults——" and he waved an arm as if to signify that he also had his virtues, which were too obvious to specify.

Miss Fletcher, not feeling called upon to make any comment, remained silent, and, after a moment or two, Smith went on.

"What I want is a young woman who understands men of my sort. A woman with a bit of spirit, mind you, not bad-lookin', and able to turn her hand to 'most anything."

"H'm; I should think you'd better advertise, stating all your requirements."

"No need," replied Smith triumphantly. "I've got the very woman in my eye."

"Oh? That ought to save you a lot of trouble, not to say expense," answered the girl with a touch of irony, which, however, Smith failed to perceive.

"Yes, but the trouble is that I ain't quite certain yet whether she'll have me," he said.

"I should think the easiest way out of the difficulty would be to ask her," she replied, wholly ignorant of the direction in which the second-mate's laborious confidences were tending.

"You don't think she'd be offended if I did?"

"Good gracious, how should I know!"

"Better than you think, p'raps," replied Smith mysteriously. "Shall I tell you her name?"

"Really, Mr. Smith, I don't think it concerns me in the slightest what the lady's name is."

"But it does!" he almost shouted, raising himself on his elbow and staring at her hard.

For the first time Dora Fletcher began to see the trend of all this. She rose from the locker upon which she had been seated.

"I must leave you now," she said a little coldly. "I have to——"

"Half a mo'," broke in Smith, "you haven't heard the lady's name yet."

"I don't think I want to, thanks. It's not a matter which——"

"Isn't it! You wait. The lady's name is Dora Fletcher—how about that?"

An angry flush mounted to the girl's face, and then, being blessed with that rare possession, a sense of humour, she had much ado to prevent herself from laughing outright.

"I'm afraid I can't oblige you, Mr. Smith," she said. "Although, of course, I appreciate the honour you've done me."

"That ain't any use to me," growled the second-mate, rather taken aback at this unhesitating rejection.

"I'm sorry, but——"

"What's wrong with me, then?" he burst out. "Of course I'm not a bloomin' earl or a dook nor yet a Captain——"

"I think we had better forget all about it," answered the girl. "Please don't speak of it again."

But Smith, his hopes dashed to the ground, and his pride wounded, was not inclined to drop the subject so lightly. In fact, he completely lost his temper.

"I suppose it's because you're sweet on the skipper," he said savagely. "But I can tell you that you ain't got a ghost of a chance there; no, not if you lived to a hundred. He ain't no ornery, bloomin' skipper, nor Calamity ain't his name. Would you like to know who he is?"

The girl hesitated, torn between an almost irresistible desire to learn the secret of that strange man's identity, and disgust at the vulgar outburst of the little Cockney.

"You may as well know," he added, noticing her indecision.

"Well, tell me then," she retorted, unable any longer to resist the temptation.

Smith glanced furtively around the cabin as if to make sure no one was concealed there, and then leaned over the edge of his bunk.

"Come nearer," he said; "it ain't the sort of thing to shout out loud."

Reluctantly she moved a little closer to him, and he whispered two words in her ear.

"Well, what do you say to that?" he asked triumphantly.

CHAPTER XXIII

DORA FLETCHER ANSWERS "NO"

A week had passed, and Calamity, now convalescent, was able once more to resume command. As, however, Smith was still unable to discharge his customary duties, the Captain appointed Miss Fletcher temporary mate.

"Since you are now an officer," he said with that grim smile of his, "you had better take your meals in the cabin with me."

The girl's eyes lit up with pleasure for a moment, then the light died out of them and her lips hardened.

"Thank you all the same, but I should prefer to have my meals in my own cabin as before," she answered.

"Please yourself," answered Calamity carelessly.

After this, although their relationship remained superficially much the same as it had always been, the Captain taciturn and abrupt, the girl quiet and self-possessed, there was a subtle change in the attitude of each towards the other. Calamity had come to rely on the girl, and now accepted at her hands many little services which tended towards his greater comfort, services which he would have rejected with curt imperiousness less than a fortnight ago.

One day he sent for McPhulach, and in due course the engineer appeared, clad as usual, in soiled dungarees, and clasping a piece of oily cotton-waste in his hand.

"Ye're wishfu' tae see me, sir?" he inquired.

"Yes; sit down."

The engineer perched himself on the cabin skylight, and began mechanically to rub the brass rails with his cotton-waste.

"Would you care to go to England after this trip, McPhulach?" asked the Captain abruptly.

McPhulach ceased rubbing the brass rails, and stared at Calamity in astonishment.

"Tae England?" he repeated.

"Yes. I may want you in connection with that document you signed, and quite possibly I shall be able to give you a good shore job."

"It a' depends," answered the engineer thoughtfully. "Ye see, skeeper, I hae sairtain financial obleegations in that country which I canna dischairge. An' maybe there are ane or twa leddies who'd mak' it no verra pleasant for me gin they were tae ken I was back."

"H'm; I should have thought that a man of your resource and experience could have overcome that difficulty."

McPhulach considered for a little time, and the cloud on his brow lifted.

"I ken brawly wha' tae dae, sir!" he exclaimed. "Gin ye'll ca' me Jones and give oot that I'm a Welshman, there's no a body who'd recognise me."

Something like a chuckle escaped the Captain, but he answered in a perfectly grave voice.

"If you think that device will overcome your difficulties, I have no objection to calling you Jones and informing all whom it may concern that you're a Welshman."

"Frae Pontypreed."

"From Pontypridd, if you like. That sounds Welsh enough."

"Then I'll sign on wi' ye, sir."

"Right, then that's settled," answered Calamity, and McPhulach, preening himself upon his astuteness, returned to the engine-room.

That evening, when Miss Fletcher came on the bridge to relieve the Captain, he seemed inclined to linger.

"By the twenty-seventh," he said, "we ought to be in Singapore."

"In Singapore," murmured the girl, and nodded as if in answer to some unspoken thought.

"Yes. Have you finally decided what to do?"

"I shall see the British Consul, lay before him my father's papers, and ask him to advance me sufficient money to——"

"There's no need to ask him that," interrupted Calamity. "I could let you have whatever you wanted, even if there wasn't——"

"Still, if you don't mind, I should prefer to borrow it from the Consul," she broke in without looking at him.

"As you please. Then I take it that you have made up your mind to go to California?"

"Yes; I will take your advice and try fruit-farming."

"H'm," grunted Calamity.

"You told me it was the best—in fact, the only thing I could do," she said with a faint touch of sarcasm in her voice.

"Yes—yes, I suppose I did."

"The profession I know best and which I love best—that of the sea—I cannot follow, being a woman. You pointed that out yourself."

"It is self-evident!"

Calamity turned away as if to leave the bridge, hesitated on the top step of the companion-ladder, and then came back again. Seemingly he did so only to glance at the compass, but, having done this, he came up to the bridge-rail and leant over it.

"You are a strange young woman," he said abruptly.

"Am I?"

He lapsed into silence again and Dora Fletcher, looking at him surreptitiously out of the corner of her eye, marvelled exceedingly. Once more this extraordinary man was revealing himself to her in a new light. Usually so self-confident and determined in manner and speech, he exhibited a

curious hesitancy this evening that puzzled the girl. He was like a man who wished to say something yet, for some reason or other, feared to say it. This so impressed her that she grew uneasy, and, moving a little farther away from him, leant against the starboard rail and gazed fixedly across the darkening waters.

Presently the Captain straightened his back, walked to the port rail, and, after standing there a moment or two, crossed to where the girl was standing. He did not speak, and, although her back was towards him, she knew that he was very close. Involuntarily she clutched the rail tightly as if to support herself, her heart began to beat faster and her breath came in little catches. And yet, she told herself, there was no reason for this; it made her angry, angry with herself for being unreasonably agitated, and angry with him for being the cause of it. He remained standing close behind her, saying nothing, till at last she could bear it no longer.

"Won't you miss your watch below, sir?" she asked.

"That is my affair," he answered in his old curt way, and she felt a sense of relief at the familiar tone.

He remained where he was, however, regarding her intently and with an expression that would have startled the girl had she seen it. There was every excuse for that look on the Captain's face, for she made as comely a picture as any man might wish to gaze upon, with her slim, supple figure and the great braid of red-brown hair coiled round her shapely head. Masculine as she was in her fearlessness, her strength, and her power of command, she was withal intensely feminine, possessing besides all the lure of blossoming womanhood.

All this Calamity recognised clearly enough now, if he had never done so before. He was very far from being a sentimentalist, but, as he stood so near to her, the memory of that day when she had frankly avowed her love for him came back with poignant vividness. He knew now that he had been a blind fool and a brutal fool as well. The greatest treasure that life can give had been his for the taking, and he had spurned it. But now he had awakened to a sense of what he had lost.

Such were the thoughts which passed through Calamity's mind as he lingered irresolutely on the bridge. It was an altogether new sensation to him, this self-condemnation and timid hesitancy. For the first time in his life, perhaps, Calamity was afraid. It was, if nothing else, a chastening experience.

As for Dora Fletcher, her whole being was in a tumult of warring emotions. Instinctively she felt something of what was passing through the Captain's mind. She could not but guess that this sudden and remarkable change in his manner was due to herself, that it meant the beginning of a new relationship between them—at least, so far as he was concerned. Already their relations had passed through several different phases: first she had been a mere nonentity in his eyes; then an individual to be tolerated, a nurse later on, then a trusted and efficient officer, and finally—finally, she supposed, a memory ever growing more indistinct as the years passed.

Just as his near presence was becoming intolerable to the girl because of the complex emotions it occasioned, he moved away and strolled towards the other end of the bridge. She wished fervently that he would go below, for while he remained near her she was in a fever of apprehension.

Presently, however, he turned again and walked slowly back to where she was standing on the lee side of the bridge.

"Miss Fletcher," he said abruptly.

"Yes, sir," she answered, turning and facing him.

"Will you marry me?"

It had come at last, the inevitable climax she had felt approaching ever since his recovery from that illness. For a moment she was conscious of a thrill of exquisite joy, and her carefully nursed resolution wavered. Then, remembering the communication Smith had made to her, she pulled herself together.

"No," she answered in a low voice.

The Captain turned on his heel and walked in a leisurely manner to the other end of the bridge, where he lingered for a moment. Then he came back, glanced at the compass, and turned towards the girl.

"Keep her west by north," he said, and slowly descended the companion-ladder.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MACHINATIONS OF MR. SOLOMON

"Land ahead!"

At that cry the men came tumbling out of the foc'sle on to the foredeck of the *Hawk*, for it meant they were in sight of port at last. With luck, they would be paid off before many more hours had passed, the prize-money would be distributed—and then for a flare-up; a riotous, drunken orgy which would probably lead to three-fourths of their number finishing up in the police-cells. It would be a great night for the drink-shops of Singapore when Calamity's men, free from the iron discipline they had endured throughout the voyage, let themselves go.

So the men crowded against the bulwarks watching, with hungry eyes, the indistinct coast-line far away on the starboard bow. Even the most sullen and discontented among them dwelt in cheerful anticipation upon the glorious debauch in store. However, they were not permitted to dwell upon these delights undisturbed. In common with most captains, Calamity was accustomed to bring a ship into port looking like a new pin, with not so much as a smudge on the brasswork or a blemish on the white paint. So all hands were turned to for the purpose of scouring, cleaning, and polishing. They worked with a will, for this would be practically their last day on board, even if the *Hawk* did not take up her moorings till the next morning. One of the men, a grizzled old shellback whose memories reached to the days of clippers and square-rigged ships, started to drone a chanty, popular enough in its day but now consigned to the limbo of masts and sails and salt junk. And this was the burden of his song:

"A Yankee ship's gone down the river,
Her masts and yards they shine like silver.
How d'you know she's a Yankee clipper?
By the Stars and Stripes that fly above her.
And who d'you think is captain of her?
One-eyed Kelly, the Bowery runner.
And what d'you think they had for dinner?
Belaying-pin soup and monkey's liver."

There was a chorus between each line of "Blow boys, bully boys blow," which the others took up and yelled at the tops of their voices. In fact, the men were in such high spirits that, on the smallest provocation, they would have raised three cheers for the skipper—but the provocation was not given.

Calamity paced up and down the bridge, grim and taciturn as ever, his hands buried in the pockets of his monkey jacket. About a cable's length astern was the *Satellite*, with Mr. Dykes lolling on the bridge and making mental calculations as to the number of dollars that would fall to his share when the final settlement was made. Like their comrades on the *Hawk*, the crew was busy making the ship spick and span, nor were their anticipations less cheerful. Even the prisoners on both vessels were perking up at the prospect of being released from the hot and stifling quarters where they had spent so many weary days.

Perhaps the only gloomy members of the expedition were the Captain himself and Dora Fletcher. The latter was sitting in her cabin gazing thoughtfully out of the open port. Since that evening when Calamity had asked her to marry him and she had refused, he had not mentioned the subject again; his manner, indeed, seemed to indicate that he had dismissed the matter from his mind. With feminine inconsistency she now fervently wished that Smith had never told her the secret of the Captain's identity, for then everything would have been quite simple. Yet she tried to comfort herself with the thought that it was better as it was, better that she should know the truth before it was too late and she found herself faced by a situation with which, she assured herself, she was totally unfitted to grapple. Involuntarily the girl sighed. So this was to be the end of her one and only romance. Rightly or wrongly, she had rejected the love she desired above all else and the one man with whom she would have gladly mated.

Meanwhile the *Hawk* and her consort were drawing nearer to Singapore, and presently, in answer to a signal, a pilot-boat approached, and, standing off, lowered a boat which quickly came alongside the yacht. The pilot, a grizzled, weather-beaten man, scrambled out of the stern-sheets and climbed on board.

"Well I'm jiggered!" he exclaimed as the Captain stepped forward to greet him, "if it ain't Calamity."

"The same, Abott," answered the latter as they shook hands, for this was not the first time by a good many that the pilot had taken him into Singapore.

"But, bless my soul, skipper, this is the hooker that you wafted out of Singapore."

"It is," answered Calamity. "But come along to my cabin and have a drink, Abott. I'd like to have a little pow-wow with you."

Nothing loth, the pilot accompanied him to the cabin, where Calamity, after carefully locking the door, brought out a bottle and some glasses from a cupboard.

"The usual?" he inquired.

"Aye, skipper, my tastes ain't changed since we last met."

The Captain poured out a generous helping of brandy, which he handed to the pilot and then poured out a like dose for himself.

"Here's luck," said the other as he raised his glass.

Calamity nodded and tossed off his drink.

"What's the news?" he asked.

"About the war? Oh, nothing special, the Germans ain't took Paris, and we haven't burnt down Berlin. But say, skipper, what in thunder made you hike off with the old *Arrow*?"

"The what?" asked Calamity staring hard at the other.

"The *Arrow*, this old packet of Rossenbaum's."

The Captain made no answer for a moment and then a look of understanding came into his face.

"Oh, so the story is that I made off with Rossenbaum's ship?"

"You bet it is and there's a nice old shindy over it," answered the pilot. "Rossenbaum accused Solomon of having stolen his blooming steamer, and Solomon took his oath that you'd taken it unbeknownst to him."

"What you've told me explains a lot of things, Abott. The excellent Solomon's manoeuvres puzzled me from the start, but now I begin to see daylight. I'll have one or two little bones to pick with Isaac when I get ashore."

"Now, see here, skipper, jest you take my tip," said the other earnestly. "Don't put into Singapore. It ain't a healthy place for you, and that's a fact."

"Why not?"

"Why not! Well, you don't suppose a man can be accused of pinching some other party's ship and the authorities not say a word, do you?"

"You mean they're after me?"

"There's a warrant out for your arrest under the Piracy Act or something of that sort."

"H'm," grunted Calamity; "that's news."

"Now see here, skipper, we've known each other a tidy while, and you know I'm not the man to lead an old friend into a mess if I can help it. Take my advice and make for some other port; you may take your oath that I shan't say a word about having picked you up."

"Abott, you're a white man," answered Calamity, "but I'm not taking your advice, good as it sounds. Solomon has played his card, but I can trump it; he's absolutely in my hands, though he doesn't know it yet. Now we'll dismiss that subject for the present, and talk of something far more important. First of all, can you trust the men on your boat?"

"Trust 'em? Well, I should say so," answered the pilot in surprise.

"What I mean is, can they keep their mouths shut?"

"Like limpets."

"Right. Now just listen to this little yarn of mine, Abott, and don't interrupt before I'm through. Savee?"

"Forge ahead, skipper."

For close upon half an hour the Captain talked in lowered tones, and, as he proceeded, the pilot's face exhibited every degree of astonishment. Even when Calamity had finished he remained silent for some moments, as if unable to wholly realise what the latter had told him.

"Well I'm damned!" he muttered at last, and, taking a large blue handkerchief from his pocket, mopped his face.

"And now the question is, will you accept the proposal or not?" asked the Captain.

"I don't know that I've fairly got my teeth into it yet, skipper. It sort o' takes one's breath away, and that's a fact."

"I'm afraid I can't give you much time to think it over, Abott."

"By thunder, I'll take it on then!"

"I'm glad, because there's no other man I could trust," answered Calamity. "We'd better set to work and get the job over as quickly as possible."

"Wait, though," said the other. "This is the sort of thing that wants to be done at night. Suppose we sheer away from land a bit and don't put in till to-morrow morning?"

"That's not a bad idea. Your boat could come alongside after dark then?"

"Yes, but there's another thing to consider as well. How about the men? Can't you pay them off, prize-money and all, before we put in? You'll want to get rid of that crowd as soon as possible after the hook touches mud."

"It might be possible. Just lend me a hand, Abott."

With the pilot's assistance, all the boxes containing money, including the heavy box found in the fort, were dragged out into the middle of the cabin and opened.

"Before we count this you'd better tell the first-mate—a woman, by the way—to alter the course and signal the *Satellite* to do the same," said the Captain.

The pilot left the cabin, and when he returned Calamity had already started to count out the money. Even with the two of them at work it took a long time, and when it was finished and the values of the various currencies adjusted, Calamity made some hurried calculations on paper.

"I can offer each man about a hundred pounds in addition to wages due," he said at last.

"And a pretty fine bonus, too, for such a short trip! They won't jib at that offer, you bet your life. The sooner that deal's squared the better, I should say, skipper."

The Captain unlocked the cabin door, and, calling Sing-hi, told him to fetch the bos'n.

"I want you to make a proposal to the men," said Calamity, when the bos'n appeared. "In the ordinary way they might have to wait a week or more before they received the prize-money due to them, but, if they prefer it, I will pay each man a hundred pounds cash in addition to wages. They might get more by waiting till the stuff is valued and disposed of, but, if they prefer the cash, I will divide the balance among the various marine charities."

"I'm for the cash myself, sir, and I think the others'll be the same; but I'll tell them what you say," answered the bos'n.

"As for the officers and engineers," said Calamity when the bos'n had left the cabin, "they will have to wait until their shares can be properly adjudged."

"As long as we can get rid of the crew, they don't matter, skipper."

In a few minutes the bos'n returned and said that the men were unanimously in favour of taking the cash.

"Then assemble the men aft at eight bells, bos'n."

"Aye, aye, sir," answered the latter, and departed.

"Now," said Calamity, rising from his chair, "I'll signal Mr. Dykes to put the same proposal to his men."

He accordingly did this, and in a very short time received a message back to the effect that the men would prefer the cash payment.

At eight o'clock that evening the crew of the *Hawk* lined up aft to receive their money. As each man's name was called out by the bos'n, the owner of it stepped up to the little table where Calamity was seated and received in his hat the equivalent in money and notes of about a hundred and twenty pounds, prize-money and pay. When they had all been paid, a boat was lowered and the Captain went aboard the *Satellite*, where a similar distribution was made.

Later on that night, when it was quite dark, a boat approached the *Hawk* and made fast under her stern. Some cases and bags were lowered into her and then she slipped away into the darkness again.

CHAPTER XXV

THE ARREST

Early on the following morning the *Hawk*, with the gunboat in her wake, steamed towards Singapore harbour. As the vessels drew nearer, a motor-boat was seen approaching at full speed, and presently a man in the stern stood up and began to wave his arms frantically, apparently as a signal for the ships to heave-to.

"Now, who the devil's that?" muttered Calamity, who was on the bridge with the pilot.

"Looks uncommon like Solomon's new motor bum-boat," answered the latter. "That's his water-clerk in the stern."

By this time the motor-boat had come within hailing distance, and the excited person ceased waving his arms and applied both hands to his mouth funnel-wise.

"Ship ahoy!" he yelled. "Is Captain Calamity on board?"

"Great Scot! How in the name of all that's uncanny did Solomon know that I was coming into port!" ejaculated Calamity, turning to the pilot.

"Well, he might have heard from one of my men who went ashore last night. I didn't tell them not to say anything about your coming in."

"Is that Captain Calamity?" shouted the water-clerk once more.

"Yes, what do you want?" answered the Captain.

"I want to see you, sir. I have a message from Mr. Solomon."

"Then come alongside."

The motor-boat sheered alongside the *Hawk*, and the water-clerk, gripping a rope which had been thrown over the taffrail, hauled himself on board. He waited at the foot of the bridge companion-ladder for Calamity to come down, having learnt from experience that it was an unforgivable offence to go on the bridge himself unless requested to do so.

"Now then, what's your message?" asked Calamity, as he descended the ladder.

The water-clerk, an undersized Malay half-breed with small, shifty eyes, made a movement that was something between a salaam and a salute.

"I have important news from Mr. Solomon, Captain," he said.

"Well, go ahead."

The clerk glanced at the men at work on deck and made a significant gesture.

"It is very private, sir," he answered.

"Then you'd better come to my cabin," said the Captain, and led the way aft. On entering the cabin he sat down, but did not request his visitor to do likewise, and the latter knew enough to remain standing.

"Now unload your instructions," said Calamity.

"The fact is, Captain, there's been great trouble about you in Singapore," began the clerk, speaking in subdued tones. "It's said that your Letters of Marque were forged and that you're nothing but a pirate——"

"A what?" broke in the Captain, so fiercely that the other jumped.

"I—I'm only telling you what people say," the clerk answered nervously.

"You mean you're telling me what Solomon told you to say. Well, get on with it."

"I know nothing about the matter myself, Captain, but the authorities are going to arrest you and take possession of the ship."

"And Mr. Solomon has sent you to warn me, is that it?" asked Calamity with an ironical smile.

"Yes. He is afraid that the authorities will seize the ship and all the plunder."

"That's better, now we're getting at the truth. But how does Solomon know I've got any plunder?"

"He did not think you would return without any."

"H'm, a far-seeing man is Solomon. But what does he expect me to do?"

"His idea is that you should transfer the most valuable stuff to the motor-boat so that it may be taken away to a safe place. Then, you see, when the officials board your ship they will find practically nothing."

"An excellent plan," remarked Calamity almost with enthusiasm. "But what about me?"

"About you, Captain?"

"Yes; am I to be left to the care of the police while Solomon is looking after the plunder?"

"Oh no!" ejaculated the clerk in shocked tones. "If there is nothing of value on board the authorities can't do much to you. Besides, Mr. Solomon will do his utmost to secure your acquittal if you are tried."

"A very ingenious scheme. And now tell me about this story of the *Arrow*."

"The *Arrow*?" repeated the other with affected innocence.

"Exactly. Hasn't Solomon declared that I stole it; that, in short, it belonged to Rossenbaum?"

A startled expression crossed the water-clerk's face, but it was gone in an instant.

"I think you must be mistaken, Captain," he answered suavely. "I have heard nothing about the *Arrow*."

"Well, you go back to Solomon and tell him that his little scheme's gone adrift, and that he needn't worry himself about the plunder, because I'm looking after it myself. Now quit."

The clerk looked as if he would have liked to protest, but thought better of it, and, leaving the cabin, hurried back to the motor-boat which then made for the harbour at full speed.

"That'll shake up our friend Solomon a bit, I fancy," said Calamity, when he had told Abott about the interview. "It was a clever scheme, and might have succeeded if you hadn't told me about that *Arrow* affair."

"He'll be about the maddest thing between here and 'Frisco when that little runt gives him your message," answered the pilot with a grin.

"The whole thing's as clear as daylight now," went on Calamity. "He got hold of Rossenbaum's ship and palmed it off on me as his own, so that, when the time came, he could get me arrested on a charge of piracy and collar the whole of the proceeds himself. There are two things he didn't count on, however, and one of them was that I might get rid of the stuff before reaching Singapore."

"But you've still got to prove that you didn't pirate old Rossenbaum's hooker."

Calamity laughed softly, but made no answer. Very soon afterwards a naval steam pinnace hove in sight, and, without signalling the *Hawk* to stop, came alongside. A young Lieutenant caught hold of the rope by which the water-clerk had lowered himself into the motor-boat and scrambled on board with the agility of a monkey.

"Captain Calamity?" he inquired briskly as the latter, who had left the bridge, came forward.

"At your service," answered the Captain.

"It is my duty to inform you, sir, that you are under arrest," said the officer.

"On what charge?"

"The charge will be formulated by the authorities," replied the Lieutenant, who, apparently, had no very great liking for this police work.

"What do you propose to do with me then?"

"I must ask you to accompany me ashore as soon as this vessel is anchored."

"I am at your disposal," answered the Captain.

Steaming into the harbour, the *Hawk* dropped her anchor, and the *Satellite*, having received no orders to the contrary, followed suit. While this work was proceeding, a native boat put off from the shore and approached the yacht. In it was a passenger attired in a frock coat, and—a thing as rare in Singapore as snow—a tall silk hat. The boat came alongside, and the boatman, in answer to an inquiry from his passenger, indicated the rope that was still hanging over the taffrail of the *Hawk*.

"Hullo, what is it?" shouted the Lieutenant from the deck above.

"Can you tell me if Mr. John Brighthouse is on board?" inquired the silk-hatted person in dignified tones.

"I will ask, but who are you?"

The stranger took a card-case from his pocket, but, realising the impossibility of handing it up to the officer, put it back again.

"I am Henry Vayne, of Vayne & Paver, solicitors, Chancery Lane, London," he said in the same dignified tone.

"You had better come aboard, sir."

"Thank you, but—er—is there no other means of ascending than by this rope?"

"If you'll wait a moment, I'll let down the accommodation ladder," answered the Lieutenant.

The ladder having been lowered, the visitor, who carried a small leather handbag, mounted to the deck.

"I should be greatly obliged," said he, taking the card-case from his pocket again and presenting a card to the officer, "if you would give this to Mr. John Brighthouse, and ask if I might be permitted to see him."

The Lieutenant took the card, and, turning to the bos'n who was standing near, asked him if there was any one called John Brighthouse on board.

"No one as I knows of, sir," answered the bos'n.

"I'm afraid you have made a mistake, sir," said the Lieutenant, but at that moment Calamity appeared on deck, and, catching sight of the visitor, hurried towards him.

"Vayne, by all that's wonderful!" he exclaimed.

The solicitor stared at him in a puzzled fashion for a moment, and then his eyes lit up with a flash of recognition.

"Bless my soul, John, I shouldn't have known you!" he exclaimed as they shook hands.

"Fifteen years make a great difference, eh?"

"Fourteen years, ten months and nine days," corrected the lawyer. "I am always most exact on the subject of dates. The last time we met was in my office, and the circumstances were—er—somewhat painful."

"Yes," answered the Captain, "they were. Still, Vayne, you behaved like a brick; you were the only person who believed in me."

"Pah! Nonsense!" exclaimed the other. "But you've altered," he went on, "altered most remarkably."

"Yes," said Calamity grimly, "I have altered, as you say. Strange you should turn up at this juncture, because I'm in trouble once more."

"Dear me, dear me," murmured the lawyer in a tone of concern.

"Yes, I've been arrested on a charge of piracy, if I'm not mistaken."

"Pi——" began the other, and then, stopping short on the first syllable, hastily adjusted a pair of pinc-nez on his nose and regarded the Captain through them. "Piracy, did you say?" he went on.

"Yes, that's my latest crime. Last time we met it was forgery."

"Tut, tut," said the lawyer in a peevish tone, "you mustn't put it like that. But, my dear John, piracy! Surely you are joking?"

"Ask that gentleman," answered Calamity, indicating the Lieutenant, who had moved a little distance away.

"But you will disprove the charge?"

"Yes, I have a pretty good defence, I fancy."

"You will, of course, place it in my hands?"

"Since you've arrived at such an opportune moment, Vayne, it would be an insult to the gods not to do so."

"Good," answered the lawyer. "But that reminds me. You haven't asked why I'm here. It's some distance from Chancery Lane, eh?"

"Oh, I know why you're here," replied Calamity, "and for that reason we can discuss your errand later on. This piracy charge is a more pressing matter, and the sooner I place you in possession of the facts, the better. I will ask the Lieutenant if he can let us have half an hour alone together before I'm taken ashore."

The officer readily consented, and Calamity, accompanied by the lawyer, went to his cabin. There they remained in close conference until a seaman knocked at the door and informed the Captain that the Lieutenant was waiting for him. Then, under an escort of bluejackets, Captain Calamity was taken ashore.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE TRIAL

A couple of hours later Calamity, with the Lieutenant and Mr. Vayne—the latter having been permitted to accompany them in his character of solicitor to the accused—was ushered into a spacious room where several men sat round a large table, at the head of which was a bronzed, hard-featured man in naval uniform, evidently the president.

"You are John Brighthouse, otherwise known as Captain Calamity, I believe?" said the latter, addressing the prisoner.

"That is correct," answered the Captain.

"Briefly, the charge against you is that you did wilfully and feloniously seize in this harbour a steamer called the *Arrow*, belonging to Jacob Rossenbaum of Johore, and did detain and use the same with criminal intent. Are you guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty."

Mr. Rossenbaum having been called upon to give evidence, stated that, having contracted with Isaac Solomon of Singapore for the repair of his, witness's ship, the *Arrow*, the latter was sent round to Mr. Solomon's shipyard. Witness had every reason to believe that the repairs were carried out, for he received a wire from Mr. Solomon telling him to send a crew to take over the *Arrow*, which had then left the yard and was lying in Singapore harbour. He had duly despatched a crew, but, on the following morning, received another wire from Mr. Solomon asking him to come to Singapore at once. On arrival, he learnt that his vessel had been boarded and taken out of the harbour under her own steam by a person known as Captain Calamity.

The president then called upon Isaac Solomon. The latter, who had carefully abstained from looking at Calamity, took his stand as far from him as he possibly could.

"According to the statement previously laid before us," said the president, "you undertook to

repair the steamer, *Arrow*, belonging to Mr. Rossenbaum. The repairs having been duly executed, the steamer was anchored in the harbour to await a crew which you had wired Mr. Rossenbaum to send?"

"That is so," answered the witness.

"But while the steamer was waiting for this crew, she disappeared mysteriously?"

"Yes."

"And you have reason to believe that the accused committed the offence?"

"I can prove it," said Mr. Solomon eagerly, but still carefully avoiding the Captain's eye.

"That will do," said the president, and Mr. Solomon, with a grin of triumph on his face, was about to retire, when the solicitor rose from his chair.

"With your permission, sir," he said, addressing the president, "I should like to ask this witness a question."

"Proceed then."

"Was there anything in the nature of a partnership existing between yourself and the accused?" asked the solicitor.

"Most emphatically not!" exclaimed the witness. "I have never had any dealings with the man. He showed me a paper which purported to be a privateer's licence, but in my opinion it was a forgery."

"That was all I wanted to know," said Mr. Vayne, and sat down.

The next witness was Tilak Sumbowa, Solomon's water-clerk, who, in answer to the president, proceeded to give a long and detailed account of how, on the very day that the *Arrow* disappeared, his employer, Mr. Solomon, had instructed him to wire Mr. Rossenbaum that his steamer was awaiting a crew.

"That wire," said the witness impressively, "is in Mr. Rossenbaum's possession now. On returning to the office I found that Mr. Solomon had gone out and left a note saying that he had been called away on business, and would not be back till next morning. I still have that note. Then, having certain business to do myself, I went out of town and did not get back till the following day."

"Then neither you nor your employer were in Singapore on the night the *Arrow* disappeared?" suggested the president as the witness paused.

"No, sir."

Other witnesses were then called—all of them natives or half-castes—to show that Mr. Solomon was not in Singapore on the night of the *Arrow's* departure, and that he had never had any business dealings with Calamity.

"I will now call upon the accused to make his defence and examine any witnesses he thinks fit," said the president.

Mr. Vayne at once stood up, and, adjusting his pinc-nez, addressed the tribunal.

"I think it only right to inform the court that my client is not quite the nameless adventurer the prosecutor would have you believe," he said in a loud, sonorous voice. "It is true that he is known in these parts as Captain Calamity, and it is equally true that his name is John Brighthouse. But he is also Viscount Redhurst of Redhurst—a fact which I mention, gentlemen, because I assume that, when we come to deal with conflicting statements, you will grant that the word of an English peer is at least equal to that of a semi-Asiatic ship-chandler."

Mr. Vayne paused for a moment or two after this *dénouement*, in order to let the full significance of his statement sink into the minds of his opponents. He had taken their measure pretty accurately, and calculated upon the effect which his words would produce.

"With the permission of the court," he went on, "I will recall the prosecutor and put a few questions to him."

At a gesture from the president, Mr. Solomon stepped forward. The air of conscious rectitude which had distinguished him when giving evidence against Calamity was not now so apparent.

"I understand," said the lawyer, focussing his pinc-nez upon the ship-chandler, "that it was you, and not Rossenbaum, who informed the authorities that my client had illegally appropriated the steamer, *Arrow*?"

"Yes," replied the witness.

"How soon, after you had discovered that the *Arrow* was missing, did you inform the authorities of the fact?"

"About three weeks," answered the witness reluctantly.

"You mean that three weeks elapsed before the authorities were made aware of what had taken place?"

"Yes."

"Then do you wish the court to believe that if a man stole your watch and chain, or broke into your office, you would wait three weeks before informing the police?"

"That would be a different thing."

"I believe you. Now," added the lawyer with sudden vehemence, "I put it to you, sir, that your reason for waiting such a long time was that the accused might get safely away before the authorities had a chance to capture him."

"It was not!" cried Mr. Solomon hotly. "Why should I not wish him to be captured?"

The lawyer placed both hands on the back of his chair and leaned forward.

"Because," he said in a denunciatory tone, "you were the accused's partner; because, having partly financed his scheme, you wanted to reap all the profits by swindling your partner out of his share. I maintain," he went on, waving aside an interruption that Mr. Solomon was about to make, "that your object was to let my client capture what prizes he could, and then, by contriving his arrest, seize for yourself all the proceeds of the expedition, together with any money that might accrue from the Government."

"It is a lie, a wicked lie!" the witness almost shrieked.

"I will go even further," pursued the lawyer, ignoring Mr. Solomon's indignant protest. "I will assert that the whole thing was a plot, engineered by you as soon as my client had laid his plans before you. With or without the connivance of Mr. Rossenbaum, the *Arrow* was brought round to Singapore, coaled, provisioned, and armed by you, and, after you had caused the name *Hawk* to be substituted for *Arrow*, was handed over to my client with the understanding that it was your ship."

Mr. Solomon attempted to make a reply, but was so overcome with indignation, anger, and other emotions that he could only utter inarticulate sounds.

"I should like to recall the witness, Tilak Sumbowa," went on Mr. Vayne, and the ship-chandler sat down, biting his nails with rage.

The water-clerk came forward looking very nervous.

"I gathered from your evidence that neither you nor Mr. Solomon were in Singapore on the night the *Arrow*, or, as she was then called, the *Hawk*, left," said Mr. Vayne.

"No; Mr. Solomon left me a note at mid-day saying he was called away on business. I have it here," and the witness triumphantly produced an envelope from his pocket.

"Let me see it."

Sumbowa passed the note to the lawyer, who scrutinised the envelope critically.

"This envelope is addressed to Mr. Solomon," he said.

"Yes. The note was lying on his desk without an envelope, so I picked one out of the waste-paper basket and put the note in it."

"And this is the identical envelope which you picked up out of the waste-paper basket?"

"Yes."

"At the time you found the note?"

"Directly I had finished reading it."

"All of which circumstance took place a few hours before the *Hawk* left Singapore and during the time that Mr. Solomon was out of town?"

"Yes."

"Then," said the lawyer quietly, "how do you account for the fact that this envelope bears on it a postmark dated a week after the *Arrow's* departure?"

There was a dead silence. The witness looked from one to the other with an almost pitiful expression of bewilderment.

"Well," said the lawyer after a long pause, "what explanation have you to offer us? I presume you will not suggest that the postal authorities post-date letters?"

"I—I must have made a mistake," faltered the unhappy Sumbowa. "Now I come to think of it, I didn't put the note into the envelope till some days afterwards."

"Oh yes, you've made a mistake," commented the lawyer drily, "but not exactly in the way you would have us believe. However, we will let that pass for the moment. Were you in the office yourself on the night that the *Arrow* left?"

"No."

"What time did Mr. Solomon arrive at the office on the following morning?"

"I don't know."

"Don't you go to the office in the mornings, then?"

"Oh yes, I went to the office at eight o'clock as usual, but Mr. Solomon was not there. I waited about for a little while and then went away. When I came back at half-past ten he had returned."

"Was there anyone in the office at the time he arrived?"

"Oh no."

"How do you know?"

"It was locked up. That was why I went away."

A gleam came into the lawyer's eye as he realised, in a flash, what he had accidentally stumbled upon. Without looking, he knew that Solomon was making frantic but stealthy signs to Sumbowa, and by a kind of hypnotism he kept the little water-clerk's attention fixed upon himself. It would never do to let the half-caste guess what a mess he was getting his employer into. Mr. Vayne's next question, therefore, was purposely casual.

"You, yourself, had no key to the office then?"

"Oh no."

"Mr. Solomon had the only one?"

"Yes."

"Then do you suggest that he went away and left the office unlocked, because, if not, how did you get in and find the note? And if it was unlocked when you went in, how came it to be locked when you returned in the morning, you having no key and Mr. Solomon not having arrived?"

The witness looked bewildered for a moment and then, catching sight of Mr. Solomon's face, seemed to crumple up.

"Come, answer my question," rapped out the other.

"He—he must have come back to the office after I found the note," whimpered Sumbowa.

"You have simply been telling the court a tissue of lies from beginning to end," thundered the lawyer. "You have contradicted yourself so many times that you can't remember what you have said. Now let me tell you this, my man: unless you are prepared to confess the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, you will find yourself in the dock on a charge of perjury and with the moral certainty of being sentenced to a long term of imprisonment with hard labour. Now, answer me; did you receive that note before or after the departure of the *Hawk*?"

"Af-after," sobbed the witness.

"How long after?"

"About a fortnight."

"Do you know why Mr. Solomon gave you that note?"

"No."

"But he told you to swear that you found it in his office on the day in question?"

"Yes."

"You knew that it was he who provided the vessel with guns and ammunition, and also caused the name *Hawk* to be substituted for that of *Arrow*?"

Sumbowa hesitated for the fraction of a minute.

"Well?" rapped out the lawyer.

"Er—yes."

"Thank you; that will do."

The witness tottered back to his seat and almost collapsed in it. Never had he passed through such an ordeal before, and, for the time being, he was a nervous wreck.

Mr. Vayne turned to the tribunal.

"I shall not waste your time, gentlemen," he said, "by calling witnesses for the defence—as, for instance, my client's chief officer, who was with him when he visited the prosecutor on the night of sailing—or by arguing a matter which I regard as proven. All I shall do is to draw from the evidence conclusions which, beyond a doubt, prove my client's innocence of the charge brought against him. After having treated us to a series of palpable falsehoods at the instigation of his employer, the witness Sumbowa has admitted that Solomon did not give him the note saying that he would be out of town until a fortnight after the *Arrow's* departure and the inference is that Solomon *did* see my client on that particular night. Had he not done so, why should he have tried to establish an alibi; why should he have taken such pains to try and prove that he was not in

Singapore that night?

"Further, I contend that these deductions are confirmed by the fact that Solomon, on his own admission, did not make known the alleged offence until three weeks after the steamer had left. I put it to you, gentlemen, as men of the world, that this was an extraordinary procedure, and can only be accounted for by the assumption that the prosecutor did not want his victim to be arrested before the latter had secured what, for want of a better term, I shall call a generous profit on the initial outlay.

"In short, I submit that Solomon entered into a conspiracy with divers persons to bring about the ruination of my client in order that he, the prosecutor, might reap the entire benefits of this privateering expedition.

"And now a word concerning the allegation that my client possessed forged Letters of Marque. I don't think it necessary to prove or disprove this charge, seeing that, under the circumstances, Letters of Marque were quite unnecessary. Any British ship, or any ship belonging to an allied Power, has the right to attack and destroy an enemy vessel, a statement which is borne out by the fact that the British Government offered rewards to any merchant captain who could prove that he had sunk, captured, or destroyed an enemy submarine. This, gentlemen, is all I have to say."

After a few minutes' whispered consultation with his colleagues, the president turned towards Calamity.

"We are unanimously of opinion that the charge brought against you is without the smallest foundation, and that you have been the victim of a malicious conspiracy," he said. "You are, therefore, acquitted. As to the prosecutor and his witnesses, they will be dealt with in due course upon charges arising out of this case."

As the president ceased speaking, Calamity rose and, drawing some papers from his pocket, handed them to him. They were the forged clearance papers and the secret instructions from a German source, addressed to Mr. Solomon, which he had taken from the *Ann*.

The president hastily glanced through them, asked Calamity a few questions in a low voice, and then touched a little bell at his side. A sergeant of marines entered in answer to the ring and stood at attention.

"Arrest that man and see that he is well guarded," said the president, indicating the ship-chandler.

With the sergeant's vice-like grip upon his arm, Mr. Isaac Solomon was dragged protesting from the room and so vanished for ever from the ken of friends and enemies alike.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE LETTER

Although the trial had been held in camera, the news of Calamity's arrest and acquittal soon became known throughout Singapore, though there were at least half a dozen different versions of the affair. And, as might have been anticipated, various inaccurate accounts of his adventures as a privateer were put into circulation by his crew, with the result that, before many hours had passed, he was looked upon as a hero of the most romantic type. Crowds flocked to the harbour to gaze at the two vessels, and the native boatmen did a thriving business in taking the more enthusiastic spectators round them. Wild tales were spread concerning the amount of booty which had been taken and the fabulous sums of prize-money which had been distributed among the crew. In addition to these confused exaggerations, another one soon gained currency to the effect that Calamity had been created a lord in recognition of his exploits.

As for the crew, they were having the time of their lives, being regarded as heroes by everybody save the police. They were feted both publicly and privately; interviewed, photographed, and written about, until, at the end of a week, they had become so overbearing and insolent that people grew tired of them and the police intimated that the sooner they found ships and departed the better. Most of the men, having spent all their money in a brief but glorious debauch, adopted this wise counsel, but a few, who overrated the patience of the authorities and continued to act as if the town belonged to them, were seized during a drunken orgy and locked up.

In the meantime Calamity had left Singapore and gone to Paku, a little town easily reached by train, where he was reasonably safe from newspaper men and inquisitive people generally. In order that he might do this, Mr. Vayne had undertaken to act as his representative in paying off the officers and making arrangements for them to receive their share of the prize-money in due course. On the day following the trial, the lawyer went over to Paku and found Calamity seated on the verandah of the house where he was staying, clad in white ducks and smoking a very strong cigar.

"By the way, have you seen anything of Miss Fletcher?" asked the Captain after they had been talking for some time.

"No, but I heard of her at the Consulate this morning. She had been to see the Consul concerning certain private matters and will be leaving for Yokohama in a P. and O. boat to-morrow. I gathered that from Yokohama she will sail for San Francisco."

"H'm," grunted Calamity, but made no comment.

"And she left this for you," went on the lawyer, and, taking a letter from his pocket, he handed it to Calamity who glanced at the superscription and put it aside.

"Thanks very much, Vayne, I'm afraid I'm giving you a lot of trouble."

"Not at all, not at all! But if you would just go into these matters now, I should be greatly obliged," and the lawyer opened the little leather handbag he had brought with him.

"Everything," he went on, taking out some documents, "is perfectly straightforward and simple. By your elder brother's death you inherit the title and estates, while, of course, his own private property, investments, and so forth, go to his wife and child——"

"Child?" interrupted Calamity. "Did George have a child, then?"

"Yes, a little girl. She'd be about twelve now."

"And Lady Betty, I suppose, is still at the Towers?"

"Yes."

Calamity's lips tightened and his brows met in a frown. The lawyer regarded him for a moment, and then, leaning forward, touched him gently on the knee.

"You're thinking of that wretched business of the alleged forgery," he said. "You may safely regard it as forgotten now; at least, no one is ever likely to refer to it in any way unless——" Vayne hesitated and smiled.

"Unless what?"

"Unless you go in for politics."

Calamity laughed in spite of himself.

"You may safely dismiss that possibility from your mind," he said. "But, as it happens, I'm going to reopen the matter myself."

"Eh?" ejaculated Vayne.

"You remember the story, don't you? A cheque for five thousand pounds was forged in my father's name, and, by a series of artificially prepared 'clues,' it was traced to me. The belief that I was the culprit was strengthened by the fact that I had been playing the fool pretty generally and was head over ears in debt at the time. Well, what you don't know is, that my brother forged the cheque in such a way that I should be suspected. He had been trying to poison the old man's mind against me for a long time and——"

"Was it on account of a woman?" interrupted the lawyer shrewdly.

"Yes; I see you understand. We were both madly in love with the same woman, and—well, my brother held the strong suit. But to continue: the gov'nor accused me outright of forging his signature, and I, being too proud to deny such a vile charge, especially coming from him, was branded as a promising young criminal by the entire family. The gov'nor offered me a sum of money to clear out, which bribe I refused, though I cleared out all the same."

"And you released Lady Betty from her engagement?" murmured Vayne as the Captain paused.

The latter winced and went on hurriedly:

"The night before I left I was sitting at the window of an unlighted room, thinking—God knows what I was thinking, it doesn't matter now—when I heard voices in the shrubbery and recognised them as belonging to my brother and his German valet. Hearing my own name, I leant out of the window and listened; I felt no shame about it, for I guessed the part George had played in my affairs. And, anyway, I wasn't caring much about the conventions just then. There's no need to repeat what I heard, but my suspicions were confirmed, and when the pair moved out of the shrubbery I knew for certain that, between them, they had engineered my ruin. To put the matter in a nutshell, my brother had forged the cheque, having previously arranged matters so that suspicion should fall on me.

"My first thought was to rush to the old man at once and tell him what I had discovered. But a moment's reflection convinced me that I hadn't an atom of tangible proof, that the whole thing would rest on my word, which, under the circumstances, I could hardly expect anyone to accept. No, there was nothing for it but to acquiesce in the inevitable and go—which I did."

"Yes," said Vayne thoughtfully, "you came up to my office one morning early. There was a look in your face that I shan't forget as long as I live. It has often puzzled me since why you came to me."

"I don't quite know, myself," answered Calamity. "But you had always been pretty decent to me, Vayne, and when I was acting the fool at Oxford, you befriended me more than once. Why a staid and eminently respectable family lawyer like yourself should lend a helping hand to a scatter-

brained idiot I don't know; but you did, and there it is."

"As to that, my dear John, your family have been clients of my firm for generations," said the lawyer almost apologetically.

Calamity laughed.

"I'm afraid that's a very weak defence, Vayne, not to say irrelevant. However, we'll let it pass. You lent me the money to get out of the country and—well, you know the rest."

"I know as much as you told me in one scanty letter a year," answered the lawyer drily. "I don't believe you would even have written me to that extent had I not extracted the promise from you before you left my office."

"I'm afraid you wouldn't have been very edified had I given you a full and particular account of my adventures. I served three years before the mast, got my mate's ticket, and after that a master's ticket. I've sailed in whalers, colliers, cattle-boats, liners, tramps, blackbirders, and God knows what sort of craft. I've dug for gold in Alaska, been a transport rider in South Africa, skippered a pearling-ground poacher in Japanese waters, run guns in the Persian Gulf, and—well, ended up by becoming a privateer. Also, I nearly pegged out once with malaria, and, as you see, I lost an eye."

The lawyer nodded.

"Your father, as I informed you in one of my yearly letters, died in the belief that you were dead, and so did your brother," he said. "Seeing that they are both gone, I suggest that you do not attempt to reopen the matter of the forged cheque. As you have said, you can prove nothing, and —"

"But I can now," interrupted Calamity, with almost savage energy. "Look at this."

He took a wallet out of his pocket and extracted from it the document that Fritz Siemann had drawn up and signed and which Smith and McPhulach had witnessed.

"There," he said, handing it to the lawyer.

The latter took the document, adjusted his pinc-nez, and carefully read it through twice.

"That clears you once and for all," he remarked as he handed it back.

"It does, and I'm going to use it."

"My dear fellow!" exclaimed the lawyer in a tone almost approaching horror.

"Oh, I don't mean that I propose publishing it in the newspapers. But all those who knew me and believed in my guilt at the time shall see it."

"But whatever wrong your brother may have done you, he is dead now, and it would hardly be—good form to dishonour his memory. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum.*"

"Damn his memory!" flashed out Calamity. "I beg your pardon, Vayne," he went on in a quieter tone, noticing the other's shocked expression, "but I don't see why a live man should suffer in order to shield a dead man's reputation. He made me suffer while I was alive, and it is a very poor revenge, albeit the only one at my disposal, to charge him with his crime now he's dead. I for one won't bow down to the shibboleth of honouring the dead just because they are dead; I hate my brother as much now as ever I did, and the mere fact that he's no longer able to enjoy the fruits of his rascality makes no difference to that."

"As you will, John; it's a matter for you to decide, not me."

The lawyer rose from his chair and slowly fastened his little leather bag.

"By the way," he said a little hesitatingly, "have—er—have Letters of Marque been revived since the war started?"

"Pon my word, Vayne, I don't know," answered Calamity.

"Then you——"

"Oh, as usual, I took risks."

"H'm," grunted the lawyer, and added, after a pause, "when will you be ready to sail?"

"A fortnight or three weeks from now. I want to make sure that all my officers receive their proper share of the profits."

"Very well. I shall see you to-morrow, I suppose?"

"Yes, I shall be here," answered Calamity, shaking hands.

The lawyer had scarcely gone when a native servant entered and stated that a gentleman had called to see Captain Calamity.

"What is his name?"

"Abott, master."

"Then show him up."

The pilot was duly ushered in, and, as soon as the servant had departed, he congratulated Calamity on having been acquitted of the charge which Solomon had brought against him.

"Thanks," answered Calamity. "I told you I had something in store for the old rascal."

"Then it's true he's been arrested?"

"Yes; I don't think you're likely to gaze on his benevolent smile again, Abott."

"Then there's a story going round that you're a lord or a dook or something of that sort."

"Don't take any notice of it," answered Calamity; "you'll hear a good deal worse than that when rumour's got well under way. And now to business."

"The stuff's down at my old shack, and, as it'll be dark in a few minutes, I thought we might as well toddle over there."

Calamity agreed, and, leaving the house, they proceeded at a rapid walk till the outskirts of the village were reached. By this time it was dark, and Abott, taking an electric torch from his pocket, led the way along a narrow foot-track till they reached the sea-shore.

"Here we are," he said, throwing a gleam of light on a tumble-down hut about fifty yards from the water's edge. "I'll go first."

He unlocked the door, a crazy affair that a good push would have brought down completely, and led the way in. With the aid of the torch he found an old lantern with a piece of candle in it, and, after lighting this, set it on an upturned barrel.

"There we are," he remarked; "'tain't much of a light, but it'll do to talk by."

In the yellow glimmer it was just possible to make out a number of cases and sacks piled in a corner with lumber of various sorts, such as empty water-beakers, odd spars, rusty anchors, and so forth.

"Looks as if it were worth about half a dollar the lot, doesn't it, instead of somewheres around two hundred and fifty thousand dollars?" remarked the pilot as he seated himself on a water-beaker. "And to think," he went on musingly, "that I pull fifty thousand out of it. What for?"

"For playing the game," answered Calamity gravely, and, taking a handful of cheroots from his pocket, he offered them to the other.

Abott took one, opened the door of the lantern, and they both lit up.

"Now," said the pilot, exhaling huge clouds of pungent smoke, "we'd better fix matters up. This isn't the sort of stuff you can tuck under your arm, walk into a bank with, and ask for it to be placed to the credit of your account. No, sir, questions might be asked, seeing that bar gold and promiscuous jewellery ain't common currency even in this country. And, I take it, if the Admiralty knew about it, they'd want to confiscate a tidy lump as treasure trove, or whatever it's called."

Calamity nodded.

"Well, I know a man in Sumatra who'll negotiate this little lot, though he'll charge 5 per cent. for doing it. How does that strike you?"

"Excellent. Will you see to it, Abott?"

"I will, and you shall hear directly the job's through. I reckon you'll have done the right thing by everybody; the Government's got a new island, a German war-boat, thirty or forty prisoners, and about a thousand pounds' worth of merchandise stacked away on board the *Hawk*."

"Likewise a traitor in the person of the late respected Solomon, and a ship called the *Ann*," added Calamity.

"The *Ann*?" queried the other. "I heard of a packet named the *Ann* having been collared by a British cruiser and taken into Penang; would that be the hooker?"

"Without a doubt, but I haven't time to tell you the story now, Abott. If ever you happen to meet Solomon—which isn't likely—ask him about it."

The pilot rose, kicked aside the beaker on which he had been sitting, and picked up the lantern. Calamity also got up, and, going outside, waited while the other extinguished the light and locked the door. They returned to Paku and stopped outside the house where Calamity lodged, the pilot having refused to go in as he wanted to get back to Singapore as quickly as possible.

"I shall see you again before I leave," said Calamity as they shook hands.

On reaching his own room, he took from his pocket the letter which Vayne had given him earlier in the day. It was addressed to "Captain Calamity" in a large, bold handwriting. Tearing open the envelope Calamity took out a sheet of notepaper and read:

"This is to say 'Good-bye' and to explain why, when you asked me to marry you, I refused. During your illness I chanced to learn who you really were, and then I realised

why it was that you once said to me 'Our paths lie wide apart.' As the wife of Captain Calamity I might have made you happy, but as the wife of Viscount Redhurst I believe I should fail utterly and bring unhappiness to us both. I am going to California as you suggested, where, should you ever have a desire to see me again, I shall be found."

The note was signed "Dora Fletcher," and Calamity, before folding it up, read the last sentence twice—the second time with a faint smile playing about his lips. Then he took out his leather wallet which contained the confession of Fritz Siemann and placed the note in it.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOME

It was spring, and although spring that year had not done its worst, the two men who alighted from the train at Redhurst Station turned up the collars of their greatcoats and shivered. One of them, a powerful, squarely built man with a glass eye, gazed round the little country station as if in search of someone, and at last fixed his serviceable eye upon a richly dressed woman in a motor just outside the wicket-gate. He thereupon turned to his companion, a red-headed man who was arguing in broad Scotch with a porter over the alleged damage done to a very old and dilapidated cabin trunk.

"Tell them the luggage must be sent on at once, Jones," he said.

Leaving McPhulach, *alias* Jones, to see that his instructions were carried out, Calamity passed through the wicket-gate. As he approached her, the woman leaned out of the tonneau expectantly; but at that moment the sun emerged from an obscuring cloud and shone right into her eyes. By the time she had opened her sunshade and could see again Calamity had reached the car. The words of honeyed welcome died on her lips and she shrank back against the cushions as she saw him standing there with a grim smile on his face.

"Well, Betty?" he said.

"Is—is it you?" she faltered.

"Yes, you find me changed, eh?"

"A—a little," she answered.

The flicker of a smile crossed Calamity's face again as he looked at her.

"You are the same as ever, anyhow," he commented.

His words restored Lady Betty's self-possession. His altered appearance had frightened her at first, and she had not recognised in him the man she had once promised to marry. But now he had spoken in a familiar language words which showed, as she thought, that, despite the years, her charms had not lessened in his eyes.

"I am so glad you have come back," she said softly.

At that moment, to her annoyance, McPhulach came up accompanied by a porter.

"He says it will be ane an' saxpence to tak' the luggage," said the engineer indignantly.

"Pay him then," answered Calamity.

"But, mon, 'tis only a sheeling, forby——"

"Pay him," snapped Calamity, and McPhulach grumblingly paid the money in pennies and half-pennies, counting them twice before handing them over.

"Won't you get in?" asked Lady Betty, as Calamity again turned to her.

He obeyed, at the same time calling to McPhulach, who was watching the luggage being hoisted on to the station 'bus. As he approached—an uncouth figure in an ill-fitting, ready-made overcoat—Lady Betty elevated her eyebrows.

"Who is this?" she whispered quickly.

"Let me introduce him," answered the Captain.

"Lady Betty Redhurst, Mr. Jones, until recently my chief engineer. Jones, Lady Betty Redhurst."

"I'm unco' pleased tae meet ye," said McPhulach, extending a huge red hand with its blunt, misshapen fingers. "I'm frae Pontypreed mesel'," he added inconsequently.

The elegant woman touched the engineer's hairy paw with the tips of her gloved fingers and smiled sweetly.

"Better sit down there," said Calamity, indicating the seat opposite, but Lady Betty spoke hastily.

"Wouldn't you prefer to sit in front, Mr. Jones?" she asked, with seeming solicitude for his comfort; "you can see the country much better there, and it's really very pretty just now."

McPhulach, only too glad of a chance to sit beside the chauffeur, where he might smoke, obeyed with alacrity, and the Captain had to own himself out-manoeuvred. The chauffeur then took his seat, and the car glided noiselessly out of the station precincts.

"Does it seem strange to you to be coming home again?" asked Lady Betty in a voice which sounded almost caressing.

"It does—very," answered Calamity.

His tone puzzled her, and she went on, curious, perhaps, to probe his real feelings.

"You are glad?"

"Glad? I should never have returned but for one thing—the memories of the place are too unpleasant."

A faint and delicate tinge of colour came into the woman's face, for she did not doubt that he was thinking of her and the shattered romance of the past. It moved her to think that, after all these years, this memory was still fresh with him.

"Why darken your home-coming by thoughts of the unalterable past?" she answered softly. "It is all forgotten and forgiven now."

"It is not forgotten, neither is it forgiven—I am not that sort."

A deeper colour flooded her face. He considered himself wronged, then, that she had believed in his guilt and married his brother. At that moment she wished passionately to justify herself in his eyes, for this stranger who had been her lover was beginning to exercise an ascendancy over her weaker nature that he had never possessed in the old days.

She was about to stammer out words of excuse and apology, when McPhulach turned round and leaned over the wind-screen.

"Hae ye such a thing as a match about ye, skeeper?" he inquired.

Calamity tossed him a box of matches, whereupon McPhulach produced a well-worn briar from his pocket and transferred it to his mouth.

"You must try and forget all that old story of the cheque," said Lady Betty recovering herself. "It is so long ago that everyone is prepared to be as nice to you as if it had never happened."

"H'm," grunted Calamity.

"You'll see," she went on hopefully. "I've got some people staying at the Towers, and Judge Pennyfeather—Lady Di—you remember her as a pert young flapper, I expect—the Bishop and some other people are dining with us to-night."

"Then the story of the forgery was not kept in the family," remarked Calamity icily. "All these people know it?"

"Well—yes," a little hesitatingly. "It was impossible to keep it secret; you know George had a valet—"

"A fitting epitaph," said Calamity grimly.

"What——" began Lady Betty, but was interrupted once more by McPhulach, who for some moments had been pulling at an empty pipe.

"I'm oot o' baccy," he said, again peering over the wind-screen. "Ye'll no be haein' a pooch on ye'r pairson, skeeper?"

Without a word Calamity passed him a tobacco pouch, while Lady Betty bit her lips with annoyance at this interruption of their *tête-à-tête*.

"I'm tell't that yon's ye'r ain hoose," said McPhulach, as he filled his pipe. "It's a gey braw place, an' I wouldna mind haein' it mesel'."

He pointed with the stem of his pipe to a picturesque old mansion standing in its own luxuriously wooded grounds at the summit of a slope just ahead.

Calamity made no answer, but gazed thoughtfully at this home of his childhood, the home he had never expected to see again. And thinking of his early days there, and of the soft and sheltered lives of those who live in such mansions, it seemed very desirable to the world-worn, battered man. All sorts of trivial incidents of the past, forgotten until now, flashed across his mind as the car turned into a road that ran through a wood on the estate. In that wood, as a boy, he had seen an adder swallow a young bird and remembered killing the reptile with a heavy ash stick. In that piece of marshy ground, almost hidden by trees, there used to be a pond fringed with yellow iris; he wondered if that pond were still there, and the iris.... He made a resolution to go and see later on, but, even as he did so, knew that he would find it the same. Everything remained the same; Betty was the same; it was only he who had altered.

Then his mood changed, and, while he felt a grim satisfaction at thus returning as master to the home from which he had been thrust forth as a criminal, he was not at all sure whether, apart from this sense of triumph, he was glad to be back or otherwise—probably he was neither. He wondered, too, whether the old life, with all its luxury and ease, would appeal to him; whether he would feel at home again amidst these remembered surroundings, or at variance with them.

And then, of course, there were the people whom he would have to meet; people more foreign to him now than the polyglot rabble which had formed his last crew. He had seen Lady Betty shrink from him at first sight, and imagined that her present amiability was forced; that her words and those soft, languishing glances she cast upon him were void of sincerity. Others would shrink from him too, he supposed, and then hide their feelings under a mask of well-bred composure as she was doing. Could he meet these people on their own ground, speak their language, lead their life? he asked himself.

Seeing Calamity deep in thought, McPhulach, who had leaned over the wind-screen to return the tobacco-pouch, slid gently back into his seat and absent-mindedly dropped the pouch into his own pocket.

The car was now proceeding up a broad avenue which led to the main entrance of the Towers, and a vision came to Calamity of himself as a small boy on horseback, cantering down this same avenue with his father. The thought of the latter brought back to his memory the brother who had blackened him in his father's eyes and made him what he had been; what, in heart, he still was—an outcast and an exile.

Never had he hated his brother as he hated him at this moment.

Lady Betty, meanwhile, was taking advantage of his thoughtfulness to examine his profile at her leisure. It was a strong face, she reflected, stronger and harder far than that of the youth she had loved fifteen years ago.

"A penny for your thoughts," she said lightly, to dissipate an emotion induced by his proximity and those memories of their youth.

He turned swiftly, and the baffling, rather grim smile which played about his mouth, together with the fixed and merciless stare of his glass eye, embarrassed her to the point of actual nervousness.

"You shall have them at your own price when I put them up for sale," he answered.

She coloured. Her first thought was that he intended to snub her, but she quickly dismissed the idea. No, he must have meant that the moment was not propitious. Perhaps he, also, had been thinking of...

"You never married in all those years?" she asked abruptly, and with a little tremor in her voice that she could not control.

"No."

"Why?"

He smiled at her in a quizzical way and shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, here we are," he said as the car drew up before the stately entrance to Redhurst Towers. Springing out, he made his way round to the other side in order to help her to alight. McPhulach, however, was before him and stood with his arm crooked at an angle of forty-five degrees, his body bent, and an ingratiating leer on his face.

"Hae a care o' yon step, ye'r leddyship," he remarked.

But the lady was equal to the occasion. Ignoring his arm, she sprang to the ground.

"Will you be so kind as to bring my furs from the car?" she asked sweetly, and to herself: "Why on earth has John brought this uncouth, seafaring savage with him?"

The sound of the approaching motor had brought a child of about twelve running out on to the terrace. She waited at the head of the stone steps, colouring up shyly as she met the stranger's gaze.

"This is my little girl, Elfrida," said Lady Betty. "Elfrida, this is your Uncle John."

The child held her hand out frankly to her grim relative, and there was no suggestion of shrinking in her manner.

"I came out to be the first to welcome you home to Redhurst, Uncle John," she said a trifle primly. Then, becoming all child again, she turned to her mother. "Oh, mummy, I thought you'd never come. I'll go and tell them you're here. We're all having tea in the hall."

As he watched the fair-haired child disappear, Calamity thought, with something of a pang, that she might have been his own. But this feeling lasted only a moment, and he remembered once more that she was the child of the man who had ruined him.

"Welcome home," said Lady Betty softly.

"Thank you," he answered without enthusiasm.

"It has been home to me, and I have loved it for fourteen years," she said, and then continued archly, obviously inviting and expecting a denial. "And now you've come to turn me out."

Calamity fixed his disconcerting gaze upon her face.

"There's no hurry for a week or so," he said.

CHAPTER XXIX

"NOBLESSE OBLIGE"

Grouped about the hall—a splendid example of Tudor architecture with its oak wainscoting and great, open fireplace—were several people chatting and drinking tea. Calamity recognised some of them immediately as people he had known in the old days. Life had dealt gently with them, and they had changed but little despite the intervening years. They had lost the rude vitality and adventurous spirit of youth, and had become sleek and soft and habit-governed; but otherwise they were essentially the same, living the same clean, sheltered, uneventful lives.

As Calamity entered with Lady Betty, these people gathered about him with words of welcome. He was, after all, one of themselves, and in the years which had passed the old story of the forged cheque had almost faded into a legend of doubtful authenticity. Calamity, despite the bitter memories which his home-coming had brought back, knew that these greetings were not insincere; that these friends of a by-gone period regarded him as a wanderer returned to the fold.

When everyone had settled down again to drink tea and chatter, Calamity seated himself between Lady Betty and an eminent politician for whom he had "fagged" at Eton, while Elfrida stood near, watching him with the grave deliberation of childhood. During a momentary pause in the conversation she drew closer to him and placed a beseeching hand on his knee.

"Oh, Uncle John," she said breathlessly, "do tell us about fighting the pirates. Were you afraid?"

Calamity smiled almost genially as he turned to the eager little questioner.

"No, Elfrida, I wasn't afraid. A pirate is a person I thoroughly understand. In fact, I came very near being hanged for a pirate, myself."

Elfrida clapped her hands with delight and the others smiled tolerantly at what they took for granted was a joke.

"Isn't he sweet?" murmured a motherly dowager to McPhulach, who was sitting near her.

The engineer started.

"Eh?" he ejaculated.

"Isn't he sweet?" repeated the dowager, shouting at him a little in the belief that he was deaf.

McPhulach did not answer for a moment. Before him there arose a vision of the Captain of the *Hawk* smashing right and left among his mutinous crew with a capstan-bar, and another picture of the same man as he led his rabble followers up the bullet-swept slope of the German island.

"Weel," he replied at last, "I wouldna go sae far as tae say that. He's a mighty quare mon, ye'll ken."

The dowager's comment had been overheard by Lady Betty, and it set her thinking. Was it only to her eyes that this man whom she had once promised to marry seemed so grim and terrible? Lady Mitford had called him "sweet," Elfrida obviously adored him, and the others seemed to be at their ease with him. Why was it that his terrific personality seemed to disquiet her alone?

The matter was still exercising her mind when she came down that evening, dressed for dinner. She had heard Calamity go down a little earlier and had hastened her dressing in order to snatch a quiet talk with him before the others left their rooms. But he was in neither the smoking-room nor the library, and so she made her way to the gallery, where his ancestors gazed down from the walls in painted stiffness.

Here she found him, pacing up and down, apparently in a brown study. He looked up as she entered, and Lady Betty, after a second's hesitation, went to him and laid her hand upon his arm.

"I was sure you'd be here," she said softly. "I know you so well."

She looked very delicate and sweet in the shaded light, and the fire, suddenly flaming up, glinted on the gold of her hair.

He laughed, a little bitterly.

"Know me, do you?" he asked. "Is that why you married my brother after promising to marry me?"

She looked at him silently for a moment, affronted by his tone yet not knowing what to say.

"It is cruel of you to take that tone," she said at last. "You know very well that after what happened I—I couldn't—"

"Be decent to me again," he concluded for her. "You don't seem to find it so difficult to-day, although the charge against me has not been disproved."

"It's so long ago. You must see, yourself, that it's different now."

"Since I've become head of the family?" he suggested.

She drew herself up haughtily and walked towards the fireplace, where she stood looking down into the blaze.

"What would you have had me do?" she asked without looking round.

"Believe in my innocence!"

She shook her head.

"I couldn't do that," she answered. "But if I had been that kind of—of fool, what then?"

He shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. Standing there in the firelight, Lady Betty looked unquestionably beautiful, and yet Calamity felt a great weariness of her and of this scene. His mind took a leap through time and space, and he saw himself once more upon the deck of the *Hawk*, facing, not this delicately nurtured woman, but a girl with fearless eyes and wind-swept hair; a girl who would have believed in him against the world.

Lady Betty crossed to him.

"You are unjust to me," she said.

"You were unjust to me," he replied.

She gave a weary little sigh. It seemed hopeless to try and make him see her point of view.

"Suppose I told you that I could now prove my innocence," he said, turning on her abruptly, "how would you feel about the past?"

"It's—it's impossible."

"Impossible! Not a bit of it. I suppose you wondered why I brought that Scotchman here? Well he's one of the witnesses to a confession signed by a confederate of the real criminal. Wayne will be coming to-night bringing that confession with him. I told him that we would all adjourn to the library after dinner to hear him read it."

Fifteen years ago when her lover had declared his innocence, Lady Betty had not believed him; now, when he told her that he could prove himself guiltless, she knew intuitively that he spoke the truth.

"John, I—I'm very glad," she said, her face colourless and stricken.

He nodded and moved away. To him, also, the moment was poignant. Presently he became aware of her hand on his arm, and turning, saw her standing beside him with bowed head.

"John, what can I say? Words are so useless—now."

"You haven't asked me who did it?"

"What does that matter?" she asked, wondering at the passion in his face.

"For fifteen years," he went on as though he had not heard her, "I have known the truth and hated him. When, by chance, I met the man who made this confession, I determined to clear my name no matter how others might suffer in consequence."

He paused and then, with a contemptuous laugh, went on,

"Now, at the last moment—the moment of triumph—the traditions of this house are too strong for me. I can't do it."

While she looked at him wonderingly, he seized her by the arm and led her to the portrait of his brother, her late husband.

"There," he said, pointing violently at it, "George, Viscount Redhurst, forger and liar! As unworthy to take his place among these noble members of a noble race as I should be if I proved his guilt."

He released her arm, and, turning away, paced up and down the room, his face working. Lady Betty groped her way to one of the window-seats, and, sinking into it, covered her face with her hands. Of the two she, perhaps, was suffering more at that moment than the victim of her dead husband's crime, for her world seemed to be crashing about her ears. The husband whom she had respected, if not loved, a forger and worse than a forger; the man whom she had loved and whom she knew at that moment she still loved, guiltless and perhaps extending to her the hatred he bore his dead brother. What, indeed, was left to her?

She raised her head to find him standing before her, with no trace in his face of the passion of a moment ago.

"Don't be afraid," he said, "there will be no meeting in the library to-night, and to-morrow I leave for California."

"California?" she repeated blankly.

"Yes," he answered; "what is there to keep me here? This place is no more home to me now than when my father turned me out of it."

A revelation of what the sacrifice he was making meant to this man came to her, and she mentally saw him set out again from the home of his boyhood, an exile and still bearing the burden of another's guilt.

"Are you doing this for me?" she asked in a trembling voice, dreading his answer.

"No."

"Then why——"

"Partly Elfrida, partly these," and he moved his arm to indicate his ancestors in their frames. "*Noblesse oblige*, you know."

"But—California." Her voice was a husky whisper.

"California, Betty. I——" he paused a moment and smiled as if at some unspoken thought. "I am interested in fruit-farming."

But here Lady Betty's self-control gave way. She knew that he meant what he said, and that if he left England she would probably never see him again. She began, incoherently:

"Oh, John, I can't let you leave me. Do you understand, I can't——"

A deafening clangour arose close at hand and drowned her words. When it had ceased Calamity did not wait for her to continue.

"The dinner-gong," he said. "Shall we go?"

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CAPTAIN CALAMITY ***

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