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by Percy F. Westerman**

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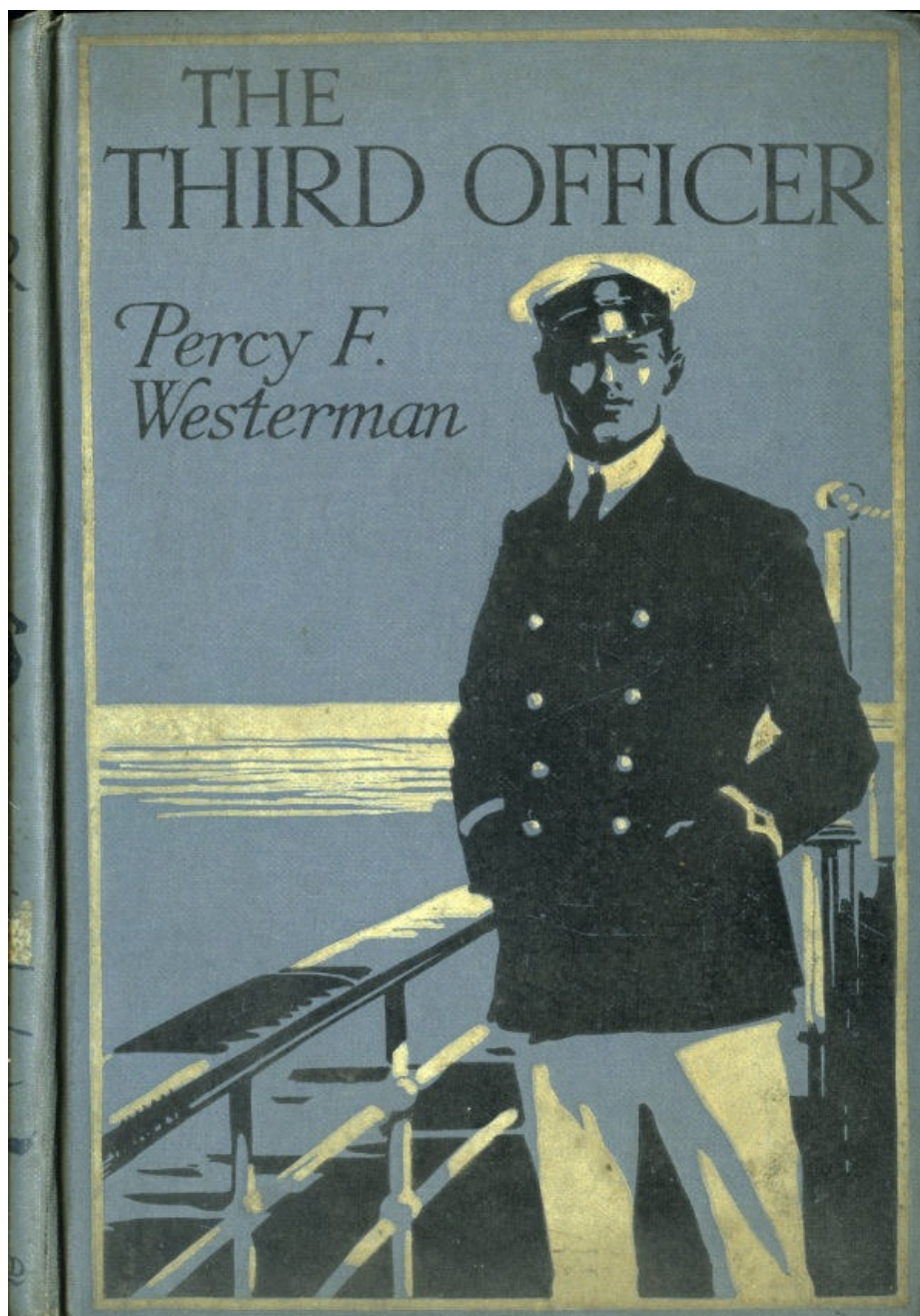
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[Illustration: cover art]

THE THIRD OFFICER

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SHE WAS A LIGHT CRUISER OF ABOUT 4000 TONS

[Illustration: SHE WAS A LIGHT CRUISER OF ABOUT 4000 TONS]

THE THIRD OFFICER

A Present-day Pirate Story

BY

PERCY F. WESTERMAN

Illustrated by E. S. Hodgson

BLACKIE & SON LIMITED
LONDON AND GLASGOW

By Percy F. Westerman

Rivals of the Reef.
A Shanghai Adventure.
Pat Stobart in the "Golden Dawn".
The Junior Cadet.
Captain Starlight.
The Sea-Girt Fortress.
On the Wings of the Wind.
Captured at Tripoli.
Captain Blundell's Treasure.
The Third Officer.
Unconquered Wings.
The Buccaneers of Boya.
The Riddle of the Air.
Chums of the "Golden Vanity".
The Luck of the "Golden Dawn".
Clipped Wings.
The Salving of the "Fusi Yama".
Winning his Wings.
A Lively Bit of the Front.
A Cadet of the Mercantile Marine.
The Good Ship "Golden Effort".
East in the "Golden Gain".
The Quest of the "Golden Hope".
Sea Scouts Abroad.
Sea Scouts Up-Channel.
The Wireless Officer.
A Lad of Grit.
The Submarine Hunters.
Sea Scouts All.
The Thick of the Fray.
A Sub and a Submarine.
Under the White Ensign.
The Fight for Constantinople.
With Beatty off Jutland.

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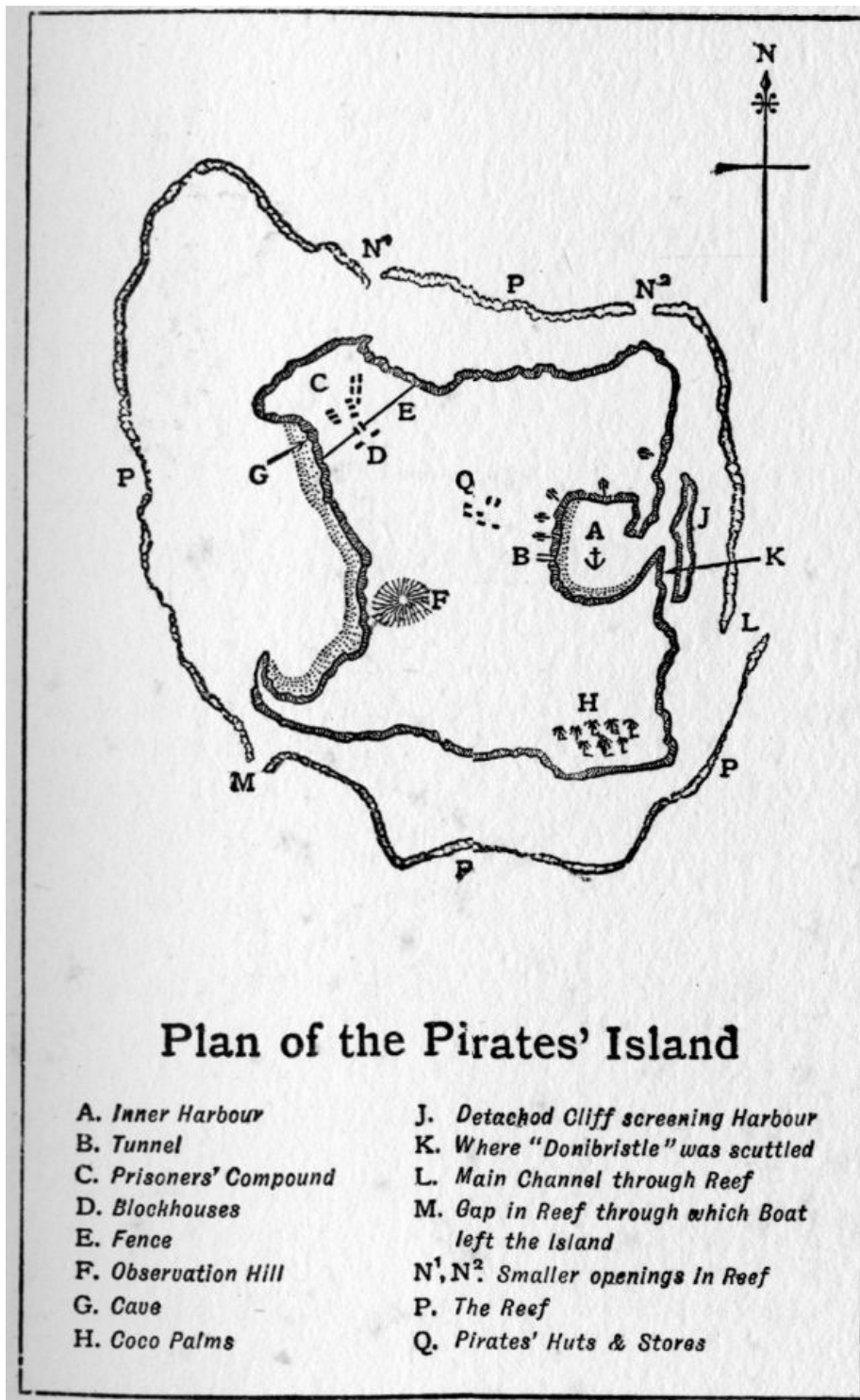
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Frontispiece

[BLACK STROGOFF ADDRESSES THE "DONIBRISTLE'S" CREW](#)

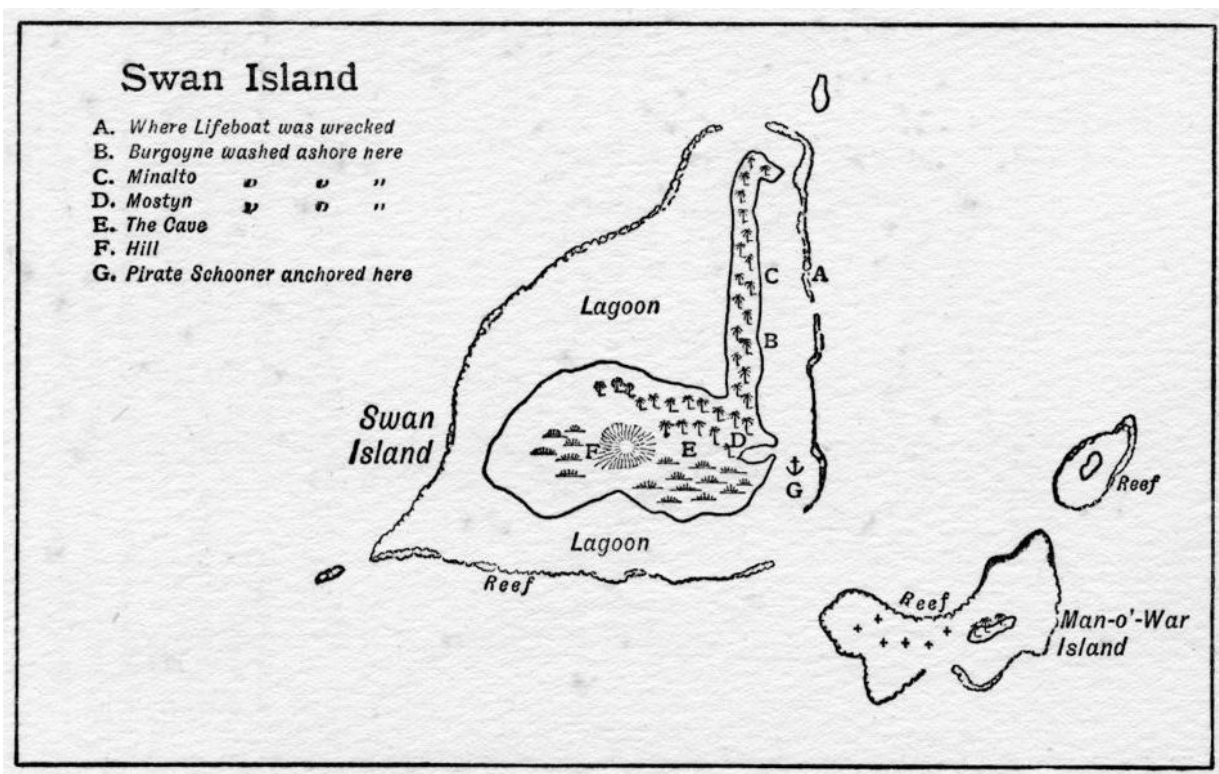
[A DASH FOR FREEDOM](#)

[THE FATE OF AH LING](#)

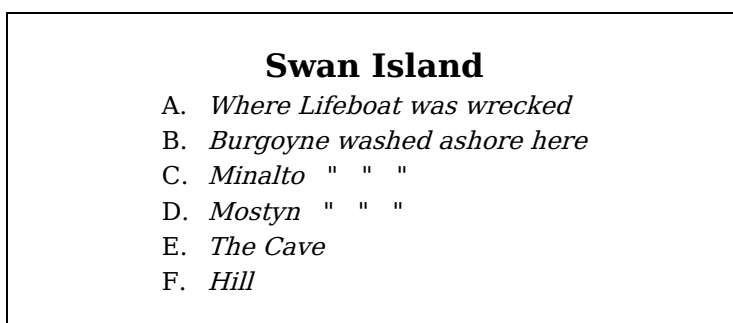


[Illustration: Plan of the Pirates' Island]

Plan of the Pirates' Island	
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[Illustration: Swan Island]



THE THIRD OFFICER

CHAPTER I

The S.S. "Donibristle"

To the accompaniment of a pungent whiff of hot oil, a miniature cascade of coal dust and frozen snow, and the rasping sound of the derrick chain, the last of the cargo for No. 3 hold of the S.S. *Donibristle* bumped heavily upon the mountain of crates that almost filled the dark confined space.

"Guess that's the lot, boss," observed the foreman stevedore.

"Thanks be!" ejaculated Alwyn Burgoyne, third officer of the 6200-ton tramp, making a cryptic notation in the "hold-book". "Right-o; all shipshape there? All hands on deck and get those hatches secured. Look lively lads!"

Burgoyne waited until the last of the working party had left the hold, then, clambering over a triple tier of closely-stowed packing-cases, he grasped the coaming of the hatch and with a spring gained the deck.

"What a change from Andrew!" he soliloquized grimly, as he surveyed the grimy, rusty iron deck and the welter of coal-dust and snow trampled into a black slime. "All in a day's work, I suppose, and thank goodness I'm afloat."

Three months previously Alwyn Burgoyne had been a sub-lieutenant in the Royal Navy; hence his reference to "Andrew", as the Senior Service is frequently designated by long-suffering bluejackets. Under peace conditions and in the knowledge that the greatest menace with which the British Empire was ever threatened was removed for all time, the Admiralty were compelled to make drastic reductions both in personnel and material. Numbers of promising young officers, trained from boyhood to the manners and customs of ships flying the White Ensign, had been "sent to the beach", or, in other words, their services had been dispensed with. Even the sum of money paid to these unfortunates was a sorry recompense for their blighted careers, since circumstances and the fact that they were of an awkward age to embark upon another profession were a severe handicap in life's race.

Burgoyne, however, was one of the luckier ones. Forsaking the lure of gunnery, torpedo, and engineering, he was specializing in navigation and seamanship when the "cut" came. Without loss of time he had sat for and obtained first a Mate's and then a Master's Board of Trade Certificate, and with these qualifications, aided by a certain amount of influence, he obtained the post of Fourth Officer in the British Columbian and Chinese Shipping Company.

On his first voyage in the S.S. *Donibristle*, from Vancouver to Shanghai, Burgoyne gained a step in promotion. Viewed from a certain point it was a regrettable promotion, since Alwyn had to step into a dead man's shoes. But Roberts, the Third Officer, disappeared on the homeward run—it was a pitch-dark night, and a heavy beam sea, and no one saw him go—and Burgoyne "took on" as Third.

To fill the vacant post, Phil Branscombe, a Devonshire lad who had come into the British Columbian and Chinese Shipping Company via a wind-jammer and a Barry collier, was appointed as Fourth Officer, and Branscombe was now about to start on his first voyage under the B.C. & C.S.C. house-flag.

The *Donibristle* was lying at Vancouver. She had been bunkered with Nanaimo coal; the last of her cargo—mostly Canadian ironmongery and machinery—was under hatches, and she was due to sail at daybreak.

"Cheerio, old thing!" exclaimed Branscombe as Burgoyne made his way aft, his india-rubber sea-boots slithering and squelching on the slush-covered deck. "All stowed? Good, same here. How about tea?"

As the chums made their way towards the companion, their attention was attracted by the arrival of three people who were on the point of stepping off the gangway, where the First Officer stood ready to receive them.

One was a middle-aged gentleman of a decidedly military bearing, obvious in spite of the fact that he wore a heavy greatcoat with turned-up fur collar. Clinging to his arm—a necessary precaution in view of the slippery state of the deck—was a lady, evidently his wife. The third member of the party, disdaining any extraneous support either animate or inanimate, was a girl of about nineteen or twenty. She wore a long fur travelling coat, a close-fitting velour hat, and thick fur gloves that reached almost to her elbows. As her collar was turned up, there was little of her profile visible, but what there was was enough to proclaim her to be a very good-looking girl.

"Passengers, eh?" remarked Burgoyne. "Didn't know we were taking any this trip."

"Eyes front, old man," exclaimed Branscombe in a low tone. "Dear old thing! Remember the path of duty—"

"Is slippery," rejoined the Third Officer, as the Fourth, skidding on the frozen snow in the midst of his homily, measured his length upon the deck. "And be thankful you haven't your No. 1 rig on."

Descending the companion, the two chums gained the alley-way out of which opened the officers' cabins. Here they encountered a stout, jovial-faced man carrying a tea-tray.

"Is there plenty of hot water on in the bathroom, steward?" asked Burgoyne. "Thanks—by the by, what names are on the passenger list?"

"Only five, sir," replied the steward. "There's a Mr. Tarrant, a Mr. Miles, Colonel and Mrs. an' Miss Vivian, sir.... Tea's ready, sir."

"Thanks; pour me out a cup and let it stand, please," said Alwyn, as he hurried off to the bathroom to remove all traces of five hours' hard work in No. 3 hold.

Twelve minutes later Burgoyne, having washed and donned his best uniform, entered the mess-room where the officers had all their meals with the exception of dinner. It was the custom on board ships of the British Columbian and Chinese Shipping Company for the officers to dine with the captain and passengers in the saloon. Although the *Donibristle* was primarily a cargo-boat, she had accommodation for twelve passengers. These she could carry without being obliged to have a Board of Trade passenger certificate, and since the *Donibristle* was by no means a fast boat there was no acute competition to secure passenger berths.

Most of the occupants of the mess-room—two engineers, the purser, and two deck officers—had finished tea and were "fugging" round a large stove. Branscombe, who had forestalled his chum by two minutes, was taking huge mouthfuls of bread and jam, and drinking copious draughts of tea with the rapidity of a man who never knows when he will be interrupted by the call of duty, while, in order to take every advantage of the brief spell of leisure, he was scanning a newspaper conveniently propped up against a huge brown earthenware teapot.

"Any news?" inquired Burgoyne.

"United Services draw with Oxford University."

"I'd liked to have seen the match," remarked the Third Officer. It recalled memories of a hard-played game in which Sub-Lieutenant Burgoyne, R.N., was one of the United Service team. That seemed ages ago, although only eight months had elapsed. "And the M.C.C.?" he inquired.

"No match. It was raining cats and dogs in Melbourne," replied Branscombe.

Having heard the latest of two great events in the world of sport that were taking place in almost diametrically opposite parts of the globe, Burgoyne exclaimed:

"Well, any more news? Don't be a mouldy messmate. Hand over half that paper—the part you've read."

"Take this one, Burgoyne," said Withers, the Second Engineer. "There's another boat missing—a week overdue. That's the second this month, an' both between 'Frisco and Kobe."

"Yes, the *Alvarado*," added the purser. "Wasn't that the vessel we sighted off the Sandwich Islands, Burgoyne?"

"Yes, I was officer of the watch," he replied.

"Well, she's gone without a trace as far as we know," said Withers. "And the *Kittiwake* went in similar circumstances. If the *Alvarado* had sent out an S.O.S. we should have got it, I suppose. What's the distance—ah, here's our Signor Marconi or our Mark Antony, whatever you please. Say, young fella-me-lad, what's our wireless radius?"

This question was addressed to Mostyn, a tall slim youth who had just entered the mess-room. His uniform proclaimed him to be one of the wireless operators.

"Two hundred and fifty by day; six hundred by night," replied Mostyn, who then proceeded with the characteristic fervour of a wireless man to let fly a battery of technical terms and formulae.

"Vast heaving, my lad," interrupted the Second Engineer, with a jovial laugh. "You've floored me. I feel like that young Canuk must have felt when he was shown over the ship last Monday."

"What was that?" inquired the purser.

"He showed great interest in my scrap heap," replied Withers. "The greatest interest. I explained every mortal thing in the engine-room—twenty-five minutes steady chin-wag. And when I'd finished he just asked: 'And do they work by steam or gasoline?' I've been off my feed ever since," he added pathetically.

"To get back to the *Alvarado*," said the purser "It's jolly strange for a vessel to drop out of existence nowadays and leave no trace. We can dismiss the mine theory. Fritz didn't try that game on in the North Pacific, and it's hardly likely that the mine laid by the Japs in '05 would be still barging about. Rammed a derelict? Blown up by internal explosion? Turned turtle during a hurricane?"

"A hurricane, perhaps," replied Burgoyne. "We had it a bit stiff just about that time—when Robert was lost overboard."

"Ships do vanish," continued the pessimistic purser. "Wireless and other scientific gadgets notwithstanding. I remember——"

"Chuck it, old man!" interrupted Branscombe.

"Don't try to give us all cold feet. It's cold enough on deck—an' it's my watch," he added

dispassionately. The Fourth Officer pushed aside his cup and plate, struggled into his greatcoat, and left the mess-room. It was his job to superintend the clearing up of the decks after the cargo had been stowed, and the stevedores had taken their departure.

The rest of the mess relapsed into silence. Some were deep in the evening papers, others were reading torn and thumb-marked novels. A few, Burgoyne amongst them, retired to the more secluded part of the room in order to write to their relatives and friends, and send the mail ashore before the *Donibristle* got under way.

"Any passengers?" asked Withers, breaking the prolonged silence.

"Yes, young fellah-me-lad," replied Holmes, the purser. "Boiled shirts and stiff collars for everyone."

"Is that the menu, Holmes?" inquired Withers with well-feigned innocence.

"It will be for you if you don't take care," rejoined the purser severely. "We haven't a full passenger list, but we've got to keep our end up, even though we're not a crack liner."

"Who are they?" asked Mostyn.

"A Colonel Vivian and his wife and daughter," replied Holmes. "They are only going as far as Honolulu—dodging the Canadian winter I should imagine. There's a Mr. Tarrant. He's in the Consular Service, and is bound for Kobe. The last is Mr. Miles. I don't know what he is, but I rather fancy he's a drummer working for a Montreal drug store. Anyone know if the Old Man's aboard yet?"

"Yes, he came aboard with the Chief," replied the wireless officer, "about five minutes before I came below."

"Why on earth didn't you say so before?" demanded Withers, making a precipitate rush for the door. "I didn't expect Angus before eight bells, and—"

"Evidently friend Withers has left undone those things that he ought to have done," observed Holmes. "Get a move on, you fellows. Nothing like punctuality for meals, 'specially when I want a run ashore after dinner."

Twenty minutes later officers and passengers assembled in the saloon for dinner. Although lacking the luxurious trappings of a first-class liner's saloon, the *Donibristle's* was quite a comfortable, well-equipped apartment. Electric lights in frosted glass bulbs with amber shades threw a warm, subdued light upon the long table. The snow-white table-cloth looked dainty with glittering cutlery and plate. Choice Californian flowers—bought that afternoon in Vancouver by the messman, presumably to create a good initial impression upon the passengers—completed the display.

At the head of the table sat Captain Roger Blair, R.N.R., a short, thick-set Tynesider, whose war record included service in the North Sea, the AEgean, and outer patrol work on the edge of the Arctic Circle. He had been twice in collision and torpedoed on four occasions; yet, until the surrender of the German Fleet, he had never set eyes on a Hun submarine. He was inclined to be irritable as a result of the nervous strain of four and a half years in mine-infested waters under war conditions; but, in spite of being nearly fifty-four years of age, he was accounted one of the finest and most reliable skippers in the company's service.

On his right was Mrs. Vivian, a frail and rather subdued lady with a distinctly nervous manner. Next to her was Colonel Vivian, huge, burly, and bronzed. His features were clear cut, but a rather heavy chin and a military moustache gave the casual observer an impression that the colonel was a severe and stern man. In point of fact he was when in command of a regiment, but in retirement he was jovial and good-natured, and simply doted on his wife and daughter.

Hilda Vivian had been placed on the Captain's left, consequently Alwyn Burgoyne, far down the table, saw but little of her except a partial view of an attractive profile.

Mr. Tarrant, an aesthetic gentleman of about twenty-five or thirty, sat on Miss Vivian's left. Next to him was Miles, an undersized, white-faced individual with an unlimited amount of "push and go" as far as his calling was concerned, and almost a complete apathy towards everything else.

At the foot of the table was Mr. Angus, the Chief Engineer. He was, like the majority of chiefs in the Mercantile Marine, Scotch. His appearance, accent, and mannerisms all pointed to the undeniable fact that he hailed from the Clyde. Five feet ten in height, broad-shouldered, rugged-featured, and with sandy hair, he was both the terror and admiration of the crowd of rascallions who comprised the rank and file of the *Donibristle's* stokeholds.

Angus was reported to be "near". If he spent a dollar he took good care to get a dollar's worth in return for his outlay. He never parted with a cent without due consideration—and lengthy consideration at that. But in greater matters he was generous in the extreme. Whenever a subscription list came round for some worthy cause—usually for the widow or dependent of one

of the company's former servants—the scrawled initials "J. A." invariably appeared for a substantial amount from Jock Angus's funds. If a fireman, down on his luck, was unable to provide himself with a kit suitable for the climatic conditions and changes of the voyage, the Chief would stealthily interview the purser and see that the man got an outfit at the expense of dour Jock Angus.

And he knew his job from A to Z. Left alone with the necessary tools he could transform a scrap heap into a set of engines and guarantee a good head of steam. He had been in charge of the *Donibristle's* engines for two years of almost constant running, and never once had they broken down or stopped through mechanical defects.

Beneath the Scotsman's rugged exterior beat the heart of a kindly man. Almost everyone on board took his troubles to Angus, knowing that his confidence would be respected, and that the advice he received was blunt, sympathetic, and sound, while the relations between the Old Man and the Chief ran as smoothly as the well-tuned triple-expansion engines of the good ship *Donibristle*.

The rest of the officers, with the exception of a few actually on duty, were seated on either side of the long table—good and true men all, typical of the great Mercantile Marine, without which the British Empire would crumble into the dust. Most of them have already been brought to the reader's notice; and since it is yet too early to bring upon the stage the arch-villain Ramon Porfirio and his satellites and myrmidons, they must be temporarily detained in the wings.

CHAPTER II

Hilda Vivian

At daybreak, in a strong off-shore wind, thick with snow, the S.S. *Donibristle* cast off and proceeded on her voyage. By noon, working up to eleven knots, she had passed through the broad strait of San Juan de Fuca—the waterway between Vancouver Island and the Federal State of Washington—and was rolling heavily in the following seas.

During his watch on the bridge Alwyn Burgoyne saw nothing of the passengers. Certainly it was not the kind of weather in which landsmen venture on deck. The whole aspect was a study in greys. The sea, as far as the driving snow permitted to be seen, was a waste of leaden-coloured waves flecked with tumbling grey crests. Overhead a watery sun almost failed to make its presence known through the sombre swiftly-moving clouds. Everything on deck was snow-covered, while wisps of steam mingled with an eddying volume of smoke from the salt-rimed funnels.

Crouched in the bows was the motionless figure of the look-out man, peering intently through the flurry of snow-flakes, and ready at the first sign of another craft to hail the bridge, where, always within easy distance of the engine-room telegraph, Burgoyne paced ceaselessly to and fro. For the time being the safety of the ship and all who sailed in her depended upon his judgment. An error on his part or even hesitation in carrying out the "Rules and Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea" might easily result in an appalling catastrophe.

Twice during his watch Alwyn had to alter course. Once to avoid a topsail schooner that suddenly loomed up, grotesquely distorted through the snow, at a distance of two cables on the starboard bow. The second occasion was called for by the sighting of a derelict—a timber-ship dismasted and floating just awash. A startled shout from the look-out man, a crisp order from the Third Officer, and the *Donibristle*, heeling under the effect of helm hard over, literally scraped past the waterlogged craft.

Five minutes later, Mostyn, the wireless operator, was sending out a general warning to the effect that at such and such a time, and in latitude and longitude so and so, the S.S. *Donibristle* had sighted a derelict highly dangerous to navigation.

At last, just as the sun was breaking through and the snow-storm had passed, Burgoyne's relief ascended the bridge ladder. Alwyn, having "handed over", went below, ate a hearty meal, and, relieved of all responsibility for the time being, turned in with the knowledge that before he took on again the *Donibristle* would be in a distinctly warmer climate.

He saw nothing of the passengers that evening. Their places at dinner were vacant. According to the steward, Mr. Tarrant was just able to sit up and take nourishment; while Mr. Miles, the Canadian commercial traveller, in a valiant attempt to ward off the dreaded *mal de mer*, had resorted to certain drugs from his sample case, and was now under the care of the steward. Colonel Vivian was attending to his wife, who was obliged to keep to her cabin, while he and his daughter for some unexplained reason were having dinner in the latter's state room.

At noon on the following day Burgoyne, having "shot the sun" and worked out the ship's position, was considerably astonished to see Hilda Vivian mounting the bridge with the utmost sang-froid.

"Good morning, Mr. Burgoyne!" she exclaimed; "or is it good afternoon? Quite warm, isn't it? A delightful change from yesterday. I've come to have a look round."

"I'm afraid I must tell you that you are trespassing, Miss Vivian," said Alwyn. "No passengers are allowed on the bridge, you know."

Hilda Vivian's eyes sparkled with ill-concealed mirth.

"That was what my father said," she rejoined. "I had a small bet with him on it. I've won, you see."

"But I can't let you——" began Burgoyne. "Company's regulations and all that sort of thing, you know."

"Supposing I refuse to go?" she inquired archly.

Alwyn pondered. It promised to be a tough proposition. He rather wondered what the Old Man would say to him if he happened to come on deck and espy a passenger—a lady passenger, and a young and pretty one at that—standing apparently without let or hindrance upon the bridge.

His colour deepened under his tan as he replied:

"You'll be getting me into a jolly hole if you persist."

It was a lame thing to say, he reflected. After all it seemed a bit futile to have to put forward an individual case to support the rights of deck-officers.

"I wouldn't do that," replied the girl earnestly. "It's all right. I asked Captain Blair, and he said I'd find somebody up here to show me round."

"Right-o," said Burgoyne, not at all sorry to have the opportunity. "But excuse me a moment while I finish working out our position."

He retired to the chart-house and shut the door, having first asked the quartermaster to show the compass and steam steering-gear to the passenger. He counted on a long and highly technical explanation from the old seaman, and in this he was not mistaken.

Alwyn used the respite profitably. He made no attempt to check his figures; that was a mere excuse. Taking up the telephone, he rang up the Captain's cabin. A brief conversation confirmed Miss Vivian's statement, not that he doubted her word, but it was desirable to obtain the Old Man's sanction.

"That leaves me a comparatively free hand," soliloquized the Third Officer, as he replaced the receiver. "There are worse ways of taking a trick than being in the company of a jolly girl."

Jolly she undoubtedly was. Without an atom of side, and utterly devoid of any trace of self-consciousness, Hilda Vivian was decidedly practical without sacrificing her femininity.

Burgoyne's watch passed only too quickly. The girl was a good conversationalist and a splendid listener. Without betraying the faintest sign of boredom she followed the Third Officer's somewhat stereotyped explanations of the various devices upon which the modern navigator depends in order to take his ship, with uncanny accuracy, across thousands of miles of trackless ocean.

And then conversation drifted into other channels. Hilda explained her presence on board. She was an only daughter; her brother had been wounded and missing at Messines, and her mother had never properly recovered from the shock. Colonel Vivian had been in command of a battalion in Egypt and Palestine, and on the homeward voyage the transport had been mined off Cape de Gata, in the course of which he had received an injury to his thigh that had incapacitated him from further active service.

"I know that bit," said Alwyn to himself. He felt pretty certain of it from the moment he saw the colonel board the *Donibristle* at Vancouver; but now there was no doubt on the matter. He made no audible remark, but allowed his fair companion to "carry on".

After the Armistice Colonel Vivian went on the retired list. He was not a rich man, having little means beyond his pension; and specialists' fees incurred by his wife's illness made a heavy drain upon the colonel's exchequer. One specialist expressed his opinion that the only thing likely to benefit Mrs. Vivian was a voyage round the world. Making sacrifices, Colonel Vivian was now engaged upon the protracted tour, taking passages in cargo-boats with limited accommodation in order to cut down expenses, and prolong the "rest cure" by breaking the voyage in various ports.

"I think the voyage is doing Mother good," continued the girl, "and I am enjoying it—every minute in fact. But I do wish I could have brought Peter——"

"And who is Peter?" asked Burgoyne, so abruptly that he could have bitten his tongue for having shown such a lively interest—or was it resentment?—towards Peter.

"He's simply a dear," replied Hilda. "A sheep-dog, you know. Of course, it was impossible to bring him, owing to quarantine restrictions and all that sort of thing, so we had to leave him with friends. Are you fond of dogs, Mr. Burgoyne?"

"Beagles," said Alwyn. "Hadn't much time for a dog of my own. We ran a pack of beagles at Dartmouth. Ripping sport."

"Were you at Dartmouth then?" asked Miss Vivian. "At the College?"

Burgoyne nodded.

"Then you were in the navy?"

"Yes," replied the Third Officer. "In the *pukka* Royal Navy. I came out some months ago, worse luck. But," he added, loyal to his present employers, "this line isn't half-bad—rather decent, in fact."

Miss Vivian made no audible comment. Burgoyne had apparently failed to arouse a sympathetic interest in his case. He felt himself wondering whether she would jump to the conclusion that he was a rotter who had been ignominiously court-martialled and dismissed the Service. But, before he could enlarge upon that particular point, Hilda steered the conversation into other channels until Phil Branscombe's arrival on the bridge brought Burgoyne's trick to a close.

"My relief," announced Alwyn.

Hilda made no attempt to leave the bridge. Branscombe smiled.

"I'm off duty," persisted the Third Officer. "Would you care to see our wireless cabin? It's a perfectly priceless stunt, and Mostyn, our budding Marconi, is quite harmless while under observation."

"Thanks," replied the girl calmly. "Another day perhaps; when it's not so fine. I'll stay here a little longer; I am interested to know what Mr. Branscombe did in the Great War."

Burgoyne accepted his dismissal with the best grace at his command. He had a certain amount of satisfaction in knowing that Miss Vivian had heard of a joke at the Fourth Officer's expense, although she may not have known the actual facts.

Phil Branscombe had been appointed midshipman, R.N.V.R., a fortnight previous to the signing of the Armistice, although it wasn't his fault that he hadn't been so earlier. Consequently by the time he joined his M.-L. in a Western port hostilities were at an end. One evening towards the end of November the commander of the M.-L. flotilla was dozing in his cabin, when certain of the younger officers thought it would be a huge joke to pour pyrene down the stove-pipe and put out the fire in the Senior Officer's cabin. Stealthily they emptied the contents of the extinguisher and beat a retreat, chuckling at the mental picture of the commander's discomfiture when he awoke to find that the stove had gone out and himself shivering in the cold cabin.

Twenty minutes later a signalman conveying a message to the commander found him unconscious. The oxygen-destroying properties of the pyrene had not only extinguished the fire, but had been within an ace of suffocating the occupant of the cabin. Fortunately the commander recovered. The culprits were discovered, but their victim, convinced that it had not been their intention to drive matters to extremes, accepted their apologies and regrets. But the case did not end there. The Admiralty got to hear of it, and Branscombe and two of his fellow-midshipmen were summarily dismissed.

"That's what I did in the Great War, Miss Vivian," said Branscombe at the end of his recital. "You see, I wasn't one of the lucky ones. This ship saw some service. She was armed with six 4.7's, and made fourteen double trips across the Atlantic. Angus, our Chief Engineer, was on board her part of the time. He might tell you some yarns if you get the right side of him. Once we had some Yanks on board, and one of them asked him the same question that you asked me about what he did in the Great War. Angus simply looked straight at him. 'Ma bit', he replied."

"The *Donibristle* hasn't guns on board now, I suppose?" inquired the girl.

"No," replied Branscombe. There was a note of regret in his voice. "The Merchant Service doesn't want guns nowadays. I can show you where the decks were strengthened to take the mountings. No, there's no need for guns on this hooker."

But Fourth Officer Philip Branscombe was a bit out in his reckoning.

Meanwhile, as Burgoyne was making his way aft, he encountered Colonel Vivian laboriously climbing the companion-ladder.

"Thanks, Mr. Burgoyne," exclaimed the colonel, as the Third Officer stood aside to allow him to pass. "By the by, are you any relation to Major Burgoyne of the Loamshires?"

"My uncle," replied Alwyn.

"Then I must have met you at Cheltenham," resumed Colonel Vivian. "Several times I thought I'd seen your face before."

Burgoyne shook his head.

"I haven't been in Cheltenham since I was twelve," he replied, "but I have an idea that I've seen you before, sir."

"Oh, where?"

"To the best of my belief about twelve miles sou'-sou'-west of Cape de Gata. You were wearing pale blue pyjamas and a wristlet watch. When we hiked you out of the ditch you were holding up a Tommy who couldn't swim, and——"

"By Jove! I remember you now," interrupted the Colonel. "You were in charge of one of the *Pylon's* boats. But I thought you were a midshipman R.N."

"I was," agreed Burgoyne. "I had to resign under the reduction of naval personnel stunt. And, by the by, sir, Miss Vivian asked me to tell you that she had been on the bridge for—" he glanced at his watch, "for the last three and a half hours."

CHAPTER III

"Heave-to or I'll Sink You"

"Hear that noise? Sounds like an aeroplane overhead," exclaimed Branscombe.

It was high noon. The *Donibristle* was approximately five hundred miles nor'-west of the Sandwich Islands. The sky was clear and bright. Air and sea were shimmering under the powerful rays of the sun.

"Hanged if I can," replied Burgoyne, "I think you're mistaken, old son. It's hardly likely that a seaplane would be buzzing round over this part of the Pacific."

Nevertheless he craned his neck and gazed at the blue vault overhead. The two chums, off duty, were standing aft. Close to them Messrs. Tarrant and Miles were engaged in a heated argument over the merits and demerits of the products of a certain firm of tabloid drug manufacturers. Colonel and Mrs. Vivian were seated in canopied deck-chairs under the lee of one of the deck-houses. Captain Blair and the Chief Engineer were pacing to and fro on the starboard side of the deck, earnestly discussing a technical point in connection with the distilling plant. Hilda Vivian happened to be "listening in" in the wireless cabin, hearing vague sounds which Peter Mostyn assured her were time signals from a shore station on the Californian coast.

"What's that," sang out Tarrant, overhearing the Third Officer's remark. "Aeroplane—what?"

Presently at least a dozen pairs of eyes were scanning the sky, but without success.

"Can you hear it now?" asked Burgoyne.

"No, I can't," replied Branscombe bluntly, "but I swear I did just now."

"Would it be the dynamos you heard?" inquired Angus.

"No; aerial motor," declared the Fourth Officer firmly. "In fact," he added, "I believe I can hear it now."

"Ye maun hae a guid pair o' lugs," observed Angus caustically.

Branscombe said nothing more, but hurried on to the bridge. An inquiry of the Fifth Officer and the two quartermasters resulted in a negative reply. Nothing had been seen or heard of an aircraft of any description.

"Good job I didn't bet on it," remarked Philip, when he returned and reported the result of his inquiries. "But no one can prove I didn't hear it," he added, with a marked reluctance to admit defeat.

"I certainly heard a buzz right overhead," announced Colonel Vivian. "I rather pride myself on my hearing, but I'm hanged if I saw anything. Besides, if there were a seaplane so far out from land, wouldn't it have come down to within a few hundred feet and had a look at us?"

"I haven't seen an aeroplane for months," said Withers plaintively. "At one time, when I was running from Southampton to Cherbourg and Havre during the war, the sky was stiff with 'em. Hardly ever bothered to look up at the things. Now they're becoming novelties again. It would seem like old times to see a Handley-Page again."

Meanwhile Mostyn was continuing to give practical lessons to Hilda Vivian.

"What an extraordinary noise," exclaimed the girl, removing the receivers from her ears. "Much fainter than before."

Mostyn took up the ear-pieces. There was a call, but in a different wave-length. He was "standing-by" on the 600-metre wave. Rapidly adjusting the "Billi" condenser he failed to attain the desired result. Apparently the sending-out apparatus was of a totally different tune. That discovery puzzled him, since almost every ship and station keeps within the narrow limit of the 600-metre wave. Disconnecting the pin of the receiving-gear, and placing the jigger-switch on the first stop, he connected up the short-wave earth terminal. The sounds were of greater intensity but still fell short of the desired result. Deftly Mostyn manipulated the rack-and-pinion gear of the "Billi" until the signal became coherent.

Unconscious now of the girl's presence, Mostyn grasped a pencil and almost mechanically wrote the message that came through ethereal space. To her it conveyed nothing, being apparently a meaningless jumble of letters.

"SK—finished," announced Mostyn, then, again aware of Miss Vivian's presence, he continued. "Code message—they often send it in that form. I'll decode it straight away."

He tried with every code-book at his command, but without success. None of the recognized books afforded a clue. It might be just possible that Captain Blair would have a key in his possession.

"Sail on the starboard bow!" hailed the look-out man, just as the wireless operator dispatched a messenger to the Old Man.

At the hail Hilda left the wireless-room and went to the rail. Few ships had been sighted during the last two or three days, and her curiosity was aroused by the appearance of the stranger. Branscombe, who was standing near her, hastened to offer her a pair of binoculars, at the same time pointing to a small black object, surmounted by a blurr of smoke, on the horizon.

"What is the name of the ship?" asked the girl.

"Sorry, Miss Vivian," replied the Fourth Officer gravely, "but I'm not a thought reader. She'll probably make her number when she passes us."

The *Donibristle* was logging eleven and a half knots, and since the stranger was making eighteen or twenty it did not take long for the latter to become clearly visible to the naked eye. She was a light cruiser of about 4000 tons, with two funnels and two short masts. From the deck of the *Donibristle* it was seen that she carried a gun for'ard, and three on her starboard broadside, so it was safe to conclude that her principal armament consisted of eight 4- or 6-inch weapons. Right aft, and visible only when the superstructure no longer screened it, flew the White Ensign.

"What is she?" inquired Colonel Vivian.

"I can't tell yet," replied Captain Blair, who, having finished his conversation with the Chief, was making his way to the bridge with Mostyn's "chit" in his hand. "I don't even know her class. The navy's developed so many weird and hybrid types during the war, that it would puzzle Solomon to know t' other from which. Had them all at my finger-ends at one time. S'pose you don't recognize yonder cruiser, Mr. Burgoyne?"

"No, sir," replied the Third Officer, lowering his binoculars. "She hasn't even her name painted on her lifebuoys. Hello! Her bunting tossers are busy."

From the cruiser's bridge the International E.C. fluttered up to the signal yard-arm.

"That means 'What ship is that?'," explained Branscombe to Hilda. They had now crossed to where Colonel Vivian, Burgoyne, and several of the ship's officers off duty were standing.

"How interesting," muttered the girl. "What do we do now?"

"Make your number," replied Alwyn, loth to keep out of the conversation. "There it is: KSVT."

"That's not a number," objected Hilda.

"We call it a number," persisted the Third Officer. "Those four flags signify that we are the S.S. *Donibristle*, 6200 tons, registered at Newcastle-on-Tyne. Now they are making the next hoist—ATVH. That means Vancouver, our port of departure, and—by Jove, there's the ID."

Without waiting to give Hilda the interpretation of the two-flag signal, Burgoyne made a dash

for the bridge, followed by Branscombe as a good second. Yet it was quite apparent to Colonel Vivian, his daughter, and Mr. Tarrant, that there was something of extreme gravity in that signal. Mrs. Vivian, being a little farther away, had not noticed the general exodus, while the remaining passenger—the drug drummer—showed no interest in the appearance of the cruiser.

Almost every officer and man on the deck of the *Donibristle* knew the significance of the signal. They had not served in the Outer Patrol during the Great War, when the examination of neutral merchantmen was an everyday occurrence, without learning to understand the peremptory command: "Heave-to instantly, or I will fire into you".

Such a mandate coming from a vessel flying the White Ensign was not to be treated with levity or contempt. Deeply puzzled, Captain Blair stepped to the engine-room telegraph and was about to ring for "Stop" when a startled voice—the First Officer's, although it was hardly recognizable—shouted:

"They're not bluejackets, sir; they're Chinks."

Just then the cruiser, which was bearing broad on the *Donibristle's* starboard beam, ported helm. Turning sixteen points, and moving half as fast again as the merchantman, she rounded the latter's stern and settled down on a parallel course at a distance of a cable's length on the *Donibristle's* port side.

"Tell the operator to send out a general SOS call," ordered Captain Blair hurriedly, "add 'attacked by pirate' and give our position."

He gave a quick glance in the direction of the cruiser. She had now drawn slightly ahead, so that she overlapped the *Donibristle* by about half her length. Meanwhile she had diminished speed until both vessels were moving through the water at approximately the same rate.

Just then a man scrambled on to the cruiser's bridge-rail and held a pair of hand signal-flags at the "preparatory". Then, without further preamble he semaphored: "If you use wireless I sink you".

The Old Man bent his head and spoke through the engine-room speaking-tube.

"Mr. Angus," he said in level even tones, "can you give me an extra two knots?"

Apparently the reply was favourable, for the skipper replaced the whistle with a gesture of satisfaction.

"Get the passengers down below, Mr. Burgoyne," he added; "there'll be sparks flying in half a shake. Heave-to, indeed. I'll show 'em how I heave-to. Pass the word for the hands to take cover."

Alwyn hurried off the bridge. He had barely reached the foot of the ladder when the pirate, aware that their commands with reference to the wireless had been disobeyed, opened fire with one of the beam 4-inch guns.

At that extremely short range it was almost an impossibility to miss such an easy target. With a terrific crash the wireless cabin simply disappeared, while fragments of the shell killed the Chief Officer on the spot, severely wounded one of the quartermasters, and gashed Captain Blair's forehead from his right eyebrow to his right temple.

The Old Man staggered, fell against the binnacle, and slid struggling to the deck. Branscombe rushed to his aid, but before he could reach him the skipper regained his feet. Half-blinded with blood, and dazed by the concussion, his one thought was the safety of his ship.

With a bound the Old Man sprang to the wheel, thrust the dumbfounded helmsman aside, and rapidly manipulated the steam steering-gear until the helm was hard-a-starboard. As he felt the ship answer he became as cool and steady as a rock. Deliberately he "met" and steadied her, until her bows pointed almost at right angles to the pirate's beam.

It was an audacious manoeuvre. The iron-nerved, tough old skipper was about to ram his opponent and send the cruiser, with all her rascally crew, to the bottom of the Pacific.

CHAPTER IV

Under Fire

When Alwyn reached that part of the deck where he had last seen the passengers he found it deserted. Miles, at the report of the cruiser's quick-firer, had bolted below. Young Tarrant, with the characteristic inquisitiveness that an Englishman often shows even in the most dangerous

situations, had gone for'ard to investigate the result of the damage. Colonel Vivian, his daughter, and the steward were bending over the deck-chair on which Mrs. Vivian had been reclining. She was still reclining but in a very different condition, for as Burgoyne approached he heard the steward say:

"I can't do any more, sir. Weak heart... the sudden shock... no, sir, no sign of life. I'll have to be going. There's work for me to do up there." He indicated the bridge, where, between the gaping holes in the canvas of the bridge rails, could be seen prostrate writhing forms amidst the pungent eddying smoke. Grasping his first-aid outfit, the man ran along the deck, seemingly unmindful of the fact that more shells would soon be playing havoc with the devoted *Donibristle*.

The steward's words were only too true. The sudden and unexpected shock, when the cruiser dealt her cowardly blow, had deprived Mrs. Vivian of life. Never very strong, and suffering from a weak heart, she had died before either her husband or her daughter could get to her.

It was no time for expressions of regret. Alwyn's instructions were imperative. The passengers must be ordered below.

"As sharp as you can, Colonel Vivian," he said; "we don't know what that vessel will do next."

The colonel pointed to the deck-chair with its inanimate occupant. He was incapable of doing anything of a heavy nature by reason of his injured leg.

Alwyn glanced at Hilda. The girl understood and nodded silently. Raising the burdened chair they carried it down the companion-way, the colonel following as quickly as his crippled limb would allow.

"You'll be safe here, I think," he said, but in his mind he knew that there was no place on board the ship where immunity might be found from those powerful 4-inch shells. He could only hope that Providence would shield the gently-nurtured girl from those flying fragments of red-hot steel. "I must go on deck," he added. "I'll let you know when we're out of danger."

At the foot of the companion ladder he stopped and beckoned to the colonel.

"I may as well tell you," he said hurriedly, "the cruiser is a pirate, her crew mostly Chinese. She does two knots to our one. You'll understand?"

"I do," replied the colonel simply. He had faced peril and death many times, but never before had he done so with his wife and daughter.

"You know where Mostyn's cabin is," continued Burgoyne. "There are plenty of his things and I'm afraid he won't want them. Tell Miss Vivian to change into his clothes, cut her hair short, and disguise herself as much as she can. If it isn't necessary there's not much harm done; if it is—well, you know, sir."

The Third Officer gained the deck just as the *Donibristle* had completed her turning manoeuvre and was steadying on her helm. His quick glance took in the situation at a glance.

"The Old Man's going to ram her, by Jove!" he exclaimed. "That's the stuff to give 'em."

"Lie down, sir!" shouted a voice. "Skipper's orders."

The warning came from one of a group of men prone upon the deck. Alwyn was quick to obey. He realized the result of a deadweight of 6000 tons crashing into the side of a stoutly-built steel cruiser.

Full length upon the quivering planks, for Angus had risen to the occasion and the *Donibristle's* engines were pulsating harder than ever they had done before, Burgoyne could not resist the temptation to raise his head and watch the proceedings.

From his unusual point of vantage, for his eyes were only about eight inches above the deck, Burgoyne had the impression that he was looking at a cinematographic picture, as the light-grey hull of the pirate cruiser not only seemed to increase in size but also moved quickly from left to right.

"Now for it!" he thought, and braced himself anew to meet the shock.

But the impact never came. Without doubt the black-hearted villains who controlled the cruiser knew how to handle a vessel, for almost the moment the *Donibristle* starboarded helm, the pirate craft began to forge ahead. Rapidly gathering speed, she contrived to elude the merchantman's bluff bows by a matter of a few feet. It was close enough to enable some of the former's crew to hurl a couple of bombs upon the *Donibristle's* deck, where they burst with little material effect, although the double explosion caused a momentary panic amongst the prostrate men in the vicinity.

Captain Blair had shot his bolt. He realized the fact. Another opportunity to ram his opponent would not occur. He could only attempt to seek safety in flight, and that, he knew, was a forlorn hope, owing to the vast difference in speed between the two ships.

Giving the *Donibristle* full starboard helm until she heeled outwards a good fifteen degrees, the Old Man steadied her when she was heading in a totally different direction to that of her assailant. In addition she was dead in the eye of the wind, and the smoke pouring from her funnels, and from the three separate conflagrations on deck, served to put up a screen between her and the pirate. By the time the latter had turned in pursuit (she circled rapidly under the contrary action of her twin screws) the *Donibristle* had gained a good two miles.

"She'll be winging us in a brace of shakes," declared Captain Blair, as the steward deftly bound lint over the Old Man's forehead. "Clear out of this, Barnes. You fellows too. She's out to cripple us, not to sink the old hooker. I'll carry on by myself."

The officers, quartermaster, and hands on the bridge had no option. They protested unavailingly. Captain Blair had a way of getting his orders carried out. Reluctantly they obeyed. They knew that the bridge would be the principal objective of the hostile guns, that it was doomed to destruction, and that the rest of the ship would come off lightly.

Burgoyne received the Old Man's order when he was half-way up the bridge ladder. Full of admiration for the grim, resolute figure of the wounded skipper, standing in solitude upon the shell-wrecked bridge, he turned and gained the deck.

A figure, crawling on hands and knees from underneath a pile of shattered, smouldering woodwork, attracted the Third Officer's attention. To his surprise he recognized Mostyn, the senior wireless officer. Until that moment Burgoyne, like everyone who had seen the wireless cabin disappear with the explosion of the 4-inch shell, had taken it for granted that its occupant had been blown to pieces; but by one of those freaks of fate Mostyn had not only survived, but had escaped serious injury. He had been temporarily stunned, bruised, and cut in a score of places, his one-time white patrol uniform was scorched, torn, and discoloured, but he had emerged wrathful if not triumphant.

"The blighters!" he muttered. "Another twenty seconds and I'd have got the message through. Can you get me something to drink, old son?"

"I'll get you below, out of it," said Alwyn. "They'll reopen fire soon, I'm afraid."

He bent to raise the wounded operator, but Mostyn expostulated vehemently.

"Don't," he exclaimed. "It hurts frightfully. I'll carry on by myself if you'll stand by."

He crawled painfully to the companion-way. There his bodily strength gave out, and he collapsed inertly against the coaming. Finding that Mostyn was insensible and no longer capable of feeling pain, Burgoyne literally gathered him in his arms and carried him below. Before he had handed over his burden to the care of the steward, the ship quivered from stem to stern, and a hollow roar reverberated 'tween decks. The pirate had reopened fire.

Burgoyne regained the open. He did not feel particularly happy at having to do so. It would have been preferable to remain in the comparative shelter afforded by the thin steel plates and bulkheads. There was no reason why he should not take cover except that some of his comrades were exposed to the far-flying slivers of steel.

The after funnel had carried away. Guided by the unsevered wire guys it had fallen inboard, and was lying diagonally across the riddled casings and a couple of boats that were slung inboard. Smoke pouring from the base of the funnel was sweeping aft, hiding the bridge and fore part of the ship in a pall of oil-reeking, black vapour.

He glanced astern. The pirate vessel was coming up hand over fist, and with a certain amount of caution had taken up a position on the *Donibristle's* starboard quarter. She thus achieved a double purpose. She was no longer impeded by the smoke from her intended prey; and there was no risk of her propellers fouling ropes and baulks of timber deliberately thrown overboard from the merchantman.

The pirate's bow gun spoke again, followed almost simultaneously by the for'ard quick-firer of the starboard battery. A heavy object crashed upon the *Donibristle's* deck from overhead. Owing to the smoke the Third Officer could not see what it was.

"Our other smoke-stack, I think," he soliloquized. "By Jove! What are those fellows up to?"

His attention was directed towards a group of men standing aft. With an utter disregard of danger, seven or eight men were throwing articles into one of the quarter-boats—their scanty personal belongings, tins of provisions, and kegs of fresh water.

"Belay there!" shouted Burgoyne. "Time enough when you get the order to abandon ship. Take cover."

Even as he spoke the staccato sound of a machine-gun came from the for'ard superstructure of the cruiser. The luckless men, caught in the open by the hail of nickel bullets, were swept away like flies. Nor did the machine-gun cease until every boat in davits on the *Donibristle's* port side was riddled through and through. Splinters of wood flew in all directions. Metal bullets rattled

like hail against the steel framework of the deck-houses, and zipped like swarms of angry bees when they failed to encounter any resistance save that of the air.

By this time the speed of the *Donibristle* had fallen to a bare seven knots. The destruction of both funnels and consequent reduction of draught had counteracted the strenuous efforts of Angus and the engine-room staff to "keep their end up". Far below the water-line, working in semi-darkness owing to the fact that the hammering to which the boat had been subjected had broken the electric-light current, unable to see what was going on, the "black squad" toiled like Trojans in the unequal contest with the fast and powerfully armed pirate.

A glance astern showed the Third Officer that the *Donibristle* was steering a somewhat erratic course. The straggling wake was evidence of that. Perhaps it was intentional on the Old Man's part in order to baffle the pirate gun-layers; but Burgoyne decided to make sure on that point.

Crossing to the starboard side, so that the partly-demolished deck structure might afford a slight amount of cover, Alwyn ran for'ard. Scrambling over mounds of debris and crawling under the wrecked funnels he hurried, holding his breath as he dashed through the whirling wreaths of smoke.

At last he arrived at the starboard bridge ladder—or rather where the ladder had been. Only two or three of the brass-edged steps remained. Here he paused. The edge of the bridge hid the skipper from his view. He retraced his steps for a few paces and looked again. There was the Old Man still grasping the wheel. The sides of the wheel-house were shattered, daylight showed through the flat roof, but Captain Blair remained at the post of honour and danger.

It was evident that he had been hit again. One arm hung helplessly by his side. The white sleeve of his tunic was deeply stained.

Burgoyne hesitated no longer. He wondered why the Second Officer had not noticed the skipper's predicament, but the Second had followed the First, and was lying motionless across the dismantled binnacle.

Without waiting to cross over to the port side and ascend by the almost intact ladder, Burgoyne swarmed up one of the steel rails supporting the bridge, and gained the dangerously swaying structure.

The Old Man looked at him as he approached.

"Women aboard," he muttered, like a man speaking to himself. "Women aboard and the dirty swine are firing into us. Worse than Huns."

"Shall I carry on, sir?" asked Burgoyne.

"No," was the reply. "But—yes. Carry on, I've stopped something here. Feel a bit dazed."

He stood aside and allowed Alwyn to take his place at the wheel. In the absence of a compass there was nothing definite to steer by. The *Donibristle*, like a sorely-stricken animal, was merely staggering blindly along at the mercy of her unscrupulous pursuer.

Then it dawned upon the Third Officer that the cruiser had not fired for some minutes. It was too much to hope that the pirate, sighting another craft, had sheered off. He glanced aft, across the debris-strewn decks, tenanted only by the dead. The pirate cruiser was still there. She had closed her distance, and was about two cables' lengths on the merchantman's starboard quarter. She had lowered the White Ensign, and now displayed a red flag with the skull and crossbones worked in black on the centre of the field. This much Alwyn saw, but what attracted his immediate attention was the plain fact that he was looking straight at the muzzles of four of the pirate's quick-firers, and, as the cruiser forged ahead, those sinister weapons were trained so that they pointed at the merchantman's bridge and the two men on it.

Burgoyne realized that if those guns spoke he would not stand a dog's chance. Through long-drawn-out moments of mental torture he waited for the lurid flash that meant utter annihilation. He wanted to shout: "For Heaven's sake fire and finish with me."

Yet the quick-firers remained silent, although not for one moment did the weapons fail to keep trained upon the *Donibristle's* bridge. There were machine-guns, too, served by yellow, brown, and white featured ruffians, who were awaiting the order to let loose a tornado of bullets upon the defenceless merchantman.

The tension was broken by the appearance of a gigantic mulatto, who, clambering on to the domed top of the for'ard gun-shield, began to semaphore a message. He sent the words slowly, coached by a resplendently-garbed villain who spelt out the message letter by letter.

The signal as received read thus:

"Surrend ers hip savey our lifs. Ifno tuues ink shipa ndnoq uarta."

"What's that fellow signalling?" asked Captain Blair. Faint with loss of blood he could only just discern the slow motion of the coloured hand-flags.

Burgoyne signified that the message was understood, and bent to speak to the wounded skipper.

"They've signalled, 'Surrender the ship and save your lives; if not we will sink you and give no quarter'."

The Old Man raised himself on one elbow. The pulse on his uninjured temple was working like a steam piston.

"Surrender the ship!" he exclaimed vehemently. "I'll see them to blazes first."

CHAPTER V

Captured

"Very good, sir!"

Fired by the dogged bravery of the skipper, Alwyn stood erect and prepared to semaphore a reply of defiance, but before he could do so Captain Blair called to him.

"After all's said and done, Burgoyne," said the Old Man feebly, "we've put up a good fight. No one can deny that. And there are women aboard, though p'raps 'twould be best——"

His voice sank and he muttered a few inaudible sentences.

"I'm slipping my cable," he continued, his voice gaining strength, "so it doesn't much matter to me. There are the others to consider—what's left of them. Quarter, they promised?"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Then we'll chuck up the sponge. Tell the villains we'll surrender. If they don't keep their word (now make sure you understand) tell Angus to stand by, and if there's any shooting he's to open the Kingston valves."

"Aye, aye, sir," agreed the Third Officer. He realized that if the pirates failed to keep faith in the matter of quarter, then the *Donibristle*—the prize they so greatly desired—would be sunk by the simple expedient of opening the underwater valves.

"We surrender," semaphored Burgoyne.

It was a hateful task, but upon reflection he agreed with his skipper's amended decision. The *Donibristle* had not thrown up the sponge without a gallant resistance dearly paid for in human lives. It remained to be seen whether the terms of surrender would be honoured by the horde of polyglot pirates.

Gripping the bridge-rail Burgoyne shouted out the order: "All hands on deck."

The summons was obeyed promptly, but how few responded to it! There was Branscombe, with his arm in a sling and an ugly gash on his cheek; little Perkins, the Fifth Officer, who had never before smelt powder; Holmes, the purser, and Adams, the steward, both looking like butchers after tending the wounded; Heatherington, the junior wireless operator; and fifteen of the deck-hands, several of whom bore visible signs of the gruelling they had undergone. In addition were Withers and Nuttall and seventeen firemen of the "watch-below", the rest under Angus remaining at their posts in the engine- and boiler-rooms. Of the rest of the officers and crew eleven had been killed outright or mortally wounded, including the First and Second Officers, and close on twenty hit.

The officers and men who had fallen in on the boat-deck, unaware of the trend of events, were watching the pirate with puzzled looks.

Burgoyne went to the skipper to obtain further instructions before obtaining assistance in order to take him below. Captain Blair was unconscious. Wounded in half a dozen places, he had carried on until the ship was no longer his to command. As senior surviving deck officer, Alwyn was now responsible for the act of surrender.

"We've given in," he announced to the assembled men. "There was no help for it. The cruiser has promised us quarter. Lower the ensign."

As the torn, tattered, and smoke-begrimed Red Ensign was lowered and untoggled, wild yells burst from the throats of the ruffian crew. They did not know how to cheer; they could not if they did. It could only be compared with a concerted roar of a hundred wild beasts.

The shouts ceased, not abruptly, but in a long-drawn-out howl. The captain of the pirate cruiser was shouting himself hoarse in an endeavour to obtain silence. When comparative quiet had been gained, he stepped to the end of the bridge and raised a megaphone.

"Ship *Donibristle*!" he shouted. "Obtain way off ze ship an stan' by to receive boats."

"Aye, aye!" replied Burgoyne.

Hitherto the *Donibristle* had been forging ahead at her present maximum speed, which by this time was a bare five knots; while the pirate cruiser had slowed down to the same speed, causing her to yaw horribly.

For the first time Burgoyne noticed that the engine-room telegraph was no longer workable. The voice-tube, however, was intact.

"Mr. Angus," he began.

"Aye, it's Angus," replied that worthy's rolling voice "Is't Captain Blair speakin'?"

"No, Burgoyne," replied the temporarily promoted Third. "The skipper's hit. We're down and out. Stop both engines, and——"

"Weel?" asked the Chief Engineer with more alacrity than he usually displayed.

"Stand by the Kingston valves. The villains have promised to spare our lives, but you never know. So if you hear one blast on the whistle, open the valves and take your chance. Do you understand?"

"Deed aye," replied Angus.

Presently the throb of the twin propellers ceased. The *Donibristle* carried way for nearly a mile before she stopped. Her head fell off as she rolled gently in the trough of the long crestless waves. The cruiser also stopped, and a couple of boats were swung out, manned, and lowered.

Burgoyne had very little time to complete his preparations, but he made the best of those precious moments. Captain Blair was carried below, with the purser and the steward to attend him. The rest of the engine-room staff, with the exception of Angus, were mustered on deck. Calling one of the hands, a reliable and intelligent Cockney, Alwyn stationed him on the bridge, telling him to keep out of sight as much as possible.

"If those fellows start shooting us down," he said, "they won't waste much time about it. Now keep a sharp look-out. At the first sign tug that whistle lanyard for all you're worth, then shift for yourself if you can, and the best of luck."

Burgoyne's next step was to send Branscombe to bring the passengers on deck. He watched intently as they ascended the companion-ladder, Tarrant and the Fourth Officer assisting Colonel Vivian, and Miles furtively following. But to his keen disappointment and alarm there was no sign of Hilda Vivian. Mental pictures of the ruffianly horde finding the girl below filled him with apprehension.

"Where's Miss Vivian?" asked Alwyn anxiously. A suspicion of a smile showed itself on the Fourth Officer's features.

"It's all right, old man," he explained. "There she is; three from the end of the rear rank of firemen."

Burgoyne gasped.

"Thought I told her to shove on Mostyn's kit," he exclaimed. "Don't you see, she'll have to—to keep with the engine-room crowd."

"Jolly sight safer," declared Branscombe. "She'd attract attention with the few of us who are left. Her father agreed with me. 'Sides, all hands know, and they're white men, every man jack of 'em."

"P'raps you're right," conceded Burgoyne, and as he gave another look he felt convinced that the amended plan was the thing. Unless an unfortunate fluke occurred or, what was most unlikely, someone "gave her away" the pirates would never recognize the slender fireman with closely-cropped hair and begrimed features, and rigged out in an ill-fitting greasy suit of blue dungarees, as a girl of gentle birth. There was certainly nothing in her demeanour to betray her. She was standing in a line with the men, outwardly as stolid as the rest.

Drawing a small plated revolver from his hip-pocket—it was a six-chambered .22 weapon of neat workmanship—Burgoyne thrust it inside his sock, jamming the muzzle between the inside of his boot and his ankle. For the first time he felt grateful to the steward for having spilt ink over both pairs of deck-shoes, otherwise he would not have been wearing boots, and another hiding-place for the handy little weapon would not have promised to be so convenient.

The leading boat from the pirate cruiser ran alongside, and about twenty men, armed to the teeth, swarmed up the *Donibristle's* side, followed (not led) by a swarthy, black-bearded individual wearing a cocked hat, a blue tunic, with a lavish display of gold lace, a black and crimson scarf round his waist, and a pair of duck trousers with white canvas gaiters. From his belt hung a cavalry officer's sword, while in his kid-gloved right hand he grasped an automatic pistol.

The boarding-party consisted of men of half a dozen nationalities, and at least three totally distinct types of colour. There were Chinese, blue-smocked and wearing straw hats and black wooden shoes, negroes, bare to the waist, Creoles and half-breeds from various South American states, a couple of South Sea Island Kanakas, and a gigantic Malay armed with a kriss and a magazine rifle. Bunched together they eyed the motionless crew of the *Donibristle* so fiercely that Burgoyne momentarily expected to find them slashing, hewing, and shooting down their helpless, unarmed captives.

The pirate officer stepped forward in the most approved melodramatic manner.

"Me Pablo Henriques, *tiente po*—dat premier lieutenant—ob cruiser *Malfilio*," he announced. "Señor Ramon Porfirio him capitano. Now I take command ob de—de—"

He paused, unable to pronounce the name.

"—ob dis ship," he continued. "If you no give trouble den all vell. If you do, den dis."

He drew one finger across his throat with a guttural cluck and pointed significantly over the side. The stolid-faced prisoners hardly moved a muscle. With no immediate danger in prospect, provided the pirate kept his word, they were content to let events shape themselves, confident that in the long run the lawful keepers of the peace on the High Seas would adjust matters in the form of a running noose round the neck of each of the pirate crew.

"Now tell me," continued Henriques, addressing Burgoyne. "You no capitán; where am he?"

"Wounded," replied Alwyn briefly.

"Bueno. He make to ram us," rejoined the half-caste lieutenant. "Capitano Ramon Porfirio him angry, so we shoot. Say, is dis all der crew?"

"No," replied Burgoyne steadily. "There are several wounded below. Also the Chief Engineer is in the engine-room."

Henriques darted a glance of suspicion at the British officer.

"Wa for?" he demanded sharply.

Burgoyne returned his look calmly.

"He has to watch the steam-gauges," he replied. "It might be awkward for us if an explosion occurred."

It was an answer that served a two-fold purpose. Not only had Burgoyne given the pirate lieutenant a satisfactory reason for the Chief Engineer's presence in the engine-room, but he had, perhaps unknowingly, shown a certain amount of anxiety for the safety of the ship. Consequently any suspicion on the part of Pablo Henriques that the crew of the *Donibristle* had arranged to destroy the vessel, the boarding-party, and themselves was totally dispelled.

"Ver' good!" he exclaimed, satisfied with the explanation. "Now, wher' are de documentos—de papairs?"

Burgoyne shook his head and pointed to the wreckage of the chart-house. "Your fire was so accurate that the ship's papers are lost," he replied.

As a matter of fact Captain Blair had weighted them with a lead-line and sinker, and had dropped them overboard almost directly the *Malfilio* had hoisted the ID signal. They were several miles astern and fathoms deep in the Pacific.

A string of questions followed. What was the nature of the cargo? The amount of coal in the bunkers? Any infectious disease? How many passengers?

All these questions Burgoyne answered promptly. He was anxious not to cause trouble and give the pirates an excuse for brutality and perhaps massacre.

"Four," he replied in answer to the last question. "One, a lady, lies dead below. She died during the firing."

Pablo Henriques shrugged his shoulders. That information interested him hardly at all.

"You vill tell your men," he ordered, "to give up all arms an knives. If we find any after late, den' we kill 'em."

The young officer gave the word, and the crew deposited their knives upon the deck. Firearms they did not possess, but of the officers, Withers and Branscombe each gave up an automatic and a few rounds of ammunition. Burgoyne took the risk and retained his revolver.

"Now I make search every man," declared Henriques, smiling sardonically. "I jus' make certain."

Fortunately a signal was being made by the *Malfilio*, and Henriques' attention was diverted. By the time the message was completed and acknowledged, the pirate lieutenant had either forgotten his intention of having the prisoners searched, or else something of more pressing nature required attention.

Accompanied by three or four of the pirates Henriques went below. He was away for about five minutes, during which time the Malay ostentatiously whetted the already keen edges of his kriss. Noting the act, Burgoyne registered a vow that, should the pirates commence a massacre, he would take care that the yellow ruffian would be the recipient of the first of the six bullets in his revolver.

Presently the grotesquely attired Henriques returned with much sabre-rattling.

"De firemans here vill go below an' keep up de steam," he ordered. "Ebbery one of de firemans. De odders dey vill go prisoners on board de *Malfilio*."

CHAPTER VI

Under Hatches

"That's done it," ejaculated Burgoyne under his breath. "Why that ass Branscombe hadn't put Miss Vivian with the deck-hands passes my comprehension. She'll be separated from her father straight away."

He was furious but impotent. He pictured Hilda ordered below into the hot, steam-laden, dusty stokehold, imprisoned in an iron box, in which only hardened firemen could endure the discomforts, especially in latitudes approaching the tropics. He wondered whether Colonel Vivian would break the bonds of restraint and jeopardize the lives of all the passengers, or whether Hilda would give way under the parting, which might or might not be permanent.

The fact that Alwyn was now senior executive officer complicated matters. He was responsible for the safety of passengers and crew as far as lay in his power, and he was under the impression that Branscombe's ill-advised step reflected upon his own judgment and discretion. And Hilda Vivian's presence on board promised to lead to endless difficulties and additional dangers before the prisoners were rescued. As these thoughts passed rapidly through his mind Burgoyne watched Miss Vivian from a distance. She no doubt clearly understood the pirate lieutenant's order, even if the words were somewhat ambiguous; but the girl gave no sign or look to indicate her thoughts. She had dropped quite naturally into the stand-at-ease pose of her companions, all of whom were ready, if needs be, to give their lives to shield her from harm.

"After all," soliloquized Alwyn, "there'll be Angus and Withers to keep an eye on her. And there's less chance of the old *Donibristle* being sunk than the pirate, if a British or Yankee cruiser should appear."

There was a decided uncertainty about that "if". British cruisers were comparatively rare birds in that part of the North Pacific, and Uncle Sam was content to keep his cruisers within easy distance of the American seaboard, except on rare occasions when events in the Philippines or Hawaii required their presence. As for merchant vessels, they kept rigidly to the recognized routes. Sailing craft had perforce to wander from the narrow path, otherwise there were wide stretches of the Pacific where the blue seas were hardly ever disturbed by a ship's cutwater.

The *Donibristle*, when overhauled by the *Malfilio*, was on the recognized Vancouver-Honolulu route. She had cut and was well to the south'ard of the steamer track between 'Frisco and Yokohama, and still at some distance north-west of the converging track between 'Frisco and Honolulu. During the pursuit she had been forced some miles out of her course, so that any slight hope of being rescued by a chance war-ship was rendered still more remote.

Pablo Henriques signalled imperiously to Alwyn to put his orders into execution.

"Carry on, Mr. Withers," said Burgoyne, without a trace of emotion, although he felt like springing at the throat of the pirate lieutenant. "Get the firemen—both watches—below."

The men broke ranks and disappeared from view. With them went Hilda, descending the almost vertical slippery steel ladder without the faintest hesitation.

"You will lower boats," ordered Henriques.

"But," protested Burgoyne, pointing to the shattered and bullet-holed assortment of woodwork in the davits, "it is useless. They wouldn't keep us afloat a minute."

The pirate lieutenant shrugged his shoulders.

"That has noddin' to do with me," he remarked callously. "If dey no float you swim. It not far."

"That's one way of making us walk the plank, I suppose," thought Alwyn; then, without betraying his mistrust, ordered the boats to be swung out.

"We can make some of them seaworthy, lads," he added. "It's not far. Those boats that can keep afloat will have to make two trips. The passengers will go in No. 1 lifeboat. She's the safest I think."

As the seamen moved off to carry out the order, Colonel Vivian turned to the erstwhile Third Officer.

"Is there no chance of my remaining on board?" he asked hurriedly. "You see, my daughter—and my wife, lying dead below——"

"Miss Vivian will be safe enough, I think," replied Burgoyne. "That is provided her secret is kept. I quite understand your anxiety about Mrs. Vivian. Why not ask to be allowed to remain?"

Colonel Vivian limped away to make the request. It was humiliating for a British army officer to have to ask a favour of a rascally half-caste pirate, but the thought of having to abandon the body of his wife to be unceremoniously thrown overboard by this horde of coloured ruffians made him put aside his scruples.

"No," replied Henriques. "De order is all leave de ship. But I gif you fife minutes to perform de burial of de lady."

And so, setting to work rapidly yet reverently, Burgoyne, the purser, and the steward assisted the bereaved colonel to commit the remains to the deep. Under the watchful eyes of a couple of pirates, lest articles or documents of value should be disposed of at the same time, the corpse was swathed in a spare awning, lashed up, and weighted with a length of chain. The steward produced a Prayer Book and handed it to the temporary skipper. Burgoyne, noting that a bare ninety seconds remained, read a few portions of the burial service, then, with every man of the *Donibristle's* crew within sight knocking off work and standing bareheaded, the mortal remains of Mrs. Vivian were committed to the deep.

"Perhaps," thought Alwyn, as he turned away, "perhaps it was as well that Miss Vivian did go below. There are limits even to the endurance of human nature."

The voice of the pirate lieutenant bawling out orders in broken English attracted Burgoyne's attention. A signal had just been received from the *Malfilio* countermanding the previous order, and instructing Henriques to send the prisoners below and get under way. So the boats were swung in again and secured.

By the time that this work was completed, and before the British deck-hands and officers could be sent below, a faint buzzing that momentarily increased caused all hands to look skywards. Approaching the *Malfilio* at a high speed was a small seaplane. At first Burgoyne and many of his comrades thought that it was a naval scout, and that deliverance was at hand; but the fact that no hostile demonstration was made on the pirate cruiser quickly banished this hope.

The seaplane was winding in a wireless aerial as she circled round the *Malfilio*. Without the slightest doubt it was by this means that the *Malfilio* had been placed in touch with her prey. The fuselage was dumpy and the monoplane spare and small, and by the corrugations of the wings Burgoyne rightly concluded that they were of metal. She was of an earlier type with a single motor of comparatively low power—but quite sufficient to enable her to be a valuable adjunct to the pirate cruiser.

The "winding-in" completed, the seaplane alighted on the surface and "taxi-ed" alongside the *Malfilio*. A derrick swung outwards from the cruiser, and a steel wire rope was deftly shackled to the eyebolt of a "gravity band" round the fuselage. Even as the machine rose from the water, dangling at the end of a wire rope, her wings swung back and folded themselves against the body, and in this compact form the aerial scout vanished from sight behind the *Malfilio's* superstructure.

This much Burgoyne saw before he was compelled to follow the remaining officers and deck-hands, including the Cockney who had been told to stand by the whistle lanyard, and who, during the operation of swinging in the boats, had seen his officer's signal for recall.

Once 'tween decks, the men were herded for'ard and locked up in the forepeak, an armed pirate being stationed on the hatchway. The remnant of officers and the passengers were ordered aft, and secured in the steerage, where they found Captain Blair, Mostyn, and the other

wounded. There were four cabins at their disposal, the whole separated from the rest of the ship by a transverse bulkhead in which was a single sliding door. Outside this a sentry was posted, while, as an additional precaution, that for some reason was not taken in the case of the men, four villainous-looking Orientals, armed to the teeth, were stationed with the prisoners. The dead-lights were screwed into the scuttles, and the captives warned that any attempt at tampering with them would be punishable with death; and, since the electric light had failed, the steerage was dimly illuminated by half a dozen oil-lamps.

The door had not been locked more than a couple of minutes before the prisoners heard the thresh of the twin propellers. The S.S. *Donibristle* under her new masters was steaming ahead, under greatly reduced speed, in the wake of the pirate cruiser *Malfilio*—but whither?

The reaction of the excitement and peril of the last few hours now set in, and a state of lethargy took possession of most of the prisoners. The hot, confined, ill-ventilated space, the reek of iodoform pervading everything, and a sheer hunger and fatigue all combined to suppress any desire for conversation. For some hours the silence was broken only by the moans of the wounded and the clank of the freshwater pump, as the parched men quenched their burning thirst with frequent and copious draughts, while constantly their Chinese guards, with their expressionless yellow faces and slanting eyes, paced to and fro, like sinister demons from another world.

Hour after hour passed. Darkness succeeded daylight. At intervals the guards were changed, and at about nine o'clock a negro brought in a small sack of ship's biscuits.

About midnight Miles attempted to start a conversation by grumbling to Tarrant about the bad methods of the Mercantile Marine, and the British Columbian and Chinese Line in particular, in allowing ships to leave port in a defenceless condition. Tarrant promptly "shut him up", amidst a murmur of applause from the men in the vicinity, for the drummer's anxiety for his own safety, and disregard of the plight of his companions, had not failed to be noticed.

"That's the way to deal with him, Mr. Tarrant," remarked Alwyn. "We've quite enough to put up with without having to listen to the yapping and whining of a spiritless fellow like that."

"Yes, it's deucedly unfortunate," said Tarrant, "but so far we haven't been badly treated."

"No," agreed Burgoyne, "we haven't. They've spared our lives, although that rather puzzles me. One would have thought that, being pirates, they would emulate the Hun and do the '*spurlos versenkt*' stunt. Piracy is a hanging matter, and having gone thus far it's a wonder they didn't go the whole hog. However, they haven't and I don't think they will now."

"I always thought that there was no such thing as piracy nowadays," remarked the purser, "at least only in a small way in the China seas."

"Then you'll have to revise your ideas, Holmes," rejoined Burgoyne. "It came as a shock to all of us. One of the aftermaths of the Great War, I suppose, and the very audacity of it brings temporary—let us hope—success. This game can't last long. Once the world gets wind of it there'll be British, Yankee, and Jap light cruisers and destroyers on the *Malfilio's* heels, and she'll be rounded up in double quick time."

"I wonder where they are taking us," said Tarrant.

"That I can't say," replied Alwyn. "But, if it's any information to you, I can inform you that we've been steaming roughly nor'west for the last six hours."

"How do you know that?" inquired Branscombe in astonishment. "Here we are cooped up without a chance of seeing a single star, and yet——"

"I've a compass, laddie," replied Burgoyne. "A liquid pocket compass, and I mean to stick to it as long as I jolly well can. Naturally, in playing a billiard handicap, a fellow...."

He continued discoursing upon the irrelevant subject of billiards for more than a minute, his companions expressing no surprise at the sudden change of topic. It was not until the Chinese sentry had passed and was out of earshot, that the former theme was resumed.

"That chap might understand English," observed Burgoyne. "Well, I can also tell you this; if we hold on our course sufficiently long, we'll fetch up on one of the Aleutian Islands, or else on the coast of Kamtchatka."

"Give me something a little warmer," protested Tarrant. "There's nothing like getting used——"

A voice, hoarse, masterful, and at the same time, slightly incoherent, interrupted the conclave. Captain Blair was recovering consciousness and making a considerable song about it.

"Mr. Angus," he shouted, "can't you whack her up a bit more? Three knots if you burst. The cowardly skunks—women on board, and the villains are shelling us. Mr. Angus, are you there?"

In a trice Burgoyne was by the Old Man's side, fearful lest he should divulge the fact to the pirate that there had been more than one woman on board.

"It's all right, sir," he said soothingly. "We've got the heels of them."

"Eh?" exclaimed the skipper. "Who's that?"

"Burgoyne, sir."

"And we've given 'em the slip, eh? Yes, the firing's stopped right enough. Where am I?"

"In good hands," replied Alwyn. "You've been knocked about a bit, but Holmes and the steward have patched you up all right."

"Yes, I remember," rejoined Captain Blair. "I told you to carry on, and everything's O.K.?"

Reassured on that point, the Old Man gave a long sigh, closed his eyes, and sank into a sound slumber.

Towards morning Burgoyne noticed, by consulting his compass, that the *Donibristle* had altered her course and was steering due west.

"Kamtchatka's off," he announced, as Tarrant appeared munching a biscuit. "They've altered course four points to the west'ard."

"And that means?" asked the Consular Service man. "That we make Japan if we carry on as we are going," replied Alwyn.

"H'm; s' long as they land me within easy distance of my destination I welcome the alteration," observed Tarrant. "But perhaps they're making for a coral island or something of that sort. Are there any hereabouts?"

"Evidently they mean to give Hawaii a wide berth," said Burgoyne. "After that there are only a few small islands—the Ocean Islands they're called. I've never been there, because they lie to the nor'ard of our regular track and a good way south of the Yokohama-San Francisco route."

"Uninhabited?"

Burgoyne shook his head.

"I've told you all I know," he asserted. "It isn't much. But we'll find out in due course, I expect."

Shortly afterwards the bulkhead door was unlocked, and Withers was unceremoniously shown in.

"What's for brekker?" he asked. "I'm ravenous."

"Ship's biscuit and lukewarm water, old son," replied Branscombe. "What are you doing here?"

"The blighters are letting us work watch and watch," said the Second Engineer, voraciously biting off chunks of the tough biscuit. "I've had my stand-easy, and they sent me aft to get some grub before I'm on again. Angus will be here in another quarter of an hour."

"And the men?" asked Burgoyne "How are they standing it?"

"Fine, everything considered," replied Withers "Even though they are being fed on rice as if they were Chinks." He glanced at the Chinese guards. They were bunched together close to the bulkhead door, resuming an interrupted game of cards. "And Miss Vivian is just splendid," he continued lowering his voice. "We rigged her up a sort of caboose under one of the intake ventilators. She told Angus that she'd slept well, but she couldn't tackle rice and cold water, so I'm going to fill my pockets with biscuits for her. No objections, I hope?"

"Do the pirates worry you much?" asked Branscombe.

"Directly—no; indirectly—yes," was the reply. "They don't post guards in the engine-room, which is a blessing; but they are continually calling for more revolutions. Perhaps they imagine we're a South American republic—how's that for a joke, Branscombe?"

"Feeble," was the reply, "but get on with it."

"There's nothing much to get on with," continued the Second Engineer. "There was a talk of tinkering with the high-pressure slide-valves and stopping the engines, only Angus said that, if the *Donibristle* did break down, the cruiser would doubtless remove the prize crew and send her to the bottom—and us as well. So that didn't come off. But, I say, who's eating chocolate?"

"No one," replied Alwyn.

"You're wrong, old son," he replied presently, "or perhaps I ought to say 'Mr. Burgoyne' now? Fact remains, I smell chocolate. The air's stiff with it."

"Hanged if I can whiff it," exclaimed Alwyn. "Iodoform, yes, but not chocolate."

For answer the Second Engineer grasped Burgoyne's arm and led him across the compartment. With a sense of smell almost as acute as that of a dog, he led Alwyn to a dark corner formed by the angle of one of the cabin bulkheads with the ship's side. There, seated on an upturned bucket, was Miles—and there was no doubt now as to the reek of chocolate. Filled with indignation at the gross selfishness of the drummer, Burgoyne held out his hand.

"I'll trouble you to hand over what's left," he said curtly.

But Miles was not going to surrender his spoils without protest.

"Say, what for?" he asked. "If I took the precaution to lay in a stock, that is my affair."

Burgoyne with difficulty restrained his temper.

"At once," he exclaimed sternly. Having been trained from his early youth to manage men, he was not going to stand any nonsense from a coward.

The passenger gasped but complied. Burgoyne found himself possessed of a slab of chocolate weighing nearly a pound. The wretched fellow, taking advantage of the fact that during the chase the steward's pantry was unattended, had taken and concealed the toothsome stuff.

"Mr. Holmes!" sang out the Third Officer

The purser appeared.

"This is part of the ship's stores, is it not?" inquired Burgoyne.

Mr. Holmes replied in the affirmative, volunteering the additional information that the chocolate was stamped with the company's initials—a fact that in his haste the pilferer had overlooked.

"Right-o, Mr. Holmes," continued Alwyn. "That leaves me with a clear conscience. Take charge of the stuff and issue it out in equal shares to everyone aft. Keep back a share for Mr. Angus and the Third Engineer when they arrive."

But when Withers returned to the engine-room his pockets were bulging—not only with biscuits, but with small cubes of chocolate. Spontaneously, and almost without exception, every temporary occupant of the steerage had given up his share to Hilda Vivian.

CHAPTER VII

Ramon Porfirio

After four days and four nights of captivity, during which period the *Donibristle* had covered about 600 miles, the engines ceased their steady throb, and the prisoners heard the muffled roar of a chain-cable running through the hawse-pipe.

Speculation was rife as to where the captured merchantman had brought-up, while the majority of the captives expressed an opinion that, provided they found themselves in the open air, the locality of the anchorage didn't very much matter just at present. After nearly a hundred hours of close confinement, fed on meagre and monotonous fare, unwashed and unkempt, they welcomed the prospect of a change.

Their guards, too, had been removed. Evidently the pirates were now satisfied that the prisoners were no longer in a position to cause trouble; while in support of that theory a half-caste South American appeared and unbolted the dead-lights.

The flow of pure, balmy air through the now opened scuttles was like a draught of the sweetest nectar to the jaded and dishevelled men. There was a rush to see where the ship was lying, until at every scuttle two or three people were simultaneously trying to look out.

The *Donibristle* was lying in a circular and apparently completely landlocked harbour surrounded by tall cliffs. Further examination revealed a narrow gap, which, in turn, was fronted on the seaward side by a lofty ridge of rock, which, harmonizing with the cliffs of the island, presented at first sight an appearance of continuity. The cliffs were so high and close to the water's edge that from the *Donibristle* it was impossible to see what lay beyond—whether the ground rose to a still greater height, whether it was wooded or otherwise, or whether the island was of large or small extent.

About two cables away lay the *Malfilio*, also at anchor, while closer in shore were two vessels that Burgoyne rightly concluded were the ill-fated *Alvarado* and *Kittiwake*. A few sailing craft,

bêche de mer traders seized by the pirates, were also to be seen, some of them lying aground with a heavy list.

It was now close on sunset. The tranquil waters of the harbour were shrouded in deepening shadow, while the horizontal rays of the setting sun bathed the summit of the eastern cliffs in a glint of reddish gold. Beyond that serrated line of sun-bathed cliff the sky was broken by three thin columns of smoke rising slowly in the still air.

"It's a snug berth at all events," observed Burgoyne, with a sailor's unerring instinct for a safe harbour. "But it would puzzle a stranger to find his way in."

"Will they set us ashore to-night, do you think?" asked Colonel Vivian.

Before Alwyn could reply the door was thrown open, and the engineer officers of both watches entered. That was a sign that their work in the engine-room was finished.

In the dim light no one noticed that Withers was not with them, but that instead there was a stranger, a tall, slender fellow of almost Withers's height and build, rigged out in the company's uniform, and with the peaked cap raked jauntily over the left eye. And until the "fellow" went straight up to the Colonel and took hold of his hands, even Burgoyne failed to recognize Hilda Vivian.

"We couldna let the wee lassie bide there," declared Angus apologetically, as if he were ashamed of having brought her along. "An' ye ken fine why."

"And where's Withers?" asked Burgoyne.

The old Scot shook his head.

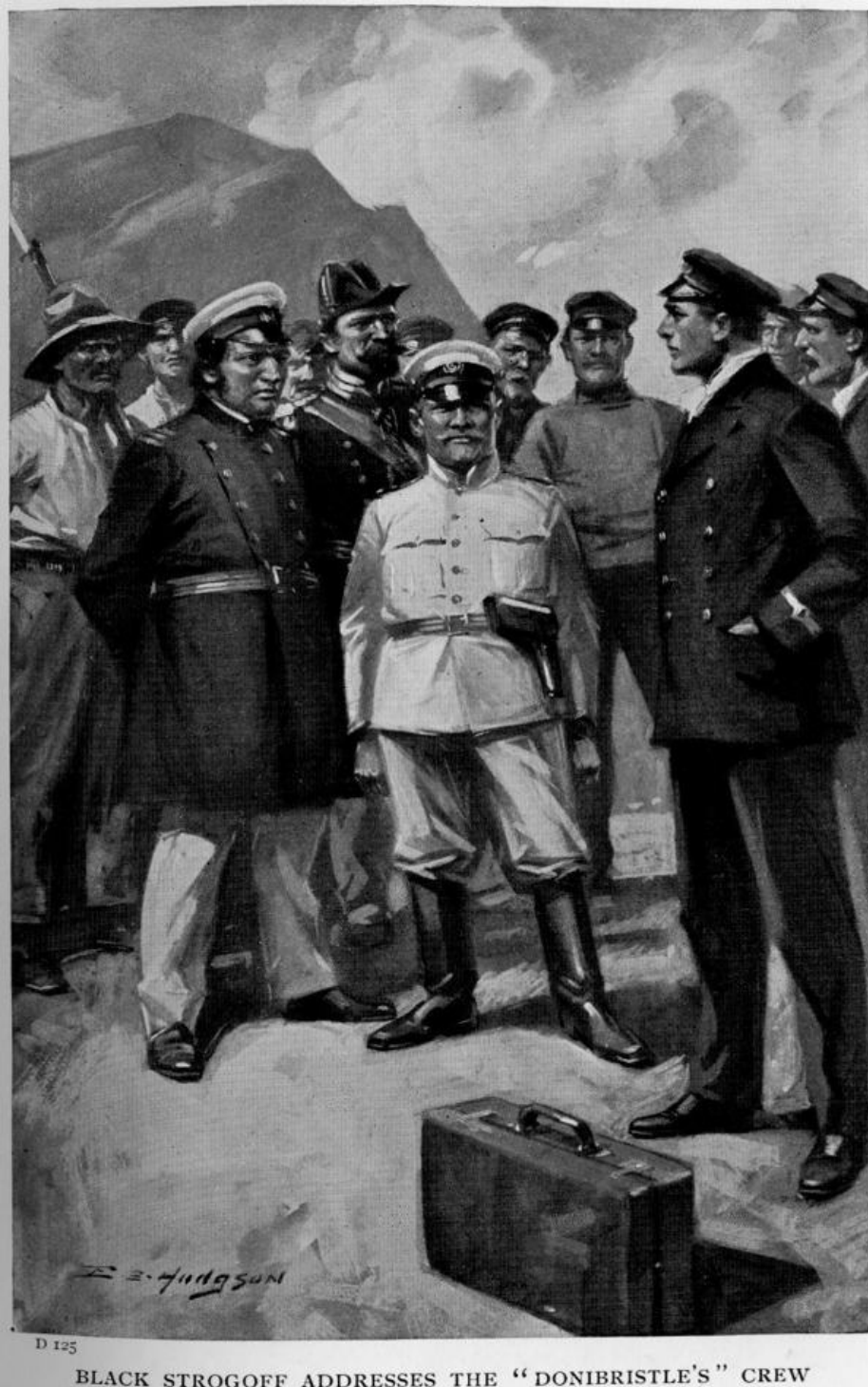
"A' would do it," he declared, and went on to explain that the Second Engineer had insisted in donning a fireman's boiler-suit and giving his uniform to Miss Vivian.

"An' in the gloamin' they'll no ken the difference," he concluded.

"So far so good," soliloquized Alwyn. "But in daylight there may be quite a different story. The rascals have seen Withers and the other fellow going in and out of the engine-room. They'll twig a strange officer in a trice, I'm afraid."

But a glance at Hilda convinced him that running the risk had its compensations. The girl, even in her sorrow at her mother's death, was happy at being reunited to her father—her sole surviving relative. Clearly she was taking little or no thought for the morrow.

When it became a practically assured fact that the prisoners were to remain on board at least another night, there was general activity on the part of all the able-bodied men, with one exception, to fix up Miss Vivian in her new quarters. Willing hands quickly cleared out—it could not truthfully be said "cleaned out"—one of the cabins for her use, making far less fuss about having to sleep uncomfortably crowded than they had when they had fifteen hundred cubic feet more space.



BLACK STROGOFF ADDRESSES THE "DONIBRISTLE'S" CREW

[Illustration: BLACK STROGOFF ADDRESSES THE "DONIBRISTLE'S" CREW]

The exception was Jules Miles, the Canuk bagman. At daybreak the survivors of the *Donibristle's* original crew were ordered on deck. Evidently the pirates were in a desperate hurry, for the *Malfilio* was lying with steam raised ready to proceed to sea. During the night she had coaled, receiving her coal from the captured *Alvarado*.

So, without even the formality of a search, the prisoners were sent ashore, the wounded being carried in strips of canvas cut from discarded awnings.

The undamaged boats of the *Alvarado* were employed to convey the prisoners from the *Donibristle* to the beach, and in consequence the journey was a painful one for the wounded.

But in the hasty performance of the operations Hilda Vivian escaped detection, and once again Burgoyne, in his capacity of senior unwounded officer, thanked Heaven that so far the villainous pirates had so far failed to penetrate the deception. Incidentally he was thankful that the prisoners had had no opportunity to wash during their four days incarceration. Their faces were black with the grime of battle, and thus Hilda Vivian was furnished with an additional disguise.

On landing, the *Donibristle's* crew were formed up in a hollow square, with armed guards patrolling the outer face of the formation. Here they were kept in suspense for more than a

quarter of an hour, until the arrival of the pirate captain, Don Ramon Porfirio, attended by his lieutenants, Pablo Henriques and Black Fritz Strogoff.

Ramon Porfirio was a Bolivian by birth, but had spent most of his time since the age of sixteen in various seaports of Chili and Peru. He was about thirty-five years of age, of medium height, and inclined to corpulence. His features were remarkable, his face being round and flabby; but instead of the broad short nose usually associated with this type of countenance his nasal organ was very pronounced, and beaked like a parrot's. His hair, bluish black and liberally oiled, hung a good six inches below the back of his gilt-braided cap. With the exception of closely-cropped side-whiskers he was clean shaven, although the bluish tint of the lower part of his face pointed clearly to the fact that he had not renewed his acquaintance with the razor that morning.

The pirate captain was rigged out in the undress uniform of an admiral of the Imperial Russian Navy. The tarnished buttons still displayed the double-headed eagle of the Romanoffs; the salt-stained blue coat was considerably the worse for wear. Burgoyne found himself wondering what had been the fate of the original wearer of the uniform, and by what roundabout way it had come into the possession of Ramon Porfirio.

Pablo Henriques requiring no further introduction, it will be necessary only to portray the third pirate officer, "Black" Fritz Strogoff.

He was short in stature, being only about five feet four inches, and grotesquely broad in proportion to his height. He had hardly any neck, literally speaking, although figuratively he possessed plenty. His features were swarthy, while by a curious contrast his hair was of a light straw colour. In point of age he was the eldest of the three. Although the date of his birth was unknown to him, he was fond of announcing that he entered the University of Dorpat in 1893; so, assuming him to be seventeen or eighteen at that time, he was now about forty-four or forty-five.

He could speak three languages fluently—Russian, German, and Spanish—and had a useful knowledge of English, French, and some of the dialects of Eastern Asia. In the days of the Russian Empire he had experienced the horrors of Siberia. During the war he had played no unimportant part in the intrigue between Soviet Russia and Germany. Not receiving what he deemed to be adequate reward from Lenin and Trotsky, he made his way, via Vladivostok, to one of the South American republics, where he came in contact with Ramon Porfirio.

It was Fritz Strogoff who engineered most of the latter's enterprises. He was the brains of the pirate organization, and while up to the present he was content to let Porfirio take precedence, he was merely awaiting a favourable opportunity of cutting his connection with the *Malfilio*, taking with him considerably more than the agreed share of the ill-gotten booty. He did not believe in playing too long with Fate.

Ramon Porfirio was literally the tool of his second lieutenant, although, with the arrogance of a Spaniard with a decided dash of Indian blood, he failed utterly to recognize Strogoff's influence. Of an imaginative, reckless, and hot-tempered disposition, he firmly believed that he was a leader of men, and a worthy successor to Morgan, Mansfield, and other famous buccaneers.

Beginning his career as a small public official at Lima, Porfirio soon found that existence was far too tame. He absconded, taking 20,000 dollars of public money, and found a temporary refuge in Chile. At Talcahuano he came in touch with German agents, who were at that time busily engaged in picking up news in order to keep von Spee informed of the movements of Craddock's squadron. At that time there was hardly such a thing as British propaganda, and Porfirio, through his German associates, was well primed with utterly erroneous ideas of the might of Britain's sea-power.

It was to the Huns at Talcahuano that he owed the thought of becoming a sea-corsair, and preying upon unprotected British shipping. The idea grew and took tangible form. After acquiring a smattering of the arts of seamanship and navigation, he felt confident enough to embark upon his career of piracy, but the difficulty was to find a vessel suitable to his pocket and his needs.

About this time he met Strogoff. Hinting at his ambition and his difficulties, Porfirio found, as he thought, a kindred spirit. Strogoff suggested that the Kamtchatkan port of Petropavlovsk would furnish the necessary vessel. It was about that time that Siberia succumbed to Bolshevism, and several Russian light cruisers and gunboats were lying at Petropavlovsk. Since it was hopeless for them to return either to the Black Sea or the Gulf of Finland, it was more than likely that an armed vessel might be acquired at a reasonable price.

Incidentally Strogoff mentioned that he knew of a secret naval base, situated in a remote island in the North Pacific. It had been prepared some years before the Great War for the use of the German squadron stationed in these waters, so that when "der Tag" dawned the Hun commerce-destroyers would have a base to operate from should Kiao-Chau prove useless—as it quickly did—to the squadron.

Fortunately, owing to the total destruction of von Spee's ships, and the transference of the *Emden's* and *Königsburg's* activities to the Indian Ocean, the secret base was not brought into operation. The garrison of German marines "stuck it" for nearly a twelvemonth in total ignorance of what was going on in the outside world. At length they abandoned the island, sailing, it was

assumed, in a small vessel attached to the base. But no one in Germany or elsewhere ever heard more of the lost garrison, and the fate of that handful of Hun marines remains an unsolved mystery.

Enlisting the services of Pablo Henriques, master of a Chilean trading schooner, Porfirio and Strogoff, accompanied by a nucleus of half-castes of doubtful character, arrived at Petropavlovsk a few weeks before the port was due to be come icebound. Under hatches they carried six casks of wine, a quantity of woollen blankets, and two thousand dollars in gold. Before they reached the Kamtchatkan coast the cargo was augmented by booty forcibly removed from a couple of Kanaka-manned traders. The Kanakas were easily persuaded to become members of the pirate band.

The acquisition of the light cruiser *Zarizyno* was accomplished so easily that even Strogoff opened his eyes in astonishment. A Bolshevik official, Lipski by name, readily agreed to hand over the ship in exchange for the wine, blankets, and half the gold. He, too, had an eye for the main chance, and had no great faith in the stability of the Soviet Government. Moscow and Petrograd were thousands of miles away. Before Lenin and Trotsky could demand an account of his stewardship, Lipski would also be miles away, with his nest well feathered, to seek an asylum in Chicago, in the vast Slavonic family domiciled under the protection of the Stars and Stripes.

Augmenting their numbers by the enlistment of Chinese and Malay seamen, together with a handful of Slav desperadoes otherwise marooned in Petropavlovsk, Porfirio and his two lieutenants took the *Zarizyno* to sea. Slightly disguised by means of different funnel-markings, and given the name of *Malfilio*, she was taken to the secret base, where her active career as a pirate began.

On the island they found an abundance of Welsh steam-coal, tinned provisions, clothing, quick-firing guns, machine-guns, and rifles, with a large quantity of suitable ammunition in fair condition.

At first Porfirio was content to confine his activities to the capture of small trading vessels plying between Hawaii and the archipelagoes south of the line; then, becoming bolder, he directed his attention to bigger game.

The *Kittiwake*, his first big prize, was a comparatively easy capture. She furnished him mainly with flour consigned for Japan, where quite recently a large demand for wheat had arisen in place of rice, this demand being one of the causes of the shortage of flour in Europe.

The *Kittiwake* was taken without loss of life. Porfirio had rather shrunk from murder, owing to a mistaken idea on his part, communicated by his German friends at Talcahuano, that piracy without murder was not a hanging matter. Ramon had a strong objection to a hempen rope.

But with the capture of the *Alvarado*, which yielded a richer booty, his record for milk-and-water piracy ended. Nor did he know that the prize was a Yankee until he was in possession of her, and fifteen corpses lay in her scupperns.

Having crossed the Rubicon, he was less scrupulous in his methods, but he refrained from taking life except in actual fight, or for disregard of his orders on the part of his prisoners. To impress upon the survivors of the *Donibristle* his views on the subject, he had caused them to be formed up in a hollow square on the beach of the secret base.

Ramon Porfirio's knowledge of English being, to say the least, imperfect, he called upon Black Strogoff to address the assembly. This the Russian proceeded to do, his speech including a number of words and sentences of an academic nature interspersed with the vernacular of Wapping.

He informed the *Donibristle's* crew that they would be well treated if they behaved, and dealt with severely if they did not. They would have to work under their own officers. Failure to perform their allotted tasks would be punished by reduction of rations, solitary confinement, and in exceptional cases by death.

He also mentioned in an off-hand kind of way that there were vacancies in the crew of the *Malfilio*, vacancies which offered a life that would appeal to the adventurous, with prospects of becoming rich in a very short space of time. He did not propose to ask for volunteers at that moment (he knew that none would be forthcoming, although it was possible that later on some of the *Donibristle's* crew would secretly hand in their names) but he would be willing to consider applications in due course.

The men heard his appeal in stolid silence. The offer fell on deaf ears. They were "not having any". Ramon Porfirio would have to cast his net elsewhere to obtain his recruits.

The Compound

At the conclusion of the pirate lieutenant's speech silence fell upon the close ranks of the prisoners. Porfirio conferred with his subordinates for some moments, then, turning abruptly, walked down to the *Malfilio's* boat. Henriques accompanied him; but Strogoff, who had been told off to remain as a sort of deputy-governor of the island, stood in the centre of the hollow square, his dark eyes closely scrutinizing the faces of his captives.

Presently he shouted:

"Place all the luggage on the ground."

The "luggage" for the most part consisted of handkerchiefs containing the men's scanty and hurriedly-collected kit. Two or three of the officers had brought small handbags, while the purser had taken the precaution of landing a portable medicine-chest.

"You have been searched for arms?" inquired the pirate lieutenant, addressing Branscombe, and without waiting for that worthy's reply he continued: "Goot; we will now the luggage search."

It was not a lengthy business. One of the guards undertook the examination of the kit, while Strogoff watched the proceedings. Since there was little of value, nothing was taken with the exception of shaving- and looking-glasses, razors, and scissors.

The prisoners, preceded and followed by armed guards, were then marched off. For a hundred yards or so they kept to the sandy beach until they arrived at a cleft in the precipitous cliffs, that had been invisible when viewed from the deck of the *Donibristle*. It was more than a cleft, it was a narrow, steeply ascending defile, and the only means of gaining the interior of the island from the harbour. Enclosed by bare walls of rock, never more than twelve feet apart, the path ascended by a series of zigzags, until at a distance of a furlong from the seaward entrance a natural barrier of granite terminated the gorge. Here, piercing the cliffs at right angles to the path, was a tunnel, the work of man's hands, driven through the solid rock. Defended by machine-guns, the gateway to the island could defy an army corps.

During German occupation the tunnel had been electrically lighted. The bayonet-sockets of the long-destroyed bulbs were still in position, while here and there broken insulated wire protruded from the rusted iron castings.

By the aid of torches made of resinous wood the guards illuminated the tunnel, through which a strong in-draught of warm air caused the lights to flicker and smoke.

On the principle that "you never know your luck", Burgoyne kept his eyes well open, studying the nature of the approach to the interior. One of the first objects that attracted his attention was a metal portcullis. It was already drawn up, and only a foot or so of the lower portion projected below the roof of the tunnel. Since no winding mechanism was visible, he concluded that above the tunnel was a large hall or cave, from which control of the portcullis and observation of the approach through the gorge could be made.

When about one-third of the inclined subterranean passage had been traversed, Burgoyne noticed that the wall on one side was running with moisture, and presently he saw an iron plate, about two feet in diameter, set in a metal frame and secured by six butterfly-nuts. It was obviously a valve, the seating of which was by no means water-tight, for two or three fine sprays were spurting diagonally across the tunnel, and forming miniature rainbows in the glare of the torches. As it was an inaccessible spot for a hydrant, Burgoyne formed the idea that the water formed part of the defences of the tunnel, and, if necessary, could either inundate the lowermost part or else set up an irresistible torrent against which no human being could stand.

Presently daylight showed ahead. The guards extinguished their torches by dashing them on the ground, and stacked the still-smoking wood in a niche in the wall of the tunnel. Passing under another portcullis, and turning sharp to the right through an inclined gulley, the prisoners arrived in the open air on the high land of the secret base.

Here they were halted. A pirate with the air of one having authority—he was equivalent to a barrack-master—carefully counted the prisoners, and began picking out a few at haphazard. Those he chose were subjected to a minute search, but luckily there was nothing found on them in the nature of arms or ammunition. Presently he stood still with his horny hand raised as if about to bring it down upon Hilda Vivian's shoulder.

The officers of the *Donibristle* were bringing up the rear of the column of prisoners, but behind were six of the pirates. Consequently Burgoyne was close to the girl, only the purser being between them. Alwyn saw Hilda shrink back. It was only a slight movement but nevertheless perceptible.

"That's done it!" muttered the Third Officer, striving in vain to think of a hurried plan whereby he might be able to save the girl without arousing instant and fatal suspicion.

But a *deus ex machina* had turned up at the critical moment. Black Strogoff, who had not accompanied the prisoners, had just emerged from the tunnel, and his imperious harsh voice was

shouting for one Fernando. The barrack-master turned on hearing his name called and hastened to his superior.

When at length Strogoff dismissed the fellow the immediate danger was over. There was no further attempt to search the prisoners, but once more Burgoyne realized that there were limits even to the vagaries of fate, and that the presence of Hilda Vivian was causing complications that indicated more trouble at no distant date.

His anxiety was shared by the rest of his comrades. Up to the present, apart from the gruelling they had received during the one-sided engagement resulting in the capture of the *Donibristle*, they hadn't much to complain about. In fact it was rather amusing and exciting, this adventure, were it not that they were saddled with the responsibility of concealing the sex and identity of a young and pretty girl.

The march was resumed, the prisoners moving in fours with their guards on either flank and in front and rear of the column. The route lay over fairly regular grassland that for nearly half a mile rose gradually. Well on their left was a grove of coco-palms, otherwise the island seemed devoid of growing timber. Ahead lay a rounded hill, towering about two hundred feet above the general level of the plateau, while to the right were a number of wooden huts where the pirates lived when not required to be afloat.

There were other buildings that served as workshops. The pulsations of petrol motors, the rasp of circular saws, and the rapid beat of a pneumatic riveting-tool, clearly indicated the purpose to which these buildings were put. And Burgoyne had good reason to believe that the workmen were prisoners, since there were armed guards lolling about outside the doors.

As the *Donibristle's* men continued their enforced march, they passed patches of cultivated land and enclosed portions of pasture on which cattle and sheep browsed. There were men working in the fields, scantily-clad, bronzed and bearded fellows, who waved their hands to the new-comers. Some of them shouted greetings, but the distance was too far for the words to be audible.

"They're from the *Alvarado* and *Kittiwake*, I guess," remarked Phil Branscombe. "So it looks as if we shall be on the same lay before long. Did you notice they've all grown magnificent whiskers?"

"Aye," replied Burgoyne. "Couldn't help noticing that. 'Bearded like a pard' as Will Shakespeare wrote."

"And we'll be in the same boat if we're here long enough," continued Branscombe drily. "The blighters have collared our shaving-tackle. I've reason to believe my beard's red. What colour is yours, old man?"

He paused, deep in thought. Burgoyne made no reply. He, too, was thinking.

"By Jove!" continued the Fourth Officer. "I said 'we'll all be growing beards'. What about Miss Vivian? Won't that give the show away?"

"Yes," agreed Alwyn gravely. "We aren't having amateur theatricals. The false beard stunt wouldn't work. They'd twig it."

"We'll think of some wheeze, old man," rejoined Branscombe. "There's time yet, although I'm not one to shelve a proposition until it's too late."

He caressed his chin, already showing four days' growth of soft reddish down.

"An' they collared our shaving-mirrors," he continued. "Wonder what I look like now? What was the idea?"

"'Spouse they thought we'd use them as heliographs," conjectured Burgoyne. "As for the razors, perhaps they've seen a nigger run amok with one. I did once. It was in New Orleans, and the fellow raised Cain till he was scuppered."

"But why safety-razors?" persisted Branscombe. Then, pointing to a fence, he changed the subject by exclaiming: "And there's home sweet home, my festive!"

The prisoners had now breasted the low ridge that, without taking into consideration the isolated hill, formed the dividing ridge of the island. Right ahead they could see the north-western part of the sea-girt base, terminated on three sides of an irregular quadri-lateral by tall cliffs. The fourth or landward side was enclosed by a lofty metal fence, made of pointed steel bars painted with the familiar "dazzle" affected by ships and fortifications during the Great War. In the fence was a large gate, on either side of which was a blockhouse on a slight artificial mound, with a pair of machine-guns so mounted as to command the whole of the enclosed space. Within the barrier was a conglomeration of huts, tents, and rough shelters, the whole forming the compound where the *Malfilio's* captives spent their scanty hours of rest and slumber.

Between the two blockhouses a halt was called, and the prisoners were again counted.

Although no attempt was made to search any of them, they were evidently meant to be kept under strict surveillance, since the pirates had taken the precaution of counting them in spite of the fact that they had been under an armed guard during their journey across the island. That boded ill for any adventurous individual who felt tempted to escape.

Through the gateway the new arrivals were herded. Then they were told to halt and kept waiting until Strogoff appeared, riding on a motor-cycle of American manufacture and recent make. He had unbuckled his sword and lashed it to the frame, and the fact that in dismounting he had forgotten it and had got considerably mixed up with the scabbard did not improve his temper.

"Listen!" he shouted to the prisoners, who were concealing their hilarity under a wooden-faced demeanour. "In two hours you will be ready for work. Four men will be cooks—I mean, cooks. Twelve used to engines will go to the smiths-shop. The rest to the fields. The officers responsible will be for the good work and behaviour of the men. At six o'clock—not one minute in advance—you knock off and return to compound. No use to give trouble."

He pointed meaningfully in the direction of the machine-guns.

"We have wounded officers and men with us," protested Burgoyne.

Black Strogoff waved his hand deprecatingly.

"The cooks—no, cooks—they can look to the sick men," he replied. "Do you not think you will have so much to eat that four men take all their time to get it ready? If you want to know more ask the *Kittiwake* captain. You waste time," he added meaningfully. "Only one hour fifty minutes more."

The pirate lieutenant signed to two of his men to bring along the recumbent motor-cycle; then, followed by the guards, he strode to the gate, conscious of a rapidly swelling bump on both of his shins.

"Let's get a move on, lads!" exclaimed Burgoyne cheerfully. "We've got to find a place to sling our hammocks and get ourselves sorted out. We'll have to lie low for a bit until we find our feet, I'm thinking."

At first sight it seemed as if the huts were untenanted, but presently in one corner of the compound Burgoyne noticed smoke arising in a thin cloud in the still air.

"Stand easy!" he ordered. "Mr. Holmes, you might come with me and interview the people tending that fire."

As Burgoyne and the purser approached they found that the fire was burning in the centre of a roofless, three-sided canvas screen. Voices raised in heated argument could be heard above the crackling of the burning logs. The men were evidently unaware that there were new-comers to the compound.

"D'ye call that the proper way?" demanded a deep voice. "You aren't in a land of plenty, sonny, and don't you forget it."

"I've allus cut one up like this afore, sir," replied a rather subdued voice.

"Then you waste half of it," continued the first speaker with asperity. "Seeing we only get one sheep a week 'tween the lot of us, it'll have to go a jolly sight further, Sammy, or you'll be looking for another job."

Warned by a look on the face of the culprit, the deep-voiced man wheeled abruptly and saw Burgoyne and the purser standing by the open side of the screen.

"What, more of them?" he exclaimed, glancing at the marks of rank on the Third Officer's torn and dirty drill uniform. "Glad to meet you, present circumstances notwithstanding. My name's Davis, Cap'n Davis, master of the S.S. *Kittiwake*. What's your tally?"

Burgoyne told him and introduced the purser.

"Come along to my cabin," continued Captain Davis. "Sorry I can't offer you a drink 'cept water. I'm on the sick list or you wouldn't have found me. I'm usually killing time in these black-bearded rogues' smithy."

"That's where I shall probably be soon," rejoined Burgoyne. "In an hour and three-quarters, I expect. So I'm in a bit of a hurry. I thought you could put me up to a tip as to how to billet my men."

"How many?"

Alwyn told him.

"H'm. Yours was a lump of a ship. But there's plenty of room here. We were practically the first-

comers, so we had the pick, so to speak. The *Alvarado's* people took the next best in the matter of site. We don't mix much, 'cause they're Yankees who don't cotton on to Britishers much. So we keep ourselves to ourselves. Now, how will this little lot suit you?"

CHAPTER IX

The First Day on the Island

"No agents' fees," continued Captain Davis. "Situation pleasant, healthy locality, standing on high ground, &c., &c. Frequent trams to the City—I don't think."

Burgoyne regarded the collection of huts without enthusiasm. Some were already rotting. The galvanized iron roofs were rusting through in several places, while attempts had been made to repair the damage by means of powdered coral worked into a kind of cement. Hibiscus plants flourished between the buildings, tough-tendrilled creepers clung tenaciously to the woodwork, as if endeavouring to cloak the defects with verdure.

"We'll soon get the show shipshape," remarked the purser. "I've seen worse cribs in the slums of Southampton."

"Then the sooner the better, Mr. Holmes," added Alwyn briskly. "Coming along, Captain Davis?"

The ex-skipper of the *Kittiwake* shook his head.

"Sorry," he replied. "I'm deputy chief cook for our crowd. They'd raise Cain, even though I'm their Old Man, if their grub wasn't ready. See you at 'stand easy'."

"One moment, Captain," said Burgoyne. "Before you sheer off I want to thank you. Also I want to ask a question: have any of you a razor to lend?"

Captain Davis laughed heartily.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed. "I hope you don't count on keeping up appearances, young man. If you do you'll be disappointed. None of us have seen a razor, let alone handled one, for close on five weeks. Don't worry, beards grow quick enough in this climate, and you won't be long in the bristling stage."

"How about hair-cutting?" asked Burgoyne hopefully, with a view to ulterior motives.

"That was a proposition that worried us," admitted the skipper. "We didn't object very much to have to grow whiskers, but we drew the line at getting a mop like a bobbed schoolgirl. Take my tip. When your hair gets too long use a chisel, or rather get a chum to use one on your thatch. You'll find plenty of cutting tools in the carpenters' shop over yonder, but for Heaven's sake don't bring one into the compound, or Black Strogoff will give you a week in the 'Glory Hole'."

Half an hour later the passengers and crew of the *Donibristle* were in possession of their new quarters. One of the largest huts was set aside for a hospital, and into this Captain Blair, Mostyn, and the wounded seamen were carried. The steward and a deckhand named Twill (who had served an apprenticeship with an Edinburgh chemist, but, failing to pass the pharmaceutical examination, had forsaken the pestle and mortar for a life afloat) were told off to act as hospital attendants. This reduced the number of "hands" allotted to the cook-house to two: Colonel Vivian and "Young Bill".

The colonel was appointed to the post of head cook because it was a fairly "soft" job, and did not require much manual work. "Young Bill" was chosen to be his assistant because "Young Bill" was his daughter. In her new capacity Hilda Vivian would stand less chance of detection than if she had been compelled to work with the men outside the compound. It was at Holmes's suggestion that Miss Vivian had been sent to the cook-house. She rather resented it, and would have preferred a more strenuous, out-door occupation, but Burgoyne, in his official position as senior executive officer, clenched the arrangement, at the same time thanking the purser for his well-thought-out suggestion.

Ramon Porfirio had plenty of work on hand. He knew that the armed rabble that formed the crew of the *Malfilio*, and the garrison of the secret base, would not follow industrial pursuits. They were "gentlemen-in-arms", whether they were white, black, brown, or yellow, and when not engaged afloat or on guard duties they took care to live a life of ease.

The menial and industrial work fell to the pirates' captives. They were made to toil; but Porfirio was intelligent enough to realize that no man can perform a good day's work if he is half-starved. There was plenty of food on the island, so the prisoners had enough to keep them in working

trim.

Amongst the pirates there was one hard-and-fast regulation that occasioned considerable discontent, but Porfirio showed unrelenting sternness with regard to it. He absolutely barred the use or possession of intoxicating spirits; not because he was an adherent to the tenets of Pussyfoot, but because he knew the dire results of plying Malays and Chinese with strong drink. Although he, his lieutenants, and the South American section of his band were hard drinkers, they voluntarily agreed to desist from the use of alcohol, so that the Asiatics would have no cause for jealousy.

Within the two hours allowed by Black Strogoff the *Donibristle's* men, marshalled into working-gangs, went to their stated tasks. The pick of the engine-room staff, under the supervision of Angus and Withers (the latter had resumed his official status), marched off to join the other forcibly-recruited workmen in the blacksmiths' and machinists' shops. The deck-hands and the remainder of the firemen were divided into two parties. One, under Branscombe, was to proceed on board the *Donibristle* and unload her cargo; the other, under Burgoyne, was told off to haul the booty to the top of the cliff and carry it into the store-houses.

Although the work of despoiling his own ship was an irksome and depressing task, Burgoyne felt glad to a certain extent that it fell to his lot. It gave him an opportunity to study the lay of the land, which, had he been sent to toil in the workshops, would have been denied him.

Escorted by two Peruvian half-castes, armed with automatic pistols and long, heavy knives, the Third Officer's men were taken to the edge of the cliffs surrounding the spacious landlocked harbour. From this point of vantage Burgoyne could observe not only the greater part of the anchorage, but a considerable portion of the island as well.

At one time there had been a powerful electric crane built on the edge of the cliff, its longer arm projecting well beyond the almost vertical wall of rock. The electric plant had given out, but the crane still remained, rusty, but to a certain degree serviceable. It had to be worked and trained by manual power, the hauling-up gear consisting of a large winch bolted to the bed of the former electric capstan.

It took the party the best part of two hours to overhaul and prepare the flexible steel ropes and treble-sheaved blocks, while Burgoyne, keenly on the alert lest any of the men should incautiously run needless risks, kept all his attention upon the movements of the active fellows swarming on the latticed steelwork. But when all preparations were completed, and the hard-worked men had to await the first consignment of cargo from the *Donibristle*, Alwyn found an opportunity to survey his surroundings.

Except for the conical hill that he had noted on his way from the tunnel to the compound, Burgoyne found that the crane was situated on the highest part of the island, although, when not in use, it could be run back on four parallel lines until it was invisible from seaward.

He judged the island to be in the form of an irregular oblong, three miles from north to south, and two miles from east to west. On the east side lay the landlocked harbour with its outer barrier of detached granite cliffs. Judging by the colour of the water the harbour was almost uniformly deep, with the exception of a rocky patch immediately inside the entrance on the port hand, and another about a cable's length from the extreme southernmost part of the curve of the shore. A mile beyond the entrance was coral reef, but how far it extended, and in what position was the entrance to the lagoon, Burgoyne had at that time no means of ascertaining, as both on the right hand and on the left the edge of the cliff cut the skyline.

Directing his attention inland, Alwyn saw little to be of assistance to him. The barracks, workshops, stores, and a building which he concluded was a magazine all lay on a lower level than that of the top of the cliffs. He had no chance of seeing what the southern and western sides of the island were like, except that he knew they must be precipitous. Whether coral reef completely encircled the secret base remained as yet a matter for speculation.

Towards the horns of the landlocked harbour, he could make out at least half a dozen gun emplacements, constructed for weapons with disappearing mountings.

"I must make a closer acquaintance of those gentlemen," he decided. "4.7's, or 6-inchers at the very outside. Even then it must have taken the Huns a deuce of a swot to get the guns up the cliff. Hello! There's the first boatload coming ashore. I guess Branscombe's jolly sick over his job."

The *Donibristle* had been moved a hundred yards closer inshore, and was lying between the *Kittiwake* and the *Alvarado*. The *Malfilio* had left, probably in pursuit of another prey.

It somewhat puzzled Burgoyne to know why the pirates had decided to take the *Donibristle's* cargo ashore. Cases of hardware and machinery would be of little use to them on the island; but, disposed of in Vladivostok or Petropavlovsk, where they might be sent into Soviet Russia, their contents would be of almost priceless value. But, Alwyn remarked, life just now was full of surprises, most of them being very disagreeable ones, and for the time being it was best for him to knuckle under and look small until the opportunity arose to be up and doing.

Steam had just been raised on board the *Donibristle* to enable her to use her derricks, but the work of loading up the boats proceeded slowly. For one thing, the men under Branscombe's orders showed no enthusiasm for their task. Neither did Branscombe for that matter. It was quite a different proposition having to work with forced labour. The men just kept going and no more, so that they would not incur the wrath of the pirates by obviously "hanging on the slack".

It was six o'clock by the time the first boatload of cargo had been hoisted up the cliff and placed in one of the stores. The crane was run back out of sight. The various small craft used in connection with the operation were hauled up and secured by stout padlocks to a heavy chain; the oars and gear removed and placed under lock and key. This task completed, the working-parties were to a limited extent free until the following morning.

On the return journey to the compound, Burgoyne and Branscombe were able to compare notes. Neither was enthusiastic over his share in the operations, but each had made good use of his eyes with a view to subsequent events. Presently they were joined by Withers and Angus, who had finished their daily task in the shops. All were agreed that the pirates, although unspeakably lazy, were smart at their unholy trade, and left nothing undone to safeguard the secrets of the island.

"It will take some doing to get clear of this show," remarked Phil Branscombe. "You couldn't see from up there, Burgoyne, old man, but the beach is bristling with machine-guns. They've mounted a couple on the *Kittiwake*."

"And what do they propose doing with the old *Donibristle*?" asked Alwyn. "Did you find out anything?"

"A couple of greasy, gold-laced blighters came on board," replied the Fourth Officer. "Apparently they didn't think much of things, 'cause they shook their heads and jabbered rather dolefully when they examined the results of their own gun-fire."

"It seems to me that our one chance is to cut out the old ship while she has steam up," said Burgoyne. "She's sound enough below the water-line, and her engines are all right, aren't they, Angus?"

The Chief grunted in assent.

"Oh aye," he replied without enthusiasm. "But I'll tak the liberty tae inquire what ye just propose to do?"

"The *Malfilio* is away cruising," observed Burgoyne tentatively.

"Yes," agreed Branscombe, "but there are at least fifty armed ruffians left behind, to say nothing of the quick-firers and machine-guns. We'd be a scrap heap before we cleared the entrance. Hello! Stand by! We're nearly there."

The four officer's separated to rejoin their respective parties. Other batches of men, crews of the *Kittiwake* and *Alvarado*, were held up outside the compound gate, while the guards from the two block-houses counted them and compared the numbers with those who had passed out earlier in the day.

It was now night, but two powerful acetylene lamps aided the guards in their task. Nevertheless it was more than a quarter of an hour later before the *Donibristle's* men were able to be dismissed to their huts.

From each building one man was told off to fetch the evening meal from the galley. Considering the limited supplies and utensils at his command, Colonel Vivian had risen to the occasion. No doubt Hilda had been in a great measure responsible for the success of the cooking, for each man received a pint of soup, in which floated minute pieces of mutton, and a small loaf made of wheat flour and taro. This they ate in their various quarters by the dim light of a small candle in each room.

"How do you like your new job, Young Bill?" inquired Alwyn, after he had complimented her father upon the cooking arrangements.

"I rather like it," she admitted. "It's a novelty; but I don't think I'd care to be a professional cook."

"You did jolly well," said the Third Officer admiringly.

"Wait until you've eaten yours," cautioned Hilda. "Then you might have cause to regret your hasty opinion."

Burgoyne stepped back and altered the position of the candle until the light shone on the girl's face. She returned the steady gaze unmoved.

"I suppose you know," he remarked slowly, "that I am responsible, as senior executive officer, for the passengers and crew of the *Donibristle*? You do? That's good. Then I'm going to reprimand you. Why have you washed your face?"

Hilda looked astonished.

"Washed my face! Of course I had to wash, especially as I'm a cook. You wouldn't like your meals prepared with dirty hands."

"No, I wouldn't," admitted Alwyn. "But I might point out that it is not customary to touch food with one's face. Now look here—I'm serious. In future rub your cheeks and chin over with ashes, or you'll be spotted for an absolute cert. Right-o! I'm glad you see my point."

Burgoyne's next step was to visit the wounded men. He found Captain Blair considerably better. The steward reported that the skipper's temperature had fallen, and was now only one degree above normal, while his wounds showed no sign of complications. Mostyn was not so well. He recognized Burgoyne and greeted him with a faint smile.

"I'm just slacking," he remarked feebly, "but you won't want me for a while, I guess. An operator without his 'set' is like Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark. But we had a run for our money, hadn't we?"

With one exception the men appeared to be doing well; but, as the steward was cautious enough to remark, it was too early to tell how things would pan out.

"Considering the limited appliances at your disposal, Barnes, you've done topingly," declared Burgoyne.

"Glad to hear it, sir," replied the steward, but he omitted to mention that a great share of the credit was due to Twill, his assistant, whose medical knowledge gained in his student days was being put to good use.

His round completed, Burgoyne returned to the quarters allotted to the ship's officers, where he found his belated meal cold but none the less acceptable.

By that time the huts were invaded by the crews of the other captured ships. Keen to know the latest possible news of the outside world, they were anxious to fraternize.

Amongst the visitors to the officers' room was Captain Davis.

"All shipshape an' Bristol fashion, I see," he remarked cheerily. "Nothing like making the best of things. I'd like to have your cook. He must be a gem. The whiff of your grub drifted over our way and nearly drove the boys frantic with envy. Well, it's close on time to douse lights, so we won't stay."

"Douse lights?" repeated Burgoyne. "Is there any rule about that?"

"There is and there isn't," replied the skipper of the *Kittiwake*, with a grin. "If you put 'em out at nine, well and good. If you don't, often as not old Strogoff will beat up a party to hoist up ashes or some such job. So we've learnt a trick and out go the lights. Cheerio, everybody."

Ten minutes later Alwyn Burgoyne was in a deep, dreamless slumber.

CHAPTER X

Investigations

Accustomed to comparatively short hours of sleep, as are usual afloat, Burgoyne was up and about before the sun rose. In spite of the unusual stability of his hard bed—it was the first night he had slept ashore for nearly four months—his rest was none the less good on that account; but once awake he felt compelled to dress and go out.

"What's up, old man?" inquired a drowsy voice, as Branscombe lifted a tousled head from his pillow—or rather a pile of folded clothes.

"Show a leg and shine, my festive," exclaimed the Third Officer. "Come along, let's see if we can put in a swim before breakfast."

Phil assented, dressed hurriedly, and accompanied Burgoyne into the open air. By that time the sun was just showing above the edge of the cliff. The reek of wood-fires mingled with the soft, cool air. Already in three separate canvas-screened enclosures the cooks of the respective crews were busy. Alwyn wondered whether Miss Vivian was one of the energetic ones.

"Our fair passenger has weathered another day, old thing," remarked Branscombe.

"Yes," agreed Burgoyne. "That's so. Hope we'll be able to work the stunt all right."

"It won't be for want of trying on your part," rejoined Phil. "Miss Vivian told me last night that you nearly jumped down her throat 'cause she'd washed her face."

"Was she angry about it?" demanded Alwyn.

"Not a bit, only amused."

"Amused?" retorted the Third Officer. "Just like a girl. She'd never see the serious side of things. I wouldn't mind betting that she'll disobey orders, and show a sparkling healthy complexion to every slant-eyed Chink that comes into the compound."

The two chums were passing within thirty yards of the hut with the canvas annexe that formed the "galley". As they did so a grimy, laughing face with a mass of cropped hair appeared through a slit in the canvas, and a hand was waved in friendly greeting.

"You've lost your bet, old man," observed Phil. "Wonder if she heard what we were saying?"

"At any rate," rejoined Alwyn. "She's carried out orders. She probably realizes that this isn't a scene from *The Pirates of Penzance*. So far all's well, but honestly I don't like the look of things. There's something very fishy about the way that scoundrel Porfirio is treating us. This sort of conciliatory business has something behind it. I shouldn't be surprised if the blighter doesn't show himself in his true colours before very long."

The two chums walked to the extreme north-western point of the island, where further progress was barred by the sheer descent of cliff. It was hardly what Burgoyne had expected. He had hoped to find a path giving access to the shallow bay, but there was none.

Foiled of the chance of having a bathe, Burgoyne began taking stock of the surroundings. From where he stood the barrier reef enclosing the lagoon presented an unbroken wall of surf-lashed coral. There was not the suspicion of an opening. Immediately off the point the reef extended seawards for nearly a couple of miles, diverging shorewards until towards the north-eastern and south-western points of the island the lagoon narrowed to about one hundred yards. On the northern face of the island the coast was but slightly indented, the cliffs being of almost uniform height. But on the western side there was a bay of considerable width, bounded on the southern extremity by a hook-shaped spur of lofty ground, off which was an islet of about an acre in extent, and only about half the height of the nearest cliffs of the main island. The cliffs did not drop sheer into the water, but were fronted by a broad and slightly-shelving beach of glistening white sand.

As far as Burgoyne could make out, this side of the island was undefended by guns in position. Evidently the authorities responsible for the safety of the secret base deemed the frowning cliffs to be sufficient protection. An army formed up on that beach would be useless for assault, since the smooth overhanging precipices were unscalable.

Presently Alwyn, who had been silently contemplating the view, startled his companion by declaring:

"I'm going to explore that beach, old son!"

"Nonsense!" protested Phil. "The cliff's too smooth. There's not a single niche in it. You'd be smashed to a jelly for a dead cert."

"I'm not trying at present," said Burgoyne. "But I mean to some day. And by a rope."

"Rope! What rope?" asked his friend.

"We'll have to make up one from short ends," replied Alwyn. "It's easy to cut off short lengths and stow them under our clothes. Then at night, or at any odd time if it comes to that, we can make up a rope long enough to reach the beach, and strong enough to bear at least a couple of men. Then if we can get hold of some files——"

"You'll have a job, old son," interrupted Branscombe. "I was speaking to Withers about that very thing last night. There's a mighty sharp Chink in charge of the stores in the workshops, and he takes care to count every blessed thing in the tool line that's issued out, and when they are returned, he—— Hello! What's the move now?"

Breaking off in the midst of his description of Li Whong's methods, the Fourth Officer pointed in the direction of the conical hill which had attracted the chums' attention on their first journey from the tunnel to the compound.

Owing to the contour of the ground forming the prisoners' camp, the whole of the enclosed space was under direct observation, not only from the two block-houses, but from the hill as well. A few minutes before the flat top of the hill was seemingly bare. Now a tall flag-staff had been reared within the space of thirty seconds. Even as the chums looked, they saw a red-and-black flag broken out smartly at the masthead.

"What's that for, I wonder?" remarked Phil.

"Hanged if I know," replied Alwyn. "Precious little good I should imagine, since there's no wind. See anything seaward? I do, by Jove! There's a vessel nearly hull down."

"The *Malfilio* most likely," hazarded Branscombe. "Why doesn't she use wireless?"

"She does; to keep in touch with that seaplane of hers," replied Burgoyne. "But I don't fancy she would communicate by radio with her island."

"Why not? There's wireless on board the *Kittiwake* and that other craft, and they would have had ours if they hadn't blown the cabin to smithereens."

"Yes," agreed the Third Officer. "They've got the apparatus right enough, but Porfirio, although he's a rotten pirate, is no fool. If the island made use of it its position could be fixed by directional wireless, and that's what Porfirio doesn't want for obvious reasons. I think I twig the meaning of that flag. Look over there."

He pointed towards the eastern side of the island to a position slightly northward of the entrance to the tunnel. There, as on the last occasion when the *Malfilio* made the harbour, three heavy columns of smoke were rising. That was the pre-arranged signal that the pirate cruiser could make her base without fear of the island having fallen into other hands during her absence.

"She's evidently been disappointed," remarked Branscombe. "There is no other craft with her."

"Unless," added Burgoyne, "she's sunk her victim, in which case she wouldn't have had time to remove the cargo. Sorry we can't wait to see her negotiate the reefs, but if we are to have any breakfast we must be getting back. Talking of grub, old thing, reminds me: I'm going to ask Colonel Vivian to hold back at least one tin of stuff a day. It'll keep, and there's no knowing if we may want it in a hurry."

As the chums strolled back to the huts they noticed that the flagstaff on the observation hill had been lowered, while a few seconds later they heard the hum of an aerial propeller.

Scanning the sky, they spotted the *Malfilio's* seaplane flying at an immense height. Then, shutting off the motors, it volplaned steeply and vanished from sight behind the cliffs surrounding the harbour.

"That's what we want," declared Branscombe sententiously. "Pity we weren't in the Royal Air Force. Old man, we've been neglecting an important part of our education, what?"

"Yes," agreed Alwyn. "If either of us could manage that, we might be able to collar the seaplane one dark night, and be in Honolulu before daybreak. However, I still hold out hopes that we'll be able to cut out one of the small sailing craft."

"How far are we from Honolulu?" asked his companion.

"'Bout eight hundred miles, I think," was the reply. "And there's the North Equatorial Current against us, to say nothing of the Nor'east Trades. No, Honolulu's dead off as far as sailing there is concerned. I'd make for the Marshall Islands, or even the Gilbert Islands. It's farther, but one would stand a better chance. Heigh-o! We've got to find a boat first."

Breakfast was already in progress when they arrived at the camp. Directly the meal was over the men were paraded for inspection. Black Strogoff was not present for this function. He rarely was, according to Captain Davis, since he had a strong aversion to early rising. But the under-officer, Fernando, deputized for him, reading out instructions, written in peculiar English, with an accent that rendered the words almost unintelligible.

With one exception the routine of the various parties was the same as yesterday's; but four men were told off to provide fish for the *Donibristle's* crew. Later on Burgoyne found out that this was to be done every third day, the intervening days being allocated to fishing-parties drawn from the *Kittiwake's* and *Alvarado's* crews respectively.

"I'm on that, if it can be worked," decided Burgoyne. "You fellows know how to carry on with the crane."

The men expressed no surprise nor resentment at the Third Officer's decision to "put in for a soft job". Knowing Burgoyne to be a smart officer who never spared himself when there was work to be done, they guessed that he had something up his sleeve.

So when the working parties marched through the gate of the compound, one of the crew who somewhat resembled Burgoyne wore the Third Officer's drill coat and cap, while the latter in his shirt sleeves fell in with three others, and was supplied with lines and bait by an unsuspecting Chinese pirate.

After the customary precautions on the part of the guards, Burgoyne's party was taken through the tunnel to the beach. Alwyn suspected that the fishing operations would be conducted from the rocks, but to his great satisfaction the Chinaman pointed to a boat, and made signs for it to be launched.

The boat was a heavy one, being about eighteen feet in length and double-ended. There were air-tanks under the side benches, while, differing from the majority of ship's lifeboats, it had a centre-plate. Although it was fitted for masts and sails, they were not in evidence.

As the Chinaman unlocked the padlock and unrove the heavy chain securing the boat—it was the endmost one of a tier—Burgoyne pointed to the mast-clamps.

"No sailee. Makee pullee long-time," said the Chinaman. "You go longee fetchee oar one chop quick."

He pointed to a long, low building abutting the cliff. Burgoyne obeyed with alacrity. He was all out to find things, and the more he learnt of the position and contents of the various buildings, the more he felt pleased with himself.

The door of the shed was open, but a brief glance told him that it was secured, when shut, by means of an exceptionally stout hasp and padlock. Within were four of the pirates playing cards, while two more were watching the game over the others' shoulders. They took but little notice of the new-comer and continued their game.

Burgoyne made good use of his eyes as soon as they grew accustomed to the comparative darkness within the building. On each side of the shed were lockers, with brackets above them clamped to the walls. On these brackets were several oars of various sizes, boat-hooks, and light spars. Overhead, resting on the beams supporting the roof-trusses, were boats' masts and sails, some of the latter loosely furled, and others in painted canvas covers. Judging by the dust, it seemed as if this lot of gear had not been disturbed for a considerable time.

By means of the oars stacked against the wall, Burgoyne hoisted himself on the rafters, and, selecting what he took to be the masts and sails belonging to the lifeboat, he lowered them to the floor. Then, heavily laden, he returned to the beech with the utmost sang-froid.

The Chinaman was talking to one of his compatriots, and failed to notice the Third Officer's approach. By the time the former had finished his conversation, Burgoyne and his three men had already stepped the masts and were preparing to hoist the sails.

"No can do," shouted the pirate. "No makee sailee. Takee um back velly quick. Fetchee oar and makee row."

Burgoyne complied. He had gained his point. He had found out at the first attempt the proper gear belonging to the boat.

He replaced it carefully, but rammed the truck of the mast with considerable force against the end of the building.

"That'll help loosen the boarding," he soliloquized. "Now for the oars."

The pirates were still deep in their game. Deftly Alwyn placed a pair of stout ash oars by the side of the lifeboat's masts and sails, so that they would be invisible from the floor; then selecting another couple and four pairs of rowlocks he returned to the boat.

It took the united efforts of four men to run her down the beach into the water, but, Burgoyne reflected, two might perform the operation if there were rollers to assist in the launching. Then, again, there was the weight of the Chinaman, who had already clambered in and was sitting aft and holding the tiller.

Thigh-deep in water, the *Donibristle's* men waded before they scrambled on board. The oars were shipped, and with long easy strokes the boat headed towards the entrance of the harbour.

Passing within a couple of boats' lengths of their former ship, the men gave curious glances at the old *Donibristle*, on board of which Branscombe's party were unloading No. 1 hold. Standing at the head of the accommodation ladder was Black Strogoff.

"No tricks, you fellows!" he shouted. "You'll be under observation all the time." Then he added something in Chinese, and the Oriental seated aft solemnly held up an automatic pistol before returning it to the folds of his loose, blue linen jacket.

The warning was unnecessary. Burgoyne had not the slightest intention of giving his captors the slip. When he did he would take good care that his revolver, which was now hidden under the floor of his hut, would once again be nestling against his ankle.

Again luck was in his favour. The pirate in charge of the boat signed for the men to continue rowing, and steered towards the entrance. They were going to fish in the lagoon it appeared.

Although working an oar, Burgoyne frequently looked ahead over his shoulder. He noted the mass of towering rock that formed the screen to the entrance when viewed from seaward. He wondered which of the two channels was the main approach; the northern one was the broader, but the boat was taking the southern approach, which was barely fifty yards wide between the southern arm of the harbour and the inner side of the barrier island.

A quarter of a mile's steady pull brought the boat clear of the mass of rock on their port hand, and afforded an uninterrupted view seaward. Half a mile away was the coral reef, pierced by a deep channel through which at that moment the *Malfilio* was returning. She was moving slowly, but before the lifeboat had rounded the south-eastern point of the island the pirate cruiser had turned into the northern approach channel. So far so good; Burgoyne had learnt the secrets of the big-ship channel leading to the pirates' lair.

It was hot work rowing under the blazing sun, but Burgoyne was not in the least keen to stop. It was an unknown water. He was now for the first time making the acquaintance of the southern side of the island, and if the boat carried on long enough they would soon open up the western side, which Alwyn had already studied from the cliffs of the compound.

The Chinaman gave no sign to anchor. Lightly grasping the tiller, he was puffing contentedly at a pipe with a bowl about the size of a small thimble, the contents of which he replenished every five minutes or so. Alwyn found himself speculating upon what was in the mind of this inscrutable-faced Oriental. Was he gloating over the fact that he was now a taskmaster set in authority over the "foreign devils"? What a tale would Ah Ling, late sampan-man on the crowded Yang-ste-Kiang, tell should he ever return to the Flowery Land.

Presently the lifeboat entered the narrowest part of the lagoon, close to the south-western side of the island. Here the sheltered water was barely thirty yards in width. The spray from the surf-thrashed reef descended in cooling showers upon the perspiring rowers. The grating of the rowlocks and the creaking of the ash oars were drowned by the thunder of the breakers, yet in that narrow belt the boat was in perfect safety.

Half a mile farther on the reef receded from the land and disclosed a narrow passage to the open sea. Here the island terminated in a hooked promontory that Burgoyne had previously seen from the compound. Passing between the steep headland and the rounded islet that lay off it, the lifeboat entered the broad but sheltered bay that comprised the major portion of the western side of the secret base.

Ah Ling signed to the rowers to lay on their oars. The boat glided another fifty yards before the Chinaman gave the word to drop anchor.

"Now you makee catchee fishee," he said. "No catchee, no dinner: can do?"

The four white men began baiting the hooks. Burgoyne, in the midst of the operation, took the opportunity to secrete one pair of rowlocks in a little locker in the bows. Then, having cast his line overboard, he prepared to make good use of his eyes.

Interruptions in the form of bites were numerous. Weird-looking fish, most of which he failed to recognize, took the bait with avidity, and all four men were constantly hauling in the spoil and depositing it in a slimy, writhing mass on the bottom boards.

From the spot where the boat lay at anchor, the cliffs were so high that the observation hill was hidden by the beetling crags. There was a sandy beach that terminated abruptly at about a hundred yards from each of the limits of the bay. Towards the northernmost part the cliffs, although smooth and projecting towards the top, were considerably rugged at the base, a fact that Burgoyne had been unable to notice from his point of vantage on the brink of the precipice. There were one or two caves, but of what extent, and whether their floors were above high-water mark, he had no means of ascertaining. Almost immediately above the nearest cave was the end of the iron fence enclosing the compound. It projected at least six feet beyond the edge of the cliff, and, fanwise, the same distance below it.

"That'll be a bit of a nut to crack, sir," observed one of the men, reading the Third Officer's thought.

The speaker was Jasper Minalto, one of the *Donibristle's* quartermasters, a native of St. Mary's in the Scilly Islands. Tall and broad-shouldered, and with the raven locks and flashing eyes that characterize so many of the Cornish folk, his strength and agility were remarkable. In the dog-watches, during the *Donibristle's* uninterrupted runs across the Pacific, Minalto would amuse and astonish his messmates by his feats of strength. He could break a "nickel" between the tips of the thumb and forefinger of either hand; snap a piece of whipcord on the muscles of his arms or legs; but his show piece was to bend the galley poker by striking it against his bare forearm. Yet, in spite of his ponderous bulk and brute strength, he was an easy-tempered, good-natured man whose almost unlimited energy was concealed under an exterior of careless repose. He would seem to tackle a job with lazy indifference, but in nine cases out of ten he would finish it thoroughly long before others engaged upon a similar task.

"Do you think that fence would baulk you, Minalto?" asked Alwyn.

The quartermaster deliberately hauled a struggling fish into the boat as he replied:

"Say the word, sir, and I'll du it. Afore I wur nine I'd scale the fence at Star Castle, down at home, an' it wur no better nor worse than yon, I'll allow."

Minalto spoke without any indication of bragging, and Burgoyne, knowing his reputation,

realized that this was the man he wanted. When the opportunity occurred, the Scilly Islander would be the man chosen to accompany him upon the daring expedition that was already being developed in Burgoyne's mind.

At about eleven in the forenoon Ah Ling, remarking "Muchee finee; upee anchor ", announced that it was time for the fishing operations to end.

With seventy pounds of fish to their credit, the men rowed back to the harbour. Burgoyne's "catch" was the smallest, but he had obtained some very useful information which he hoped to employ to good purpose at the first favourable opportunity.

Nevertheless it came as a bit of a shock when, on emerging out of the tunnel, he was stopped by Black Strogoff.

"I gave orders for your men to go to fish," exclaimed the pirate angrily. "Your place is with the men up there."

He pointed to the cliff on which some of the *Donibristle's* crew were still laboriously hauling cargo from the beach.

"Another time," continued Strogoff—"another time you go to fish instead of work the crane, I'll have you beaten till you cannot stand. You got that? Good, an' don't you forget it."

CHAPTER XI

A Fight to a Finish

Alwyn thought he had got off lightly, but he was mistaken, for without warning Black Strogoff struck him violently in the face with his clenched fist. Luckily the British officer saw the blow coming and moved his head smartly aside. Thus the blow, which was intended for his nose, glanced from his cheek.

Strogoff had hoped to rouse Burgoyne into a state of fury, and thus find an excuse for using his automatic. He would not have dared to strike the unarmed Englishman but for the fact that there were twenty or more pirates with him.

With a tremendous effort Burgoyne kept himself under control. He had not only himself to consider but his three comrades. In fact, Jasper Minalto was on the point of taking up the cudgels on his officer's behalf, when Alwyn stopped him.

"Afraid, eh?" remarked Strogoff scornfully.

"Not in the least," replied Burgoyne in even tones that surprised himself. "If you would like a set-to, a fight with fists, I'll be happy to oblige you, or anyone else you care to mention."

"Fists, eh? Barbarian sport," sneered Black Strogoff. Then, swayed by a sudden inspiration, he shouted to one of the onlookers, a huge, hulking Peruvian.

"Ver' well," he continued. "We will have sport."

"And what happens when I knock out the man?" inquired Burgoyne.

Black Strogoff roared with laughter.

"There is no need to ask that," he replied. "He will not be the one who will be conquered. Are you ready to try?"

"I'd prefer to deal with *you*," declared Burgoyne pointedly.

The pirate lieutenant ignored the suggestion, and, beckoning to the Peruvian to approach, he gave directions to which the latter replied by grinning broadly.

Meanwhile Ramon Porfirio and his henchman Henriques had appeared upon the scene. To them Black Strogoff explained the situation. It rather appealed to them to see a lightly-built Englishman pitted against a seventeen-stone pirate. They, too, had no doubt as to the result, and the contest would amuse the crowd of ruffians. Some of the latter had evidently had some experience of boxing contests in American and British ports, for with the utmost celerity—a marked contrast to their languid movements in their leisure time—they drove in four stout posts and stretched the ropes enclosing the ring.

A more inappropriate spot could hardly be found. The ring was staked out on slightly shelving ground in the full glare of the mid-day sun. Crowding up to the posts was a steadily increasing

swarm of pirates, those living on the island being augmented by the majority of the crew of the *Malfilio*. Three hundred yards away the prisoners working the crane ceased operations to watch the spectacle of one of their officers pitted against the huge Peruvian.

Burgoyne was still in his shirt sleeves. He did not attempt to emulate the example of his opponent, who had stripped to the waist, revealing a powerfully-built frame, huge muscles, and a decided excess of fatness. The rest of his garb consisted of a pair of blue canvas trousers, with an orange scarf round the waist, and a pair of leather sea-boots.

"I wish I were in your place, sir," whispered Minalto, who had been chosen to act as Alwyn's second. "I'd just love to dust that chap. He's heavy on his pins to be sure. Keep him on the move, sir, until he tires like, an' then go for his heart."

Burgoyne nodded. He was of the same opinion himself as to the tactical programme. He realized that once the Peruvian got in a direct blow he would be whirled over the ropes like a feather.

"Two minute rounds, I suppose," inquired Alwyn.

"Certainly not," replied Black Strogoff. "A fight to a finish. Why end the fight in two minutes?"

Burgoyne explained the nature of the word "rounds", which was a stranger to the pirate lieutenant's otherwise expansive knowledge of English. But Strogoff was obdurate. To his mind the act of stopping two combatants in the heat of the fight was simply absurd.

Briskly vaulting over the ropes, Alwyn watched his opponent climb into the ring. There was no signal to commence. Like a charging bull the Peruvian rushed straight at the clean-limbed Englishman.

With a lithe, natural movement Burgoyne cleared his corner, ducked under the flail-like arm of his opponent, and, seizing the opportunity, he did what he had not intended to do at that stage of the proceedings. Before the Peruvian could turn, Burgoyne's right fist shot out and dealt the pirate a stinging blow on the left side.

It might have punished an ordinary man, but in this case it merely warned the pirate to be cautious in his movements. The blundering rush was succeeded by a slower yet ponderous attack, before which Burgoyne retreated, taking care to keep well away from the ropes. Once during the next minute did Alwyn essay to strike under the arms of his antagonist.

He certainly got home, but in return received a mighty swing of the Peruvian's left that, glancing from his shoulder, gave Burgoyne such a clout on the head that for a few seconds everything seemed to be whirling round and round. Yet he had the sense to evade the following rush, until through sheer breathlessness the pirate brought up in the centre of the ring.

The brief respite cleared the mist from Burgoyne's eyes. In wind he was comparatively fresh. If he could only succeed in playing with the huge pirate for another minute, and avoid another heavy blow, he might be able to take the offensive.

The latter, goaded by the action and encouraged by the shouts of his comrades, lurched across the ring, delivering blow after blow, all of which Alwyn avoided with comparative ease. And thus, with no hit recorded, the third minute passed.

By this time the temper of the onlookers changed. They were there to see a close fight with plenty of blood flowing. The spectacle of a big man blindly chasing a smaller and agile one round and round the ring did not appeal to them. They yelled to the Peruvian to get to business and pulverize the Englishman.

With a loud yell the South American made another frantic rush. Even as he waited Burgoyne could not help feeling amused. The shout was so typical of the half-breeds, and so utterly foreign to the British boxing-ring. If it were meant to strike terror into Burgoyne's heart the Peruvian never made a greater mistake.

Anticipating a repetition of his opponent's former tactics the half-caste guarded his left side. Quick as lightning Burgoyne slipped under his extended right arm; but even as he did so the Peruvian hacked with his leather-booted leg.

Unable to check his rush Alwyn measured his length and more upon the turf. Before he could regain his feet the half-caste was upon him, dealing windmill-like blows upon his head and shoulders, while the crowd of pirates yelled with enthusiasm. The protesting voices of Jasper Minalto and his companions were drowned in the torrent of applause. Not content with using his fists, the Peruvian was again bringing his heavy boots into play.

Regardless of the consequences, Minalto was in the act of leaping over the rope when he stopped in sheer wonderment, for the white and almost motionless, prostrate figure had sprung into activity.

It was the Peruvian's cowardly performance with his boots that gave Burgoyne his chance. In

his blind fury the half-caste slipped. Before he could recover his balance Alwyn was up and striking hard. The Peruvian's enormous hand was gripping his neck, but Burgoyne was jabbing lightning-like punches right over the fellow's heart. Like the rattle of a pneumatic hammer the Englishman's right fist pummelled his opponent's ribs, until the half-caste's clutch relaxed. Breaking away, Burgoyne summoned his remaining energies and delivered a terrific straight left full on the point of the pirate's jaw. The force of the blow lifted the huge bulk completely off the ground. Staggering and already unconscious, he toppled backward over the ropes into the midst of the crowd of spectators.

Jasper Minalto was just in time to catch Alwyn in his arms. Without any attempt being made to stop him the Scilly Islander carried off the insensible victor to the compound, and placed him in his hut.

Three hours later Burgoyne recovered consciousness. His head and face had come off comparatively lightly, but his ribs were black and blue, his left shoulder was laid open almost to the bone, while his shins were raw through violent contact with the Peruvian's boots.

Burgoyne was alone. The working day had not yet ended. Someone had patched him up. Cautious investigation on his part resulted in the knowledge that none of his limbs was broken, because they were not in splints, but he ached in every limb, and his tongue, hot and parched, seemed too big for his mouth.

"I'm a downright ass," he soliloquized. "Instead of pretending to knuckle under and take advantage of what I've seen, I've got myself laid out. *Cui bono?* Dashed if I know!"

But the fight, purposeless as it appeared to Burgoyne, had its good results. The Peruvian had not only been knocked out, but his eyesight was permanently impaired. That in itself was nothing to gloat over. When, later on, Alwyn did learn of the extent of the damage he had inflicted he felt sorry for the man. It was not his quarrel. He had been practically ordered to fight on Black Strogoff's behalf, and although he was a bad sportsman, judged by British ideas, he had been well punished by being knocked out.

But the matter did not end there. The luckless Peruvian had been by far and away the best gun-layer of the *Malfilio's* complement. He was now useless and could not be replaced by an equally competent man, and consequently Ramon Porfirio was in a towering rage with Black Strogoff for having been the means of depriving him of a most useful man. Henriques sided with his chief. For some time past no love had been lost between the two pirate lieutenants, and now the rift threatened to develop into an impassable abyss.

CHAPTER XII

Plans

Burgoyne's solitary meditations were interrupted by the appearance of the purser and Barnes the steward, the latter carrying a tin pannikin of lime juice.

"That's better, Mr. Burgoyne," exclaimed Holmes, seeing that the patient had recovered consciousness. "My word, that was some fight by all accounts. You didn't half sock the blighter."

Alwyn drank deeply before replying:

"S'pose it was," he admitted. "Goodness only knows why I did take the fellow on, though. How long shall I have to stop here, do you think?"

"Matter of a couple of days," replied the purser. "Pity you didn't settle that chap Strogoff. He didn't attend afternoon parade, thank goodness, but he was fooling around all the blessed morning, finding fault with things."

Burgoyne raised himself on one elbow. The movement sent a thrill of pain all over his body.

"He didn't see Miss Vivian, I hope?" he asked anxiously.

"Young Bill? No. Young Bill was kept in the background, so to speak. Hello! Here come the others. Hadn't any idea it was knocking-off time."

Branscombe grinned sympathetically when he saw his chum.

"You low-down bruiser!" he exclaimed. "Did they teach you that in the navy?"

"Partly," admitted Alwyn. "I'm afraid I departed somewhat from the recognized canons of the ring towards the end. Had to, or I mightn't have been here now. Well, any news?"

Phil divested himself of his soiled patrol coat, and revealed the fact that he had encompassed his waist with an uncut length of about ten fathoms of inch-and-a-half manila rope.

"A slight contribution to the general fund, eh, what, Withers?"

The Second Engineer produced his share of the day's plunder; one hack-saw blade and four pieces of files each about three inches in length.

"I had Satan's own job to get them," he explained. "The hack-saw blade I managed by a sort of three-card trick, and old Li Whong never twigged it. I spend most of the time in the workshop breaking off the tips of eighteen-inch files and rounding off the jagged edges. Li issued twenty-four out to the men, and twenty-four were returned; but he didn't notice that, instead of eight eighteen-inch and ten fourteen-inch, he received four eighteens and fourteen fourteens. How's that, umpire?"

"Excellent," conceded Burgoyne.

"'Spouse you haven't formed a satisfactory programme?" inquired Branscombe. "Hardly to be expected from a battered old prize-fighter like you."

"I have," replied Alwyn, "subject to alterations. In the first place, any idea of surprising the guard must be scrapped. Although there are more prisoners than guards when the *Malfilio* is away, there's too much alertness on the part of the pirates to warrant success. We'd be bowled over like rabbits, especially if they caught us out in the open with those machine-guns. What I propose doing is to select a small crew—unfortunately I can't take it on, as I'm senior man here—cut out one of the boats, provision her, and make a dash for the Marshall Islands."

"That's all very fine," admitted Phil, after Alwyn had explained his movements earlier in the day "Collaring the boat seems feasible; but how about provisioning her? We can't lug fifteen days' grub down through that tunnel and stow it away. And there's fresh water to be taken into account. We've no barricoes. Even if we had, how could we get, say, thirty gallons, or nearly three hundredweight of water to the boat?"

"That is a proposition," admitted Burgoyne thoughtfully. "Ten gallons ought to be sufficient, though. We must devise some way of getting hold of a barrel or two. Now as regards provisioning the boat. Has anyone a pencil?"

Withers supplied the required article.

"Phew!" ejaculated Burgoyne. "I feel like one of those 'Every Picture tells a Story' advertisements we used to see in the papers at home. You fellows carry on with your grub while I draw a rough chart of the island. I don't think it will be very much out."

In spite of several interruptions, and at the cost of considerable physical discomfort, Burgoyne completed the plan.

"Now," he continued, "there's a free passage right round the island inside the reef. Here's our compound; there's where the fence ends on the western side. Right underneath is a cave. If that won't suit, probably the others will. What's to prevent us going down by means of a rope and exploring? If everything's O.K. we can lower our reserve stock of provisions, and hide the stuff in the cave until it's wanted. Then, when opportunity serves, the crew told off to cut out the lifeboat will run her round one dark night, provision, and be more than hull down before dawn. If they fall in with a ship, so much the better. If not, they can make the Marshall Islands, and in less than a month there ought to be half a dozen cruisers off the island."

"Sounds all right," admitted Branscombe. "But how about a course?"

"I've a compass," replied Alwyn. "It's only a pocket one, and I don't know what the variation and deviation are. But steer due south and one can't go wrong. Whoever goes in charge of the boat takes the compass."

"Who will?" asked Withers.

"Branscombe," replied the Third Officer. "At least, he's down for the job. I can't go, unfortunately, but Phil is the only other officer available who has had experience in boat-sailing and navigation."

"Thanks, old son!" exclaimed Phil.

"You haven't gone yet, dear old thing," rejoined Burgoyne. "However, there's no harm in thinking things out. Another point is the crew. One hand will be sufficient. I would suggest that Scilly Islander, Minalto."

"A decent sort," conceded Branscombe.

"Yes," resumed Alwyn. "He started boat-sailing early in life. It's a sort of instinct with the Scilly Islanders, since they can't go a couple of miles in a straight line without having to make use of a boat. He's a bit slow on the up-take, but he can interpret an order intelligently. He's got initiative,

and doesn't hang on to the slack——"

"My child!" ejaculated Withers, rolling his eyes. "Why this thusness?"

"You'd know quick enough if I could lay hold of you," declared Burgoyne with mock severity. "Now, buzz off, if you don't mind. I have some sort of idea that my head's aching."

Burgoyne did not get up on the following day, nor on the next. Before he was fit to resume control a week had passed. Phil Branscombe "carried on" for him, and the forced labour proceeded as leisurely as the pirate crew permitted.

As far as the occupants of the compound were concerned, Black Strogoff was a back number. Not since Burgoyne's encounter with the Peruvian had he put in an appearance. One result of the quarrel between Ramon Porfirio and Strogoff was the latter's transference to the *Malfilio*, where he was less likely to cause trouble than if left to influence a certain section of the pirates ashore. Fernando, Strogoff's understudy, was undoubtedly a brute and lacked the intelligence of the Russo-German, and the various members of the crews of the three captured ships soon found that Fernando could be easily hoodwinked.

During the week in which Burgoyne was detained within the compound, he was kept well in touch with the progress of events. The *Malfilio* during that period remained in harbour. Withers, who had been sent on board the cruiser to assist in executing repairs reported that her machinery was far from being in an efficient state, and that during her last trip to sea she had burst the main steam-pipe of her starboard engine. What had transpired during that short cruise he was unable to ascertain; but it was evident that Ramon Porfirio was in a very "jumpy" state.

In point of fact, the *Malfilio* was overhauling an oil-tanker when the steam-pipe gave out. Consequently the pursued vessel got away; but whether she had any suspicion of the nature of the cruiser was a matter for doubt in the pirate captain's mind. If she had, then her escape would mean that the world would know of the existence of a pirate craft in the North Pacific, and in due time things would be made far too hot for Señor Ramon Porfirio.

Alwyn saw a good deal of Young Bill during his convalescence. The girl's visits brought balm to his mind, but he would not have felt quite so elated had he known that Hilda impartially distributed her favours between all the "sick bay" cases amongst the *Donibristle's* crew.

"I suppose you are properly fed up, being cooped on this island?" asked Burgoyne.

"Not at all," replied Miss Vivian. "It's rather exciting, especially wondering how we are going to get out of it. If things get no worse there's not much to complain about. It was very hard losing Mother, and both Dad and I feel the loss very much. But apart from that there's nothing much to worry about—except carrying out your orders, sir," she added, with an enigmatical smile.

"I'm glad you did that," said Alwyn.

"Supposing I had refused to wear these clothes, and insisted upon keeping my face clean? As it is, I renew my charcoal powder three times a day."

"Had you refused I should have taken steps to compel you," declared Burgoyne firmly.

"I don't see how," remarked Hilda.

"It is unnecessary to give details," said Alwyn, his face growing stern. "I can tell you this; if those ruffians had found out your sex you would have been shot."

"Shot?" repeated the girl, unable to conceal her astonishment. "By whom?"

"I should have done it," was Burgoyne's startling reply. "With the full consent of your father. If you wish to know why, ask him."

Hilda Vivian changed the subject abruptly. Nor did Burgoyne ever have to refer to the matter again. It was, he reflected, a brutally drastic step to take, but it had the desired result. The girl realized that it was not an idle masquerade, but the shadow of a great peril, that compelled her to assume the rôle of ship's boy.

A surprise awaited Alwyn when he was able to resume duty. Captain Blair had made a rapid recovery, and was now able to resume his interrupted control of the *Donibristle's* officers and crew to the extent permitted by Señor Ramon Porfirio and company.

Alwyn accepted the change most cheerfully. Although for certain reasons he was loth to relinquish many of his responsibilities, he was now left with a relatively free hand. He could pursue his investigations with less fear of inside interruptions, since any question of routine would be made direct to the skipper. He would also be able to take command of the lifeboat, if and when she started on her long voyage to the Marshall Islands. It was rather rough luck on Branscombe, he reflected, being done out of that part of the excitement, but there was no question as to who was the better man at handling a small sailing-boat.

At the first opportunity Burgoyne broached the subject to Captain Blair. The Old Man listened

carefully to the Third Officer's recital, then, to the latter's utter astonishment he said:

"I'm sorry, Mr. Burgoyne, but I refuse to give you or anyone else permission to make the attempt."

CHAPTER XIII

"Getting on with It"

For some moments Burgoyne was completely dumbfounded. He could form no satisfactory reason for the Old Man's emphatic decision, unless Captain Blair was labouring under a delusion owing to a hitherto unsuspected mental trouble.

It seemed incredible that Alwyn's carefully-thought-out plans and careful preparations (although the latter were only in the initial stages) should have been drastically turned down, especially as they had met with the approval and gained the co-operation of every other surviving officer of the *Donibristle*.

Burgoyne uttered no word of protest. It was not for him to reason why—at least audibly. His sense of duty—impressed upon him from his early days of Osborne—had taught him to receive and carry out orders unquestioningly. So he held his peace and waited.

"I suppose you'd like my reasons for the decision, Mr. Burgoyne?" asked the Old Man.

"I would, sir, if you have no objection."

"Not in the least," rejoined the skipper. "The chief one is that there is no immediate necessity for you to take this step. As things go we have nothing much to complain about." ("Exactly what Miss Vivian said," thought the Third Officer.) "It is reasonable to assume that Porfirio cannot carry on for long, and release will come possibly long before you could reach the Marshall Islands. It's a tremendous voyage for an open boat, and the results gained, if any, would not justify the risk. Then, again, there's the question of reprisals. The pirates would miss the boat and draw perfectly logical conclusions. They would revenge themselves on those who would be still in their power, even to the extent of committing cold-blooded murder. No doubt you think I'm a bit in a blue funk, but I have the advantage of years, and that has taught me to look ahead and not wait till I see a rock under my bows. However, I don't want to moralize. I hope you see my point?"

"Yes, sir," replied Alwyn.

"However," continued the Old Man briskly, "there's no reason why you shouldn't carry on with your preparations. If occasion should arise for someone to leave the island in a hurry, it is as well to be ready for the emergency. But, until occasion does arise, it is folly to precipitate matters, and deliberately seek the path of a typhoon when we are bowling along before a steady breeze. By the by, what has that wash-out Miles been doing?"

"He was placed in Mr. Branscombe's party working on board the *Donibristle*, sir."

"H'm. I'll tell Branscombe to keep a pretty sharp eye on him. Captain Davis informs me that Miles seems rather fond of that ruffian Strogoff."

"Is that so?" remarked Alwyn. "I was under the impression that Strogoff was sent on board the *Malfilio*."

"He was aboard the old *Donibristle* yesterday, at any rate," declared the skipper. "Miles knows about Miss Vivian, and, although I cannot say definitely, I think he's the sort of man who wouldn't hesitate to give the show away if he could make his own case good."

The seriousness of Captain Blair's words took Burgoyne aback. The Third Officer remembered that little incident of the chocolate. It was but a straw that showed the direction of the wind. Miles had proved himself to be a man of no moral fibre. To what depths would he descend to obtain consideration from the villainous Strogoff?

"That is why you wanted the boat held in readiness, sir," he asked. "To remove Miss Vivian from the island in the event of discovery?"

"You've hit it, Mr. Burgoyne. The sooner the preparations are completed the better; but, of course, there may be no necessity for them. I quite agree with you that Minalto is the right man for the job, with you in charge of the boat."

"And Colonel Vivian."

"He won't be going," declared the skipper. "I pointed out to him the almost unsurmountable disadvantages of having a cripple in the boat. His health, too, isn't at all good. He quite saw the force of my contention."

"We are speaking, sir, as if the lifeboat were already in our possession."

"Aye," rejoined the Old Man. "It's a rough proposition, Mr. Burgoyne, but from what you've told me the task is not beyond your ingenuity."

That night Burgoyne carefully revised the altered situation. The perplexing factor in the case was the uncertainty of the time when the boat might be required. He could not completely grasp the meaning of Captain Blair's decision to refrain from action until Miss Vivian was in immediate danger. It was obvious that the boat must be seized, taken to the western side of the harbour, and provisioned all within a few hours, and be out of sight before dawn. There wasn't the faintest hope of being able to conceal the boat for several days prior to the dash for freedom. The mere fact that the lifeboat had been removed from the beach would be sufficient to put the pirates on the qui vive.

And, again, although a fair amount of provisions had been set aside to victual the boat, nothing had yet been done to hide them in the cave. Neither had any of the people in the secret been able to obtain a receptacle of any description to carry water, and fresh water was indispensable for the voyage.

Nor had the cave been explored. Branscombe had collected enough rope to make a three-inch hawser of two hundred and fifty feet in length, more than sufficient to reach from the top of the cliff to the beach, but the actual descent had not yet been attempted.

Clearly a stupendous task confronted Burgoyne. Much had been accomplished, but more remained to be done in secrecy and with dispatch.

On the following morning Burgoyne rejoined his working-party. Fernando, the half-caste who had succeeded Black Strogoff as overseer-in-chief to the prisoners, nodded and made some remark. The words being Spanish, Alwyn failed to understand them, but evidently they were of a complimentary nature.

Before the working-party arrived upon the scene of operations, one of the men who had done a good deal of voyaging on the South American coast explained that Señor Fernando was delighted that Perez —Burgoyne's late opponent—had been vanquished. There was no love lost between Fernando and the late leading gun-layer of the *Malfilio*.

The work of unloading the *Donibristle's* cargo had been completed, but most of her stores were taken on board the *Kittiwake*. It was obviously the intention of the pirates to keep the latter vessel in a seaworthy condition, since she had not been stripped as in the case of the other prizes. In addition, a wireless operator, a German with a knowledge of four or five languages, was constantly on duty on board the *Kittiwake*. He merely "caught" and reported radios from vessels within range of the apparatus, making no attempt to transmit, lest the source of origin might be located.

Instead of being ordered to man the crane, Burgoyne's party were marched through the tunnel down to the beach. Here they "stood easy", while a number of the *Malfilio's* crew launched and loaded a boat, placing a number of explosive charges into the stern-sheets. The pirates then pushed off and made for the *Donibristle*.

Presently the reason for the unusual "stand easy" became apparent. Pablo Henriques, being unable to give intelligible orders in English, had reluctantly been compelled to bring Black Strogoff upon the scene.

For the next three hours the captives were kept hard at it, laying out anchors in the centre of the deep channel, until a continuous line of warping buoys was laid from the *Donibristle's* berth to the entrance to the enclosed harbour. It was heavy and exacting work handling those anchors, weighing anything between five and nine hundredweight. A hitch in the operations, or the slightest lubberly work, might easily result in the capsizing of one of the boats, and more than likely the loss of several of her crew.

This task completed, the men expected a respite. They got none. Instead, Black Strogoff ordered them to take other anchors and place them on either side of the narrow channel turning southward between the island and the long narrow mass of rock that protected the entrance to the harbour.

Fortunately the water inside the lagoon was as smooth as a mill-pond, and by "knocking-off time" six pairs of anchors were in position, "backed" by pickets and crowbars. Each pair of anchors was connected by cables, buoyed in the centre of the span.

Still "in the dark" as to the reason for this strenuous labour, Burgoyne returned with his party to the compound. Three of the men walked back with severe physical discomfort, apparently suffering from what is popularly known as a stiff knee. Within five minutes after they were dismissed they were all right again—and Burgoyne had added three useful crow-bars to the

steadily accumulating stock.

Literally speaking, Burgoyne had returned empty-handed. Metaphorically he had not; for, strapped to the small of his back was a flat pulley of the "snatch-block" type, with a sheave capable of taking a three-inch rope.

All this was attended by great risk to the parties concerned. Although the systematic search to which the prisoners were at first subjected had been discontinued, the pirate guards occasionally went to the length of ordering some of the captives aside; but fortunately the greatly desired articles were smuggled into the compound without detection.

During the day Captain Blair had not been idle. Although "fit for duty" he had remained in the compound with the idea of obtaining a greatly-needed water-barrel.

Directly the working-parties had cleared off, the Old Man, armed with an axe that had been issued to the "galley", made his way to the spring that supplied the prisoners with fresh water. There was not a large supply, although the flow was fairly constant, and in order to ensure that a sufficient quantity should always be on hand, a large cask with the head knocked off had been sunk in the sand to catch the trickle of water from the spring.

Cautiously, so as not permanently to injure the cask, Captain Blair removed three of the hoops and "started" some of the closely-fitting staves. Then, wedging the openings with pebbles, he brought the "chine" back into position and replaced the chine-hoop. When the sand was replaced around the barrel, it appeared to be intact though utterly leaky.

His next step was to go to the wicket-gate and report the lack of fresh water to Señor Fernando.

The latter inspected the faulty cask, and by a smattering of English, aided by signs, told the skipper to get another cask from the cooperage.

Delighted with the way in which his little "stunt" was panning out, Captain Blair ordered the steward and Twill to accompany him. Escorted by Fernando the three men passed through the wicket-gate without difficulty, and proceeded to the store where spare casks and barricoes were kept.

The door of the cooperage was open, as was the case with most buildings containing articles of bulk and of no great value, although everything was carefully locked after working hours. Fernando was smoking the inevitable cigarette, and, since Ramon Porfirio's instructions against smoking in wooden buildings were very exact, he remained outside.

It did not take the Old Man long to choose a suitable cask. Into it he placed two barricoes, each capable of holding twelve gallons of water, and jammed them tightly against the bottom of the cask. The head of the latter was then deftly replaced and Captain Blair and his two assistants rolled their prize into the open.

With perspiration oozing from every pore, Barnes and Twill propelled the cask to the gate of the compound. Here Fernando left them, and the guard, taking it for granted that no search was necessary, since the prisoners were escorted, made no attempt to examine the seemingly empty barrel.

Under the lee of the cook-house the skipper removed the barricoes and carried them into his quarters. An hour later the prisoner's water-supply was again normal.

But the Old Man's triumph was short-lived. The unexpected and dramatic appearance of the Chinese store-house man, Li Whong, accompanied by a couple of armed pirates, completely took the wind out of his sails.

In pidgin English Li forcibly demanded the return of the barricoes. Vainly Captain Blair tried to explain that he had taken the water-barrels with the idea of saving numerous journeys to the spring.

The Old Man had to surrender his hard won trophies, and received an admonitory kick from the Chink into the bargain. No wonder, then, he was "fed up to the back teeth" when Burgoyne returned.

"Rough luck, sir," sympathized Alwyn. "Wonder how that Chink got wind of it?"

"Dashed if I know," replied Captain Blair. "It only shows we'll have to be most careful. Do you think it safe to carry out your investigations to-night?"

"I think so, sir," said Burgoyne. "For one thing, there's no moon and the tide's favourable."

"The tide!" exclaimed the Old Man. "What's the tide got to do with it? There's always a beach above high-water mark down there."

"Quite so, sir," agreed the Third Officer. "But I want to explore the whole extent of the bay to see if there's a practicable means of ascent on the other side of the fence. As the tide's falling, I

can keep below high-water mark, and the flood tide will wipe out my footprints."

"That didn't occur to me," admitted Captain Blair. "Well, good luck, and may you fare better than I did."

CHAPTER XIV

The Vigil on the Cliffs

At ten o'clock, having snatched two hours of sound sleep, Burgoyne was awakened by Phil Branscombe and Withers.

"What's it like outside?" was Alwyn's first question.

"Quiet," replied Phil. "What little wind there is is off shore for us, an' there's just about enough starlight. I've got the pickets and the block, Withers has the rope, and Minalto and Twill are outside."

Although, with one exception, every officer, passenger and man of the *Donibristle* knew of what was about to take place, and offers of assistance had simply poured in, Burgoyne had been compelled to limit the exploring-party to five. It was the absolute maximum and minimum, since two were required to descend the cliff, and three to man the rope by which the others were to be lowered and hauled up again.

The only one not in the secret was the Canuk, Miles. One night recently he had not been in the compound, and, putting two and two together, Captain Blair had concluded that the fellow was in touch with one section of the pirate crew. On that occasion the prisoners had been numbered off both in leaving and returning to the compound, and although one was missing, the fact did not appear to trouble the custodians of the gate. When Captain Blair taxed the delinquent, and demanded an explanation, Miles pitched in a plausible yarn to the effect that he had been working down below on board the *Donibristle*, and had failed to hear the signal for the working-parties to go ashore. Then, afraid of being found on board by the pirates, he had lain low till the following day.

The Old Man accepted the statement without comment, but he fully expected that any day the "drummer" would openly join the pirates.

To prevent him from "walking in his sleep" and stumbling across the men working on the edge of the cliff, Miles was now closely watched by three of the *Donibristle's* crew, with instructions from the Old Man that if the fellow attempted to leave his hut before daybreak he was to be forcibly detained.

"I can't do more simply on suspicion," the skipper confided to Burgoyne. "If I were sure that the miserable blighter was playing a dirty trick, over the cliff he'd go one dark night, or my name's not Roger Blair."

In single file and with the utmost caution the five adventurers made their way to the cliff immediately above the caves that Burgoyne had noticed during the fishing expedition. From the huts where the pirates lived when ashore came the sounds of boisterous revelry. Not a light was visible on the island, but the silhouette of the look-out hill stood out sharply against the starry sky. There were alert men stationed on that lofty perch, but whether they could discern the five figures working silently on the edge of the cliff was extremely doubtful, since the latter did not cut the sky-line. Nor could the pirates on the hill command the expanse of beach below the cliff.

Muffling the head of one of the crow-bars with a piece of wet canvas Jasper Minalto drove the iron rod deeply into the ground. The operation was anxiously watched by the rest, fearful lest even the dull thuds of the wood that served as a maul would betray their presence.

"All right, so far," declared Alwyn. "Carry on, Minalto."

A second crow-bar was driven home at about a foot from the first and parallel with the edge of the cliff. Between these and about six inches from the ground the third bar was lashed horizontally. Under the fork thus formed a stout beam was thrust, until its end projected three feet into space, with fifteen feet left resting on the turf. The beam had been removed under cover of darkness from one of the tumble-down huts, and must needs be replaced before dawn.

To the outward end of the projecting piece of timber the snatch-block had been securely strapped. Then the end of the coil of rope was pressed over the sheave, a "bowline on the bight" having been made to accommodate the descending man.

"All ready, I think," said Burgoyne quietly. "Stand by, and when I'm ready, lower away

handsomely."

With four men holding on to the rope the Third Officer slipped into the bowline. The rope ran slowly through the well-oiled block, and Alwyn vanished from sight.

It was an eerie sensation dangling at the end of a rope over a cliff more than two hundred feet high. The darkness destroyed the idea of distance, but the descent was none the less hazardous on that account. Although every care had been taken in the surreptitious making of the rope, and every precaution taken to test it, there might be a weak spot that had escaped detection.

Almost from the first of the descent the rope began to turn until he was spinning giddily; then, as the length of rope increased, a swaying motion was additionally imparted, until several times Alwyn bumped heavily against the face of the cliff. He was thus able to check the rotary motion at the expense of sundry and various bruises.

"By Jove," he soliloquized, in the midst of this human punch-ball performance, "it'll be rough on Young Bill if we ever have to lower her down. It would scare her stiff right away."

The actual descent took four minutes. To Burgoyne it seemed much longer, and it was with considerable relief that he felt his feet touch the soft sand, and was able to extricate his cramped and bruised frame from the embraces of the bowline.

There was no need to shout to the others to "vast paying out!" The release of the tension on the rope told them that the descent was accomplished. Then, like a phantom, the bowline vanished as the helpers hauled the rope to the top of the cliff. Within five minutes Jasper Minalto joined Burgoyne on the beach. Since there was the possibility of the rope's shortening with the release of his weight, and contracting by the heavy dew, he took the precaution of bending in a length of light line and weighting it with a lump of coral.

Burgoyne was not likely to fail through lack of precaution or by neglecting to take proper steps to facilitate his return.

The cave exceeded the Third Officer's expectations. It was for the most part dry, the floor being above high-water mark, and the undisturbed sand at its mouth pointed to the fact that a long time had elapsed since human feet had trodden it. Darkness prevented a minute examination, and it was only by a sense of touch that the two men were able to make their investigations.

About eighty feet in length, and with a gradually shelving floor, the cave was less than five feet in height at its entrance, but soon increased until Minalto was unable to touch the roof even with his enormous reach. In width it averaged about twelve feet when half a dozen paces inside its mouth.

There was water, too. Eagerly Burgoyne groped for and found the steady trickle. Holding his hands cup-fashion he filled his palms with water and held the liquid to his lips.

"Fresh!" he exclaimed to his companion. "We're in luck this time."

"But we've nothin' in the barrel line for tu put et in," added Jasper.

"Not even a petrol tin," added Alwyn. "Ever drunk water out of a petrol tin, Minalto?"

The Scilly Islander shook his head.

"Leave ut tu you, sir," he replied. "I've a-drunk water wi' three inches o' paraffin on top of ut on the West Coast—Accra way. That wur enough for I."

Gently jerking the rope, as a signal to Branscombe for the stock of emergency rations to be sent down, Burgoyne gave his companion instructions to bury the stuff in the cave. Leaving Minalto to carry on, the Third Officer walked down to the water's edge, then, turning abruptly to the left, followed the line of wet sand left by the receding tide.

At every possible spot where the cliff might be scalable he approached the base of the rocks, always without the desired result. Carefully obliterating his footprints on the dry sand, he continued his way until farther progress was barred by the abrupt ending of the beach at a point beyond which the cliff rose sheer from the lagoon.

The secret base was an unscalable plateau with only one approach—except by means of a rope—and that was the carefully-guarded tunnel, where more than likely (although Burgoyne was not certain on that point) the double portcullis was lowered every night.

Disappointed but by no means disheartened Burgoyne returned to the cave, where Jasper had completed his task and was awaiting him. To him Alwyn related the results of his investigations.

"Lawks!" exclaimed Minalto. "You can swim, can't you, sir? What's wrong with the reef? Can't us swim off to 'en and walk round to t' harbour? I'd do it now, on my head like, if you're in no particular hurry."

"Sharks?" queried Alwyn.

"Sharks!" repeated Jasper. "Ain't seen none since I've bin on the island, an' many's the time I've watched the water an' within' I could have a swim. What d'ye say, sir. Might I go?"

Burgoyne was fired by the man's enthusiasm. It was now midnight. Allowing three hours to cover a distance of six or seven miles, Minalto ought with luck to be back well before four. This would give the party an hour and a half before dawn in which to "pack up", replace gear, remove all traces of the night's work, and regain their quarters.

"All right," agreed the Third Officer. "I'll come with you as far as the end of the bay. Wish I could do the whole thing, only the others would be scared stiff and think we'd done ourselves in. When I return I'll get myself hauled up and wait on the top of the cliff. You know the signal? Right, and don't forget to wipe out your footprints. The tide will be at quarter flood on your return."

With many other cautions and suggestions, Burgoyne accompanied the stout-hearted seaman to a spot where the reef approached to within three hundred yards of the shore.

Taking off his shoes, and slinging them round his neck, Minalto waded waist-deep into the water and struck out for the line of milk-white foam that marked the reef. Burgoyne remained at the edge of the lagoon until the phosphorescent swirl that marked the swimmer's progress was merged into the darkness. He had no indication that Minalto had reached the reef, for his white-clad form would be indistinguishable against the ever-breaking wall of foam.

Retracing his way to the cave Burgoyne slipped into the bowline and tugged three times at the rope. The signal was promptly answered, and the swaying, roundabout ascent commenced.

"Well?" inquired Branscombe anxiously, when Alwyn landed safely on the top of the cliff.

"All serene," replied the Third Officer, a little breathlessly. "We'll have to stand by for a few hours. Minalto has gone on a voyage of exploration. That chap gave me a thundering good idea. I was getting a bit tied up in knots when I found there was no way up from the beach, so he suggested walking along the reef—and he's gone and done it," he added vernacularly.

Dispatching Twill to inform Captain Blair of the alteration of plans, so that the Old Man would not be unduly anxious about their failure to return at the suggested time, the three officers prepared to make the best of their long vigil. They took fifteen minutes' shifts to tend the rope, so that should Minalto return before they expected there would be no delay in receiving his signal and hauling him up.

"Can you get hold of another length of signal halyard, Phil?" asked Alwyn. "Another three hundred feet of it."

"I dare say," replied Branscombe. "I'll have a jolly good shot at getting it, anyway. What's the scheme?"

Burgoyne rubbed his aching shoulders.

"If you'd been barged into the cliff umpteen times, old son, you'd know," he declared grimly. "We want a guide-line, stretched taut and about eighteen inches inside the rope. That'll prevent anyone being bumped, and also spare them the luxury of an impromptu merry-go-round. We'll have to lower Young Bill, and we may as well make things as comfortable as possible for her."

"Quite so," agreed Phil. "I'll get some line tomorrow, even if it makes my figure look like that of a portly alderman. It wouldn't be a bad idea either to get hold of some spare canvas. You'll want some sort of awning or tent for the boat, and it will come in handy. For one thing, we can wrap Miss Vivian up in it when we lower her."

"What for?" asked Withers.

"To protect her in case any loose stones fall from the cliff," explained Branscombe. "'Sides, if she's covered up she won't be quite so frightened when she's being lowered. At least, I shouldn't think so."

For some minutes silence reigned, save for the ever-present dull rumble of the surf. Then Withers apparently without any reason, began chuckling to himself.

"What is it?" asked Phil.

"What's the joke," added Alwyn. "Out with it."

"Nothing much," replied Withers. "Only a reminiscence. This cliff recalled it."

He paused, his eyes fixed seaward.

"Let's have it, old son," prompted Branscombe.

"I thought I saw a vessel's masthead light out there," declared the Second Engineer. "Must have been mistaken.... The yarn? Oh, it was merely an incident. It was in '14, just after war broke

out. I was on a collier awaiting orders at Whitby. Everyone was on thorns over the spy scare. Well, one night, there was a report that lights were flashing on the cliff, and a crowd of fellows went off to investigate. Having nothing better to do that evening, I went too. Sure enough there were lights about every half minute. About two miles from Whitby we ran full tilt into a couple of men striking matches, so they were promptly collared."

The narrator paused and looked seaward again.

"What happened?" asked Burgoyne.

"Nothing—they were released," replied Withers.

"I can't see anything funny in that," remarked Phil.

"Well, it was funny—and pathetic, too," explained Withers. "They were deaf mutes. One lived in a small cottage near Kettleness, and the other's home was in York. They had missed the last train for Kettleness and were walking along the cliff path to Whitby. Their only means of communicating with each other was by lip-reading, and since it was dark they stopped and struck matches whenever they wanted to converse. They had used up three boxes of matches by the time we came up. Poor blighters! As likely as not they didn't know there was a war on; if they did it was obvious they hadn't heard about the regulations concerning coastwise lights. But, by Jove! surely those are vessel's steaming lights?"

"It is, by smoke!" exclaimed Burgoyne. "A steamer going south. I can just distinguish her port light."

"The *Malfilio* perhaps?" suggested Branscombe.

"Not she," declared Withers. "That steam pipe of hers will take at least two days more before it's patched up."

"I can see her green, now," announced Alwyn "She's altering course. If she holds on she'll pile herself upon the reef."

Helpless to warn the on-coming vessel—for even had the three officers been provided with means of signalling they would have incurred heavy penalties by the pirates and the wrecking of all the formers' carefully laid plans—the watchers on the cliff awaited events.

The vessel was now steaming dead slow—at least she took an unconscionable time in approaching. That was in her favour. It might give the look-outs the opportunity to hear the roar of the surf; while, even if she did strike, and were held by the coral reef, she would not be likely to sustain serious damage.

Suddenly a dazzling glare leapt from the vessel and the giant beam of a searchlight swept the island. From where the three officers lay prone on the grass they could see the rim of the cliff outlined in silver. The crest of the Observation Hill was bathed in the electric gleams, but elsewhere, owing to the depression towards the centre of the plateau, the island was in darkness. So carefully chosen was the site of the various buildings that nowhere from seaward could they be visible.

"A warship!" declared Burgoyne. "I say, this complicates matters. Let's get back to the huts, or we'll be missed. We can return before dawn."

Cautiously the three officers made their way down the slight slope, where the darkness, by contrast with the slowly traversing beam of light overhead, was intense.

When within fifty yards of the nearest of the prisoners' huts Burgoyne gripped his companions' arms.

"Lie down!" he whispered.

Both officers obeyed promptly. Alwyn, on hands and knees, went on. Presently he rejoined them.

"It's too late," he said in a low voice. "There is an armed pirate outside every hut."

CHAPTER XV

How Minalto Fared

Burgoyne and his companions were on the horns of a dilemma. If they persisted in their

attempt to regain their quarters they would almost certainly be detected, while even if they succeeded they would be unable to return to the cliff. Minalto would have to be left to take his chance, and the gaunt evidence of the night's work would be laid bare with the dawn. If they returned to the cliff there was the possibility that they would have to hide all next day, and be faced with the awkward problem of explaining their absence satisfactorily.

They chose the latter course, and upon returning to the scene of the lowering operations they flung themselves flat upon the turf, lest their silhouettes would betray them to the pirates stationed about the camp and concealed in the bushes on the summit of Observation Hill.

There they lay, hardly daring to stir a limb and maintaining absolute silence for the best part of an hour. Then the searchlight, which had been playing continuously upon the island, was suddenly masked. Twenty minutes later Burgoyne cautiously raised his head and looked seaward. A flickering white light informed him that the vessel was steaming rapidly away.

"Hang on here," he whispered to his companions "I'm going to have a look round."

He was back in a quarter of an hour, with the report that he had seen the pirate guard form up and march through the gate of the compound.

"That leaves us with a tolerably free hand," he added. "I was afraid they'd muster all hands and call the roll. No sign of Minalto yet, I suppose?"

"None," replied Withers, who had been holding on to the rope. "He's a bit behind time. I hope nothing's gone wrong."

"So do I," agreed Alwyn fervently.

Slowly the minutes passed. Momentarily doubts grew in the minds of the three watchers. Even Alwyn's faith in Minalto's powers was waning.

"I'll take on now," he remarked, relieving the Second Engineer at the rope.

He had barely resumed his "trick" when the manila rope was almost jerked out of his hand. From the unseen depths below came three decided tugs.

"He's back, lads," whispered Burgoyne joyously. "All together. Man the rope—walk back."

It was no easy task to hoist the ponderous seaman, but at length Jasper Minalto's head and shoulders appeared above the edge of the cliff. With no apparent effort he swung himself up by the projecting beam and gained the summit. Slipping out of the bowline, he shook himself like a Newfoundland dog, for water was dripping from his saturated clothes.

"I've been there sartain sure," he announced coolly, "an' back agen, sir. If you'm your doubts, sir, there's my 'nitials scratched on ter boat's back-board, fair an' legible-like s'long as you looks carefully."

Burgoyne brought his hand down upon the seaman's shoulder.

"Splendid!" he exclaimed. "You must spin your yarn later, after we've packed up and stowed away the gear. There's not much time. But, in any case, Minalto, you've won your place in the boat."

"Thank'ee, sir," replied Jasper gratefully.

Grey dawn was showing over the eastern height of the island when the four men returned to their huts. Burgoyne reported "all well" to Captain Blair, who, declining to hear details, told the Third Officer to turn in.

"You can't work watch and watch for two successive days unless you have a 'caulk'," he added. "It will be another hour and a quarter before the hands are turned out. Make the best of it."

But the Old Man was wrong in his estimate. No attempt was made to summon the crews of the three captured ships to their forced labour. They were piped to breakfast and then allowed to "stand easy", while armed pirates patrolled the inner circle of huts in addition to augmenting the guards in the two block-houses.

"Something's in the wind," declared Captain Blair. "The vessel that used her searchlight last night is evidently beating up for the island."

Soon there was no doubt on the point. From the compound the heights commanding the harbour and eastern approach to the island were plainly visible. Bodies of pirates were being rushed up to the concealed gun emplacements, which they could reach without being seen from seaward. Others were hurrying towards the tunnel, with the idea of manning the machine-guns that swept the entrance to the harbour and the only landing-place.

"The ball's about to commence," said Branscombe. "Wonder who'll open fire first?"

The prisoners listened in breathless suspense for the crash of the opening contest between the warship—or whatever she might be—and the quick-firers comprising the principal defences of the island. At intervals a powerful siren boomed out its raucous wail, demanding in Morse Code whether there were any people on the island.

Presently the sound came from the south'ard and then the west'ard, but no reply was sent from the pirates lying low on the apparently uninhabited island.

An hour later the captives caught sight of the trucks and aerials of a two-masted vessel proceeding on an easterly course at a distance of about two miles north of the island. Then the two mastheads vanished behind the rising ground; but from the fact that the batteries were still manned the *Donibristle's* people drew what proved to be a correct conclusion that the vessel had once more taken up a position off the eastern face of the secret base.

At noon, the prisoners still standing easy, Captain Blair called a meeting of officers to receive the reports of the investigating party.

It was Jasper Minalto's recital which created the greatest interest. After parting with Mr. Burgoyne on the shore, he said he swam to the reef, landing without difficulty on a flat expanse of coral. Although the reef averaged twenty yards in width and the state of the tide was almost low-water, the breakers swept far across the coral barrier before they expended their strength. Had it been anything near approaching high-water progress along the reef would have been extremely dangerous, if not impracticable.

But in present circumstances Minalto found the reef "fair going". There were several deep and narrow gulleys to be crossed, while there was a strong tidal current setting out of the only possible boat channel—not taking into consideration the ship passage—which was on the extreme south-western part of the reef.

It required a strenuous effort to swim across the narrow gap, but Minalto expressed an opinion that at dead low-water, or thereabouts, there would be little or no current.

Off the south-eastern end of the island he found himself quite a mile from shore, but on the eastern side the reef converged towards the island. Nevertheless he had to swim a quarter of a mile, aided by the set of the current, to gain the long, narrow and lofty ledge of rock that screened the harbour in which the *Malfilio* and her prizes were lying.

Here the buoys laid down the previous day by the *Donibristle's* crew helped him considerably, since he was able to hang on to them and rest as he made his way up the narrow channel.

Swimming close to the rocks on the island side of the channel, he arrived at the entrance to the harbour, and was glad to find his feet touch bottom just within the southern spur of rock that practically enclosed the anchorage.

From that point he waded until he reached the sandy beach. Everything was quiet. Keeping close to the cliff he passed the boatsheds and almost tripped over the chain securing the hauled-up boats.

Arriving at his goal, Minalto, as he told Burgoyne, scratched his initials upon the lifeboat's back-board. Then, having established his claim, he began to retrace his course.

At that moment he was considerably taken aback by seeing a light flash across the sky. His first thought was that the pirates had discovered him, but upon second consideration he rightly concluded that the flash came from a searchlight in the offing.

Before he had gone very far a faint light blinked from a point half-way up the cliff and immediately above (so he judged) the entrance to the tunnel. It was promptly answered by a light from the *Malfilio* and in a few minutes the crew of the pirate cruiser were standing to their guns. From where Minalto stood he could see all the starboard guns trained upon the entrance to the harbour, and rather apprehensively he wondered what would happen to him if they opened fire when he was swimming through that narrow gap.

He remained for some minutes crouching against the cliff, until it occurred to him that time and tide wait for no man, and that if he were to return by the way he came he would have to hurry his movements.

Minalto took the water as noiselessly as an otter. Swimming dog-stroke in order to minimize the phosphorescent swirl of his wake, he kept close to the cliffs—so close, in fact, that once his right knee came into sharp contact with a rock.

Then came the crucial point of his return journey—the passage of the harbour mouth. Dozens of pairs of eyes must, he knew, be peering in that direction, but he reckoned on the possibility that while they were looking for a large object, namely an armed boat from the warship off the island, they would fail to detect a small one—the head of the swimmer.

Unobserved he cleared the projecting headland, and working from buoy to buoy along the south approach channel until he came in view of the reef, gained a "kicking-off" position for the

longest and most strenuous of his many swims that night.

Although the sea was warm he was beginning to feel that "water-logged" sensation that results from keeping in too long. Alternately swimming on his breast and back he continued doggedly, knowing that if he rested he would be swept out of his course by the steady indraught into the lagoon, for by this time the young flood was making.

At length he gained the reef, rubbed his cramped limbs, and set off briskly to the point nearest that part of the island whence he had set out, and an hour and a half later he was being hauled up the cliff.

Jasper Minalto had told his story, without any embellishments, in the broad, burring dialect of the West Country. But behind that simple narrative his listeners detected a ring of indomitability that had brought the man safely through the grave perils by land and sea.

"That coral is most heavy on shoe leather," he remarked. "Fair cut to pieces 'un is. But nex' time 'twill be only one way, like; seein' as how us be a-comin' back wi' the boat."

"You think we'll be able to launch the lifeboat and get her round without being spotted?" asked Captain Blair.

"We'd best wait till the *Malfilio's* a-put to sea, sir," replied Minalto. "There wur nobody on the beach as far as I could see, an' t' other craft wur quiet enow."

"It was the vessel in the offing that put the crew of the *Malfilio* on the qui vive, I fancy," observed Burgoyne. "We'll have to take the ship into consideration, I'm afraid, sir. That is, if we are to take advantage of these moonless nights."

"We'll have to," decided the Old Man. "We've five clear days before the new moon grows sufficiently to cause trouble. Failing that it will mean a fortnight's delay—and then it may be too late. And then there's the question of fresh water," he added, still smarting from the effect of his splendid failure. "That is the question."

"What's wrang wi' a bit o' canvas?" inquired Angus. "A pair o' canvas tanks fitted 'tween thwarts'll just dae fine."

"A good idea, Mr. Angus," said the skipper. "We'll have to knock up a couple of canvas tanks. There's the question of evaporation and leakage by the boat heeling to be taken into account."

"And, perhaps, the water might be tainted by the canvas," added Alwyn.

"Havers, mon!" ejaculated the First Engineer scornfully. "May ye never hae wurrse. Mony a day I've drunk bad water—an' bad whusky forbye, an' I'll live to dae it again," he added with an air of finality. "We'll get on with it," decided Captain Blair. "After all, beggars can't be choosers. Any more points to raise? None. Very well, then; unless anything unforeseen takes place Mr. Burgoyne and Minalto will bring the boat round to the west beach at——?"

"Three a.m. on Thursday," said Alwyn.

For the remainder of the day the captives' "stand easy" continued. As far as the men taking part in the previous night's work were concerned nothing could have been more welcome. It enabled them to make up arrears from loss of sleep and strenuous activity. Nevertheless the additional length of line for the guide-rope was forthcoming, the canvas water-tanks were sewn up and tested, and more provisions lowered and hidden in the cave.

There remained three clear days before the die was cast and the momentous step taken—unless events over which the late officers and crew of the *Donibristle* had no control should necessitate a hurried change of plans.

Just before sunset the guns' crews were withdrawn from the emplacements, and the guards stationed outside the huts were marched out of the compound, so apparently Señor Ramon Porfirio was satisfied that the vessel that had caused him great uneasiness had really taken her departure.

CHAPTER XVI

Captain Consett's Report

Extract from the Report of Captain Cyrus P. Consett, commanding U.S.S. *Yosemite*.

"U.S.S. *Yosemite*,

"21st March, 1921.

"TO REAR-ADMIRAL JOSIAH N. FELIX,

"Commanding Third Pacific Squadron, U.S.N.

"Sir,

"I have the honour to report that in execution of previous orders I have carefully examined the area bounded by the 20th and 40th parallels and between 180° longitude and 160° W. longitude, paying particular attention to the uninhabited islands comprising the Ocean Group.

"II. Throughout these operations no trace has been found of the *Alvarado*, *Kittiwake*, and *Donibristle*.

"III. I have been constantly in touch by means of wireless with the British and Japanese warships engaged in searching for the missing ships. H.B.M.S. *Adventurer* has now received orders to return to Hong Kong, and H.I.J.M.S. *Kanazawa* has been recalled to Nagasaki. In no case have these vessels reported any signs of the above-mentioned missing ships.

* * * * *

"VII. At midnight on the night of the 14th—15th March, visibility being fair, wind Force 1 and sea smooth, a breaking sea was heard ahead. Knowing that I was in the vicinity of an island marked position uncertain on U.S. and British charts (Lat. 31° 10' 12" N., Long. 171° 30' 10" W.) the speed of the ship was reduced to five knots. At 12.15 a.m. course was altered eight points to port. Frequent casts gave a depth of from 49 to 30 fathoms. At 12.30 a.m. I ordered a searchlight to bear upon the island, continuing the inspection at intervals until 2.15 a.m. Deeming it prudent not to close the island during the hours of darkness I steered north by west until dawn.

"VIII. When sufficiently light I again approached the island, which is about three miles long on each of its four sides and forms a plateau fronted by cliffs averaging 200 feet in height. There is a considerable indentation on the western side, but no harbour. The closest examination by means of glasses failed to reveal any means of gaining the summit of the island, which is recognizable by a conical hill towards the center and a conspicuous group of palms on the south-eastern extremity. The island is surrounded by a continuous reef, over which the surf was breaking heavily.

"IX. In the circumstances I deemed it prudent not to send a boat ashore, as landing would be extremely hazardous if not impracticable. At intervals sound signals were made in the hope of attracting the attention of possible castaways, but there was no sign of life upon the island.

"X. At noon I caused independent observation to be made, determining the position of the island as follows: Lat N. 31° 10' 5"; Long. W. 171° 30' 15".

"XI. While regretting that the search has proved to be unsuccessful I wish to call your attention to the indefatigable zeal of the officers and men under my command, with a request that the Navy Board be informed of my recommendations set forth in paragraph V.

"I have the honor to be,

"Sir,

"Your obedient Servant,

"CYRUS P. CONSETT,

"Captain, U.S.N."

CHAPTER XVII

The Scuttling of the "Donibristle"

On the morning following the departure of the U.S.S. *Yosemite* from the vicinity of the secret base the forced labour parties turned out to find the rain descending in torrents. It was the first rainy day since the arrival of the *Donibristle's* crew, and they viewed the climatic conditions with marked disfavour.

There was no wind. Overhead from a mirky, dark-grey sky the heavy drops were falling vertically, thudding upon the corrugated iron sheets like the beating of a hundred kettle-drums and rebounding from the puddles already formed, until as far as the eye could see—a distance of less than fifty yards—everything appeared to be a confused blurr of moisture.

"There'll be wind behind this lot," remarked Captain Blair. "Let's hope it'll blow over before Thursday."

It was his first day outside the compound. Partly owing to the desire to share the discomforts with his men and also to make himself acquainted with the harbour, he had insisted upon taking charge of the working-party told off to proceed to the beach.

Ramon Porfirio was in a hurry to complete the operations hindered by the appearance of the *Yosemite*, which were to result in the blocking-up of the southern approach channel by sinking the *Donibristle* in about eight fathoms of water between the detached ridge and the southern arm of the cliff enclosing the harbour. It was for this purpose that buoys had been laid down in order to warp the *Donibristle* to the position chosen for the act of scuttling.

Already the vessel's masts and derricks had been taken out of her, and the wreckage of the funnels and bridge removed. Almost everything of a portable nature likely to be of use to the pirates had been landed, until with the exception of her engines and boilers very little remained but the hull and a few fittings considered of no value for removal.

Ill-equipped for the wet weather the *Donibristle's* company turned out and awaited the arrival of Fernando, who invariably superintended the calling of the roll. About fifty feet away and just visible through the rain were the *Kittiwake's* crew, who for the last week or more had been engaged in excavating dug-outs and trenches on the cliff through which the approach-tunnel had been driven. Farther away and lost to view, the remnants of the *Alvarado's* men were mustering for their daily toil.

Presently the skipper of the *Kittiwake*, seeing Captain Blair with his men, strolled over to him.

"Mornin', Blair," said Captain Davis. "Not a nice sort of morning for you to be turning out. Feelin' fit?"

"Fairly," admitted Captain Blair. "Eh, what is it?"

For the *Kittiwake's* Old Man had taken the *Donibristle's* skipper by the arm, and was leading him away from the rest of the party.

"A word in your ear, Blair," replied Captain Davis, lowering his voice "You've got a young woman amongst your crowd, haven't you?"

"How on earth did you get to know that?" demanded the astounded skipper.

"'Taint a question of my knowing," rejoined Captain Davis. "There are others in the know also I'm just warning you, Blair; you can count on Captain Davis and the *Kittiwakes* to help you put up a fight if need be, although the lot of us don't stand a dog's chance."

"Thanks for the warning, Davis," replied Captain Blair grimly. "I'll act upon it."

The arrival of the half-caste overseer terminated the conversation. Captain Blair, greatly perturbed, walked slowly back to his men.

An hour later the soaked and dispirited prisoners were launching several of the boats, amongst them the lifeboat that Burgoyne had definitely in view for the projected flight from the island. It was raining so heavily that by the time the boats ran alongside the *Donibristle* the bottom-boards were floating, in spite of the fact that the plugs had been withdrawn and the water allowed to drain out before launching.

Wearing an almost new dark blue bridge-coat that looked suspiciously like the skipper's, Black Strogoff was sheltering under the boat-deck when the working-party arrived. With him were half a dozen pirates armed with automatic pistols.

"You there!" shouted Black Strogoff on catching sight of Captain Blair. "Come you here. Do you know what is to be done? Run out warps ahead and astern, buoy and slip the cables to move the ship round that point. You understand? Good; then do it, and tell me when the work is finished."

There was no option but to obey. Calling Burgoyne and Branscombe Captain Blair allotted them their respective posts, sending the former away in a large pulling cutter to pass the bow warp to the nearest buoy. He also took the opportunity of conferring hurriedly with Alwyn on another matter.

In the absence of steam the work of warping out had to be carried out by hand. The cable was slipped, and, under the united efforts of the score of men walking away with the bow warp, the *Donibristle* moved slowly, almost reluctantly, through the rain-beaten waters of the harbour.

As the battered hulk passed within a cable's length of the pirate cruiser, Ramon Porfirio stepped to the rail of the *Malfilio* and shouted a curt order to the sheltering Strogoff. Apparently the command was to the effect that the work must be hurried up, for the pirate lieutenant, emerging from his retreat, gave a brief and surly reply. Then, bawling to Captain Blair to tell the men to haul away quicker, he retired to his temporary den.

"Meaning, I suppose," observed Captain Blair to Branscombe, "that the *Malfilio* is about to sail and that Porfirio wants the job finished before he weighs. How is that fractured steam-pipe getting on, by the by, Angus?"

"It's patched up," reported the Chief Engineer with a dry chuckle. "She'll be raising steam I've nae doot, but she'll blaw yon patch clean out when they wark up tae onything like a pressure."

Captain Blair's surmise was a correct one. Porfirio, having picked up the wireless messages exchanged between the British, American, and Japanese cruisers engaged in searching for the missing merchant vessels, was aware that they had given up hope of finding the survivors and were returning to their respective bases. He was a believer in the old adage "Men and ships rot in port", and was loth to keep the *Malfilio* and her polyglot crew in harbour any longer. Inactivity not only meant no prizes; the pirates, lawless except for the iron rule of their captain, were particularly apt to get out of hand when their enthusiasm flagged by standing idle.

But before he set sail he wanted to see the *Donibristle* sunk in the South Approach Channel. That entrance, he considered, was a weak spot in the natural defences of the secret base, and by sealing it against the passage of all but the smaller craft he would be able to devote all his resources to the defence of the sole remaining approach. Not that Ramon Porfirio had any desire to pit the guns of the island against a squadron of warships. He hoped to be able to disappear decently long before the secret was out, leaving Henriques and Strogoff to shift for themselves. Similarly Black Strogoff was fostering a plan to get away from the island with the bulk of the booty in specie, and, once clear, obtain his revenge on Porfirio by denouncing him to the British Admiralty or the U.S. Navy Board.

At length the *Donibristle* was warped out until her bows nearly touched the sheer face of the cliff that formed the detached screen to the anchorage. Hawsers were then led from her port quarter and starboard bow, until she swung straight up and down the Southern Approach Channel. A cable's length more and the ship arrived at the scene of her watery grave.

Captain Blair, looking much like a parent would when called upon to sacrifice a child—for the idea of scuttling his ship was hateful to him in the extreme—shouted for the boats to be recalled. The life-boat, in which Burgoyne and half a dozen men had been working, ranged alongside under the *Donibristle's* port quarter. Astern of the life-boat was a gig; while a couple of cutters and another gig—the latter only manned by pirates—came alongside the starboard accommodation ladder.

"We're in eight fathoms of water, Mr. Burgoyne," sang out the Old Man.

"Ay, ay, sir," replied the Third Officer.

Captain Blair turned and made his way to the spot where Black Strogoff was standing.

"We are in position," he reported gruffly.

"And about time, too," was the ungracious response. "All right, tell your men to push off."

The skipper of the *Donibristle* then crossed to the starboard rail, and leaning over the side ordered the men to lay off at a distance of about half a dozen boats' lengths. Then, calling to everyone of his party on board to abandon ship, he waited until the deck was clear of all but Black Strogoff and two or three of his followers, and lowering himself by a rope gained the gig on the port side.

The scuttling was quickly accomplished. In order to prevent the vessel from being raised at any future date the Kingston Valves were not employed to flood the ship, but in each of the holds and in the engine-room explosive charges had been placed in position ready to be electrically fired from the deck.

"You know what to do, Perez?" inquired Black Strogoff, addressing an olive-featured ruffian whose costume consisted of a pair of canvas trousers, a poncho made of pampas grass, and a cork lifebelt.

The man nodded. He had no great liking for the task, and was wondering what would happen to him if the charge was sufficiently powerful to blow up the decks as well as shattering the keel plates.

"You will feel only a slight shock," declared Strogoff reassuringly, but Perez noted that the lieutenant showed no inclination to remain. In point of fact Strogoff hurried down the accommodation ladder, jumped into the gig, and ordered the men to row twice the distance of the other boats from the ship before he signed to Perez to depress the firing-key.

Simultaneously with a muffled report the charges burst. Without waiting for the good ship *Donibristle* to sink under him the operator took a flying leap over the side, hit the water with a tremendous splash, and struck out frantically, swimming as fast as the huge cork lifebelt permitted.

The *Donibristle*, her keel-plates rent asunder, sank rapidly, with a slight list to port. Amidst a smother of foam caused by the escaping of the confined air, she settled on the bed of the channel, with about five or six feet of her upperworks showing on the starboard, and less than one foot clear on the port side.

Above the hiss of escaping air and the turmoil of the agitated water came the voices of a dozen men shouting at once:

"The life-boat's taken under."

The gig containing Black Strogoff appeared on the scene, just as five or six men forming the life-boat's crew were scrambling over the gunwales of the boats nearest them.

"What game of fools is this?" demanded the lieutenant angrily.

"Life-boat's sunk. Pinned down by the foot of one of the davits," announced one of the men.

"Sunk like a stone, with her sides crushed like an egg-shell," added another.

"Just about as much as we could do to get clear," declared a third. "She was gone in a brace of shakes. An' where's Mr. Burgoyne?"

"Anyone seen Mr. Burgoyne?" inquired Captain Blair loudly.

"I seed 'im in the boat, sir," declared the bowman of the lost life-boat.

"So did I, sir," volunteered another seaman. "He was a-holdin' on the yoke-lines, and was goin' to tell us to——"

"He was a blamed idiot," declared Strogoff. "What did he mean by hanging on alongside when the ship was sinking?"

"She went that sudden-like," explained the bowman.

"Didn't give us no chance no-how."

"Anyone else missing?" demanded Captain Blair.

There was a pause, then half a dozen voices replied in unison:

"Yes, sir, Minalto, the quartermaster of the port watch."

"No sign of them?"

Several of the men peered into the now transparent water, for the sand disturbed by the sinking vessel had now settled. Twenty feet below the surface, pinned down by something engaging the starboard gunwale, the life-boat could be seen with fair distinctness. She was lying on her beam ends with her bows slightly lower than her stern.

"Can't see 'em, sir," replied one of the men. "P'raps they're trapped between the boat and the side of the ship."

"You might have given us more warning," said Captain Blair addressing the taciturn lieutenant. "If you had I should not have lost a promising officer and a smart seaman."

"Imbeciles, both of them," snapped Black Strogoff. "They have themselves only to blame. It is none of my affair."

"Now I come to think on it," resumed the irresponsible bowman. "I think I saw Mr. Burgoyne mixed up wi' some gear as we dipped. An'——"

Captain Blair held up his hand to enjoin silence. Having succeeded in bluffing Black Strogoff he considered it high time for the mendacious recital to terminate. He was too good an actor to risk wrecking the piece by an excess of "gagging".

CHAPTER XVIII

Successful so Far

Snugly hidden in the almost denuded compartment known as the captain's pantry, Alwyn Burgoyne and Jasper Minalto waited breathlessly for the impending explosion.

Discussing a hurried plan of action with Captain Blair—a quick change of programme necessitated by events over which they had no control—Burgoyne had acted promptly. Taking advantage of the confusion when the order had been given to abandon ship, the Third Officer and the faithful Minalto had climbed up the side and disappeared down the companion ladder without a single member of the pirate crew having the faintest suspicion of their presence. In the meantime the men in the life-boat, hurriedly coached by Captain Blair, had done their part of the business well.

A stout block had been bent to the heel of one of the davits. Through it was led a three-inch rope, one end being made fast to the life-boat's middle thwart close up to the knees, while the other was secured by means of a clove hitch to the crown of the davit. Unless looked for the rope would easily pass muster as one of the disordered falls of the davit. The idea was that, when the *Donibristle* sank, the strain on the rope would capsize and swamp the life-boat, pinning her hard and fast against the submerged side of the ship, and that was what exactly did happen.

The stowaways were confronted by two great and distinct perils. The pirates engaged in making up the explosive charges were not experts. They might easily err on the side of generosity when preparing the quantities, and when the explosion took place the whole ship might go up instead of down.

The second risk was that the *Donibristle* might sink in deeper water than the total height of her hull from keel-plates to the rail. In that case Burgoyne and Jasper Minalto would be trapped in a metal box and drowned without the ghost of a chance of saving themselves.

Yet unhesitatingly, though dubious of the result, they had taken the risk and were awaiting developments.

They could hear the splash of the oars as the boats pushed off, and the gentle grinding of the life-boat's gunwale as it rubbed against the rusty iron sides of the ship. Then came an ominous silence as Black Strogoff raised his hand and gave the signal.

The charges were fired.

Alwyn felt the floor-plates give as the whole fabric of the ship quivered under the internal impact. A waft of acrid fumes drifted into the enclosed space.

The two men exchanged glances as if to say, "Well; it's all right so far, but there's more to come."

The water was surging and hissing along the alley-way. The pantry-door, burst open by the outside pressure, was flung hard back against the bulkhead, and in an instant the two men were knee deep in water.

The level rose to their waists, and still there was no indication that the ship had settled on the bottom. The level was rising more slowly now. Without a jar the ship had touched the bed of the channel and was gradually sinking in the soft sand. Disappear she would eventually, but for the time being, perhaps for several hours, the subsidence was barely perceptible.

Then as the *Donibristle* listed slightly to port the level in the pantry fell a foot or eighteen inches, leaving the occupants standing nearly thigh deep in water.

Again they exchanged glances, but this time both men's faces wore a grin of satisfaction. They even chuckled softly, as they listened to the ravings of Black Strogoff and the carefully rehearsed lamentations and explanations of the boat's crew.

Half an hour later all was quiet without, save for the rattle of the rain upon the exposed portion of the deck. Black Strogoff, his assistants, and the working-parties had departed, their task accomplished; but there remained the unpromising prospect of their returning that afternoon to salve the sunken life-boat.

The downpour was a blessing in disguise. It enabled Burgoyne and his companion to talk without risk of being overheard by anyone on the cliff.

"Things'll be a bit more comfortable presently," said Minalto. "Tide'll be falling."

"Yes," agreed Alwyn. "It was half-ebb when they scuttled her. That means high-water about seven o'clock. Let's hope it will be a dark night and not too much wind. You say you know where the two buckets are stowed?"

Minalto made no reply. He was staring thoughtfully at a corner of the pantry.

"Anything wrong?" inquired Burgoyne. "You haven't got cramp, I hope?"

"No, sir," replied the man. "It's a mort too warm to give I cramp. I'm just a-thinkin', sir. See that li'l boiler? Couldn't us get 'en away an' use 'en for a water-tank?"

Burgoyne jumped at the idea. The "li'l boiler" was in reality a galvanized iron bin used for storing flour, and would hold about fifty gallons of water without much chance of its contents spilling over the top, as it was fitted with a metal lid.

"You're a gem of the first water, Jasper!" exclaimed Burgoyne enthusiastically. "Come on, let's get it adrift at once. It will be something to do."

By the aid of broken-off ends of files it was a fairly simple matter to unscrew the brass clamps. Examination of the tank showed that it was half filled with mouldy flour.

"Soon clean 'en," declared Minalto. "Then when us gets round t'other side fill 'en wi' water, and put 'en aboard the boat again."

"Hardly," demurred Burgoyne. "That tank even if only filled to within two inches of the top would weigh well over four hundredweights. No, we'll have to leave it in the life-boat and fill it up by means of the buckets. By Jove! that knocks Angus and his canvas tanks into a cocked hat. We'll clean it out now. Salt water won't hurt if we wash it with fresh later on."

The hours dragged wearily on. Both men were hungry and thirsty, for they had come unprepared for the task on which they were at present engaged. But at length the darkening gloom in the alley-way announced that night had drawn in, and the time for strenuous activity was at hand.

Glad to escape from their cramped quarters, for the rising tide was beginning to make things far more uncomfortable than before, the two men emerged from the pantry, dragging their prize after them.

It was now quite dark. The rain had ceased, but the sky was overcast. A north-easterly breeze was ruffling the waters of the lagoon. Shorewards there was nothing to denote human occupation. The cliffs of the secret base rose gaunt and forbidding against the faint loom of the sky, with no indication to show the hive of piratical industry that flourished within the limits of those unscaleable precipices.

Very cautiously Burgoyne and his companion crept towards the davit to which had been made fast the rope pinning down the life-boat. The manila had shrunk in the wet to such an extent that the clove hitch had jammed. It was only by using the broken file as a marline spike that Alwyn succeeded in teasing out the tenacious hitch.

The result though expected was nevertheless startling. The whaler, under the buoyancy imparted by six large air-tight copper tanks, bobbed up like a cork, making a splash that might be heard on board the *Malfilio* and even by the pirates on shore.

"They'm thinkin' it'll be a girt shark," commented Minalto, as he slipped over the side with a bucket to bale the boat.

Burgoyne joined him, and in twenty minutes the bottom boards were figuratively "dry". The exercise also helped to restore the circulation to the cramped limbs of the two men.

There were oars in the boat. Some thoughtful person had considerably lashed them down to the thwart so that they had not floated away; but the question now arose how were the masts and sails to be procured?

"It's too risky making a double trip across the harbour," said Burgoyne. "One would have been bad enough and we've been spared that. And there's the *Malfilio* to be taken into account, although I don't suppose they'll be so keenly on the look-out as they were when that vessel was using her searchlight. We'll have to swim for them. They will tow easily, since they are in canvas covers."

"I'm on, sir," agreed Minalto.

Both men stripped, and wringing out their saturated clothes spread them over the thwarts of the life-boat. Burgoyne held up the revolver.

"We'll not be wanting this on this trip," he remarked to his companion. "I'll hide it in the boat. It's too early to start using firearms."

Minalto nodded. He quite understood that if detected at this juncture the revolver would be of

no help. Once the boat was ready to leave the island, then, perhaps, the little weapon might prove to be of service.

With the skill of experienced swimmers the two men dived noiselessly overboard and struck out with steady, powerful strokes towards the mouth of the as yet invisible harbour.

Keeping close to the cliff they rounded the projecting arm. Not only was the anchorage quiet—the *Malfilio* had gone. Unknown to Burgoyne and Minalto the pirate cruiser had proceeded to sea shortly after the *Donibristle* had been scuttled.

Changing over from breast-stroke to dog-stroke the swimmers proceeded slowly until they touched bottom in shallow water, about a hundred yards from the boat-house. Covering that hundred yards took a full ten minutes. Twice they threw themselves flat upon the sand—once when a lump of rock loosened by the rain crashed down from the cliff; another time when a piece of canvas flapping in the breeze beat a disturbing tattoo upon the side of one of the huts. In each case, imagining that they were discovered, the two men lay still with their hearts thumping violently, until they recovered themselves sufficiently to resume their way.

At length the mass of the tarred boat-shed loomed up through the darkness. The door was securely padlocked. That was reassuring, since it was highly improbable that any of the pirates were asleep within the building. Nor did Burgoyne waste time in filing through the padlock, and thus leave traces of his exploit. Cautiously the two men worked round to the back of the shed. Then Alwyn, standing on Minalto's broad shoulders, deftly wrenched open the already loosened weatherboard.

In less than a couple of minutes the life-boat's masts and sails, in two painted canvas covers, were lying outside the hut. Replacing the weatherboards Burgoyne climbed down to the ground, and, without a word being exchanged, the two men shouldered their respective burdens and retraced their steps.

There was no need to destroy their footprints. Already the sand was covered with the prints of men's boots and bare feet, for daily the vicinity of the hut was a scene of activity.

Arriving at the end of the strip of beach, they again took to the water. The canvas covers with their weighty contents were buoyant, but Burgoyne soon found that it was a difficult matter to swim and push the gear in front of him. It was an easier task, though not so simple to the swimmer, to drag the bundle of masts, spars, and sails behind him.

But deprived of the slight support afforded by the gear, Alwyn found that, although it no longer yawed as before, it was a decided encumbrance by the time half the distance was covered. Apparently Jasper Minalto found the same thing, for directly they rounded the bluff at the entrance of the harbour the sailor ranged up alongside and by the aid of a length of halliard deftly secured the two sets of gear side by side.

After that progress was quicker and much easier, since each swimmer could rest one hand and continue striking out with the other; but their relief was none the less when they arrived alongside the life-boat.

"We'm making sail, sir?" inquired Minalto, as the pair resumed their clothes after having lifted the gear into the boat.

Burgoyne thought wistfully of the favourable breeze, and reluctantly shook his head.

"I'd like to," he replied, "only the canvas would show up too much even in the darkness. We must row. All ready? Then let go!"

Pushing off from the almost submerged rail of the vessel that had been their floating home, the twain shipped an oar apiece, having taken the precaution of muffling the crutches with strips of rag. Then standing in towards the island they skirted the line of cliffs. Here they were safe from detection unless, which was most unlikely, the pirates had posted sentries on the edge of the lofty wall of rock that completely girded the island. There were, they knew, watchers on the look-out both by day and by night on the Observation Hill, but their task was to observe vessels approaching from the offing. The idea of a boat manned by their captives being navigated inside the lagoon and close to the precipitous shore never occurred to them, or if it did they had dismissed it as unworthy of serious consideration.

"There's one way out when the time comes," said Burgoyne, as the small gap on the south-western side of the reef appeared abeam.

"Right-o, sir," replied Minalto. "I know it, havin had to swim across 'en."

A few minutes later the life-boat rounded the extreme south-westerly point of the island. It was now that the most dangerous part of this phase of the operations was threatening; for, having to pass some distance off the detached rock before entering the west bay, the little craft would no longer be masked by the cliffs from the pirates stationed on the Observation Hill.

"Easy—lay on your oars a bit," cautioned Alwyn, as he glanced over his shoulder in the

direction of the look-out post. The rugged outlines of the hill showed up against the mirky sky, but whether the boat was so plainly visible as it moved slowly through the calm, phosphorescent water was a matter unknown to Burgoyne and his companion. They hoped not and wished themselves farther in shore.

"Give way," ordered Burgoyne.

"Touched wi' my oar, sir," reported Jasper in a low voice. "'Ard rock, tes."

Evidently the shoal ran out farther than the Third Officer had thought. The boat had to be backed and the rock given a much wider berth; all of which took time and kept them longer in sight of the Observation Hill.

Yet, as the moments slowly passed and no disconcerting flash of a rifle came from the look-out post, Burgoyne felt his spirits rise. His immediate goal was within easy distance, and once the boat gained the shelter of the cliffs ultimate success loomed large upon his mental horizon.

At length the life-boat's forefoot took the sandy beach close to the mouth of the cave. Thankfully the two men boated their oars. Only twice in that eight or nine miles had they rested, and the craft was a heavy one to pull.

"Stand by her," cautioned Burgoyne as he leapt ashore. "Don't let her ground too hard. Tide's falling."

As he made his way towards the spot where he expected to find the lower end of the guide rope, Burgoyne had a nasty shock, for advancing towards him were three men.

CHAPTER XIX

A Dash for Freedom

The voice of Phil Branscombe quickly reassured the startled Burgoyne.

"It's all right, old man," exclaimed Phil in a low voice. "Everything's O.K. How are things?"

"Ravenous, the pair of us," declared Alwyn.

"I thought so," rejoined the Fourth Officer, "and so as a reward for a good little boy I've brought both of you some grub. Save you drawing on the tinned stuff," he added.

"And Young Bill?"

"Young Bill is there," replied Branscombe, indicating the cave. "She's as plucky as they make 'em. The Old Man got a move on at the finish. Do you want to see him? If so, he's on the top of the cliff."

Burgoyne shook his head. He couldn't speak just then because he was munching bread and bully beef.

"No," he replied at length. After his strenuous exertions and with the prospect of more to come before very long, he did not feel equal to the task of ascending and descending the cliff. "No, he gave me final instructions. I don't think there's anything else. Hello! Why, that's Mostyn! Thought you were still on the sick list, old man. What are you doing here?"

"Coming along with you," replied the Wireless Officer. "Old Man's orders."

"Dash it all!" exclaimed Burgoyne, somewhat taken aback at the prospect of being saddled with a man who not so long since had been lying on his back with a score or more of wounds. "What do you know about handling a boat?"

"I wasn't *always* a wireless bloke," replied Mostyn.

"I've been used to a sailing boat ever since I was a kid. Also I've brought my share of the grub and a bit over."

Burgoyne capitulated without further protest. Mostyn's declaration that he knew how to sail a small boat more than wiped out the objection.

"All right," he said; then addressing Branscombe and Twill—the third member of the shore party—he continued: "It's no use hanging on to the slack any longer. We've found a water-tank and it wants filling. Mostyn, you might put all the provisions and spare gear on board. Yes, the canvas tanks. They may come in handy."

With four men to handle the tank the task of conveying it filled with water to the boat was a fairly simple one. Under Burgoyne's direction it was stowed between two of the thwarts and immediately for'ard of the centre-board case.

"That's everything, I think," remarked Alwyn. "Now the sooner we're off the better. I want to get at least thirty miles from the island before dawn. Now, Phil, if you will kindly bring Miss Vivian—I mean Young Bill—we'll put off."

Branscombe carried out instructions. Hilda Vivian wearing an old pilot coat (a gift from Captain Davis) over her borrowed clothes, which during her stay on the island consisted of a duck jumper and trousers and a sailor's straw hat, came up to greet Alwyn.

"I'm ready, Mr. Burgoyne," she said; then with a suspicion of a smile she added, "and may I keep my face clean now, please?"

She shook hands and said good-bye to Branscombe and Twill, and was assisted by Alwyn into the boat.

Slipping into the stern sheets Burgoyne gave the word to push off, and the voyage began.

Hilda Vivian was told to sit down upon a pile of canvas in front of the water-tank, where she would be least in the way when the time came to step the mast and hoist sail. Mostyn was pulling bow oar and Minalto stroke. Burgoyne steered, the while keeping an anxious eye upon the cliffs fronting the still hidden Observation Hill.

During the last hour the clouds had dispersed and the stars shone brilliantly, reflecting long shafts of shimmering light upon the gently-undulating water.

Alwyn expressed no appreciation of the change, although rather philosophically he remarked that it was a jolly good job the stars weren't out when they were rowing round the island. Now, although not desirable, the starlight did not count to such an extent. If the boat were sighted it would be an awkward circumstance, but before the pirates could stand in pursuit the life-boat would establish a useful lead and be lost in the darkness.

"You know how that foremast steps, Mostyn?" he inquired in a low voice.

"Ay, ay," was the reply. "I've been watching it, and I've overrun the gear."

"Good enough," rejoined the Third Officer, considerably impressed by the initiative of the latest addition to the crew. "We may have to hoist sail in a hurry before very long."

"Isn't the surf making a roar to-night?" remarked Hilda from her "quarters" for'ard of the water-tank.

"Yes," replied Alwyn. "Good thing; it prevents anyone ashore hearing the sound of oars."

He purposely omitted to add that the exceptionally noisy roar of the surf was occasioned by a heavy ground swell, that, taken in conjunction with the torrential downpour unaccompanied by wind, betokened bad weather at no distant date. None of the officers or men of the captured merchant ships possessed an aneroid, so for prognosticating the weather they had to rely upon Nature's signals—and the unwonted thunder of the surf was one of them.

"Now, steady all," cautioned Burgoyne, as the lifeboat drew away from the shelter of the cliffs. "Clean strokes and no fancy feathering."

Nearer and nearer drew the isolated rock that marked the limits of visibility from the Observation Station. Carefully avoiding the shoal that extended some distance seaward, Burgoyne held on his course until the rock bore broad on his port beam. Another five minutes and the risk of detection would be past.

Slowly starboarding his helm Alwyn brought the boat round until she was eight points off her former course. By so doing, although the action was the only practicable one, he exposed the whole of the life-boat's broadside to the shore instead of being "end on" as previously; but at that increased distance from the island the boat would appear little larger than a walnut-shell.

"We've done it!" he announced gleefully. "Another twenty strokes and we can hoist sail."

The next instant a flash of flame leapt from the pirates' look-out station, and a bullet whizzed shrilly above the heads of the fugitives, ricocheting fifty yards beyond the boat.

"Give way for all you're worth!" yelled Burgoyne. "Keep well down, Miss Vivian, in case they get one in."

Two more flashes followed in quick succession, but where the bullets struck remained a matter for conjecture. Then another, throwing up a feather of spray twenty yards short, ricocheted and sent splinters flying from the life-boat's gunwale.

"Another ten strokes!" shouted Alwyn. "Put every ounce into it."

The stuttering rattle of a machine-gun from the summit of the Observation Hill warned Burgoyne that Ramon Porfirio's ruffians had not had their last say in the matter. The pirates evidently knew how to handle the weapon to the best advantage, for they were training it about five degrees in a vertical plane, so that the hail of bullets struck the water short and beyond the boat and almost every inch of the distance between. They had only to traverse the machine-gun slightly to the right literally to smother the life-boat with lead.

"Way 'nough!" ordered Burgoyne. "Take cover!"

Waiting until Mostyn and Minalto had thrown themselves on to the bottom-boards, Alwyn relinquished the tiller and crouched on the stern gratings. He knew that by the combined action of the wind and tide, added to the way of the boat, they would drift fairly rapidly through the danger zone.

The fusillade ceased as suddenly as it had begun. Alwyn raised his head above the gunwale. The boat was still in the line of fire, but almost on the point of being masked by the detached rock.

"They've got a jam!" he announced. "It'll take another five minutes to clear it, and then they'll be much too late. Up with the masts!"

Considering it was the first time they had stepped the masts in that particular boat the task was accomplished fairly smartly.

"Up foresail," ordered the Third Officer.

Jasper Minalto sprang forward to assist Mostyn to hoist the somewhat awkward dipping lug. When the canvas was sheeted home the boat seemed to leap forward under the quartering breeze.

"That'll do for the present," said Alwyn. "She'll steer better like that until we're clear of the reef. Come aft; we want her trimmed by the stern going through—no, not you, Miss Vivian. You'll do nicely where you are. Are you quite comfortable?"

"Quite, thank you," was the cheerful reply, given in a tone which implied that, having been under fire twice within the last month, the discomfort of sitting upon a pile of canvas on the bottom-boards counted for naught.

"Right-o," continued Alwyn. "Directly we gain the open sea we'll rig you up some sort of tent."

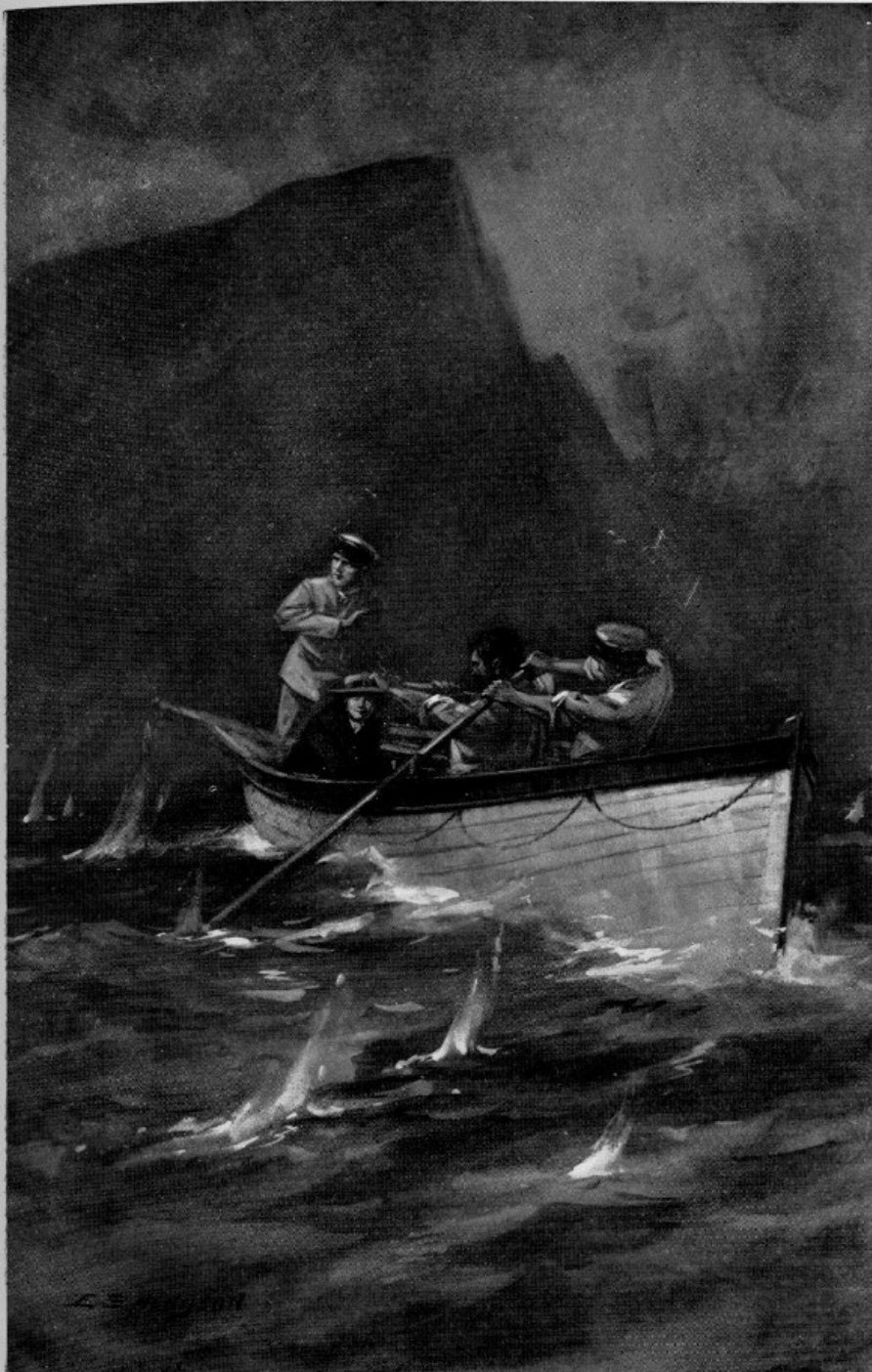
"But I'm not at all tired," protested Hilda.

"You will be before morning," rejoined the Third Officer. "We've a very long way to go, you know, and there are no rugs, hot-water bottles, or Thermos flasks aboard this packet."

With that observation Burgoyne glanced ahead under the foot of the bellying sail. He could now discern the gap in the reef, bearing roughly a couple of points on the starboard bow.

"Give her about a foot of plate," he ordered, "and a couple of inches home with the sheet."

Mostyn promptly lowered the centre-board to the required distance, while Minalto took a pull on the fore-sheet. The life-boat no longer drifted to leeward, but on the contrary showed a decided tendency to "eat her way" to wind'ard. All the same Burgoyne anticipated a bit of a struggle in taking the boat through the narrow gap in the reef. There was a fairly heavy "tumble" on the comparatively shallow bar, with seas breaking on each side of it. An error of judgment might easily result in the boat being dashed upon the coral ledges on either hand.



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A DASH FOR FREEDOM

[Illustration: A DASH FOR FREEDOM]

"Stand by with an oar," ordered Burgoyne. "In case we have to steer with it. I doubt whether the rudder will have much grip when she's in the thick of it."

The Third Officer's whole attention was fixed upon the passage through the reef. What was happening ashore did not trouble him in the least. He knew that long before the pirates could rush a machine-gun round to the summit of the south cliffs the life-boat would be well away from land—provided she wasn't swamped or battered against the dangerous ledges.

Meanwhile Jasper Minalto had lashed a fourteen-foot oar to the stern-post, allowing sufficient play for the blade to be moved to the right extent in a horizontal plane. Should the rudder fail to grip as the boat climbed the steep sides of the waves the oar would serve to keep her from broaching-to, and from being almost inevitably swamped.

Putting the helm up until the boat was running almost free Burgoyne steered for the smoothest patch in that almost regular line of breakers, for there was about twenty yards where the heavy swell did not break, although it reared itself menacingly across the whole extent of the narrow entrance.

The noise of the surf was now deafening, as the ground swell, rolling in against the wind,

thresed irresistibly upon the low-lying reef. Already the steady movement of the boat through the tranquil waters of the lagoon was giving place to a jerky motion, as the first of the spent rollers began to make themselves felt.

The little craft was travelling fast. Although many of the disconcerting conditions were hidden by the darkness, the milk-white foam showed up conspicuously through the night, while to the roar of the surf was added the whine of the ever-increasing wind.

Now they were in the thick of it. Like a racehorse the boat charged the first of the steep rollers, and lifted gallantly to the curling wall of water. Throwing showers of spray far and wide from her sharp stem, she slid gracefully down the other side, although it took every ounce of strength on the part of Burgoyne and Minalto to prevent her from broaching-to.

She took the next wave badly, shoving her nose into the crest and shipping it green over the bows; then staggering she managed to overrun the third breaker and gained the comparatively safe water beyond.

"That's all serene," shouted Burgoyne. "Get the water out of her, Mostyn."

He half expected a protest from Miss Vivian, but the girl had not stirred, although the floor-boards were six inches deep in water. She had, however, taken the precaution of wrapping a piece of canvas round her—Burgoyne had meant to caution her, but in the quick flight of time during the approach to the reef he had omitted to do so—and had come off comparatively dry.

"She's carrying all she can, I think," said Alwyn, raising his voice to reach Mostyn and Minalto, both of whom were busily engaged in baling out.

"I'm carrying nothing, Mr. Burgoyne!" exclaimed Hilda, rather astonished at words that apparently related to her. "Is there anything I can do?"

"No, thanks," replied Burgoyne. "'She' applies to the boat. I mean she has as much sail as we can set without risking a capsized. It's all right as things go; but we may have to reef."

"I reckon she's doing eight knots," remarked Mostyn, who, having completed his task of baling out, had come aft.

"A good eight," agreed Burgoyne. "Will you take her now? Minalto and I have had a pretty tough time."

"Right-o," replied Mostyn, glad of the opportunity of "feeling the kick of the helm" again. "What's the course?"

"Sou' by east," said Alwyn, handing the Wireless Officer the pocket compass. "Don't watch the needle; steer by a star and check your course occasionally. You'll find it much simpler than straining your eyes in the starlight. Call me in about a couple of hours—earlier if you want me."

Giving a glance astern Burgoyne saw that the line of foam was almost invisible, the island entirely so. If the breeze held—he was not anxious for it to increase in force—the secret base would be forty or fifty miles astern by daybreak.

"Now, Miss Vivian," he said cheerily. "We're going to fix you up before Jasper and I turn in. Are you hungry? There's some ship's biscuits going. That's our staple fare for a bit, I'm afraid. You're dry, I hope? Externally, I mean. Good! Now we'll rig you up a tent."

Lashing the loom of one of the oars to the mast at a height of six inches above the mast-clamp and resting the blade in a roughly-made boom-crutch, Burgoyne and Minalto deftly stretched a sheet of canvas over the oar, securing the ends to the thwarts.

"There you are," said Alwyn. "As we say in the Merchant Service you'll be as snug as a—an insect in a rug. We can't allow you much head-room, in case the foot of the sail flies over. Now Jasper and I are turning in. If you want me just shout and I'll be up in a brace of shakes."

CHAPTER XX

The Voyage

Within two minutes Burgoyne was sleeping the sleep of sheer exhaustion, nor did he awake until the slanting rays of the early morning sun shone in his face, as the boat heeled to the now beam wind.

"You're a bright one, Mostyn," he exclaimed, as he stretched his cramped limbs. "Do you call

this two hours?"

"I didn't like turning you out," replied the Wireless Officer. "After all, I've had quite a soft time. Only had to trim the sheet once, and she carries just the right amount of weather helm."

Balancing himself on the after thwart Alwyn scanned the horizon. All around sky and sea met in an unbroken line. Neither land nor vessel of any description was in sight. Satisfied on that score the Third Officer took stock of the boat. Underneath the tent Hilda Vivian was sleeping soundly. Her regular breathing was sufficient evidence to prove that.

Curled up athwartships, with his head pillowed on one of the canvas water-tanks—for which there had been no need in their original rôle—was Jasper Minalto, snoring like a young bull. He, too, had scarcely stirred for the last four hours.

"Let him stop," said Burgoyne. "I'll take on now. You might get out some grub before you turn in, and there are some tin mugs in the after locker."

"I brought along some lime-juice," announced Mostyn. "Holmes told me I could have it, and it may come in jolly useful. Branscombe lowered a dozen coco-nuts over the cliff and stowed those on board, too; so we shall be able to have some sort of variety. What's the menu? Bully and biscuits?"

The two men ate their first meal on board with evident relish; then Mostyn turned in, leaving Burgoyne at the helm.

It was a glorious day. As the sun gathered strength its warm rays brought comfort to the helmsman. For the first time for nearly twenty hours his comparatively thin clothing was dry, and his cramped limbs regained their usual suppleness.

"Things might be a jolly sight worse," he soliloquized. "We're clear of the island and no sign of any craft in pursuit. The breeze is fair and steady, we've a reasonable amount of grub in the locker, and a staunch little craft for the trip. I wonder what the others are doing, and whether Strogoff and his bravos are cutting up rough?"

In about half an hour after Burgoyne had resumed the "stick" Minalto stirred himself, and sat up with a look of wonderment on his face, sniffing the morning air with deep appreciation.

"Eh, sir!" he exclaimed. "I've just had a wonderful dream. We wur havin' fried bacon, an' taters an' all. I could smell 'em, real as anythin'-like, an' it doesn't haf smell good."

"'Fraid that's as far as you'll get just now," replied Alwyn with a laugh. "Come on! Biscuits and bully is our mark."

He glanced at the well-filled foresail and then to windward.

"May as well get the rest of the canvas set," he remarked. "The breeze is moderating a bit."

Lashing the helm the Third Officer assisted Minalto in the task of hoisting the standing lug. Before this was accomplished Hilda, disturbed by the noise, awoke and crawled from under the awning.

"Good morning!" she exclaimed.

"Mornin' to you, young Teddy," replied Jasper, touching his trailing forelock, while Alwyn removed his cap from his shock of tousled hair.

"Young Bill's shaved this morning," she continued with a disarming smile. "I'm sorry to have to say that Mr. Burgoyne has not."

"I thought I once heard you remark," rejoined Alwyn, "that you were rather partial to beards!"

"Yes, torpedo beards, tawny for preference," admitted the girl.

The Third Officer complacently stroked the stubbly growth of hair that completely hid his cheeks and chin.

"For the matter of that," he observed, "a pair of scissors will do the trick when we get back to civilization."

"But your beard is red, not tawny," countered Hilda laughingly. "But don't worry about that, Mr. Burgoyne. I think I prefer you as you were on board the *Donibristle*—clean-shaven. That is from an appearance point of view. Just now you look a bit of a ruffian, but you're splendid. I shall never be able to thank you sufficiently for all the danger you have gone through—and the others as well, of course—to get me away from the island."

"It's jolly good of you to say that, Miss Vivian," said Alwyn. "We've got you clear of the island, it's true, but we are by no means out of the wood yet. Now: ready for something to eat?"

Telling Minalto to take the tiller Alwyn prepared the girl's breakfast. In the absence of a knife or a tin-opener the bully-beef tin had to be battered open with a rowlock, since, as is almost invariably the case, the patent opener provided failed utterly in its predestined mission. The biscuits, too, had long lost their crispness, and the water, notwithstanding the addition of a small quantity of lime-juice, was decidedly "cloudy" owing to the continuous motion of the boat. In default of a plate the beef had to be spread out on a piece of canvas which Burgoyne had washed by trailing over the side; while a total deficiency of cutlery resulted in the application of nature's knives and forks.

Yet Hilda enjoyed the rough-and-ready repast. She was naturally a high-spirited girl, passionately fond of an open-air life, and the novelty of the situation appealed to her. Burgoyne thought she looked the picture of health, with her finely-modelled features, of rich bronze hue by reason of exposure to the sun and rain, her closely-bobbed hair, and her mirth-loving eyes. Even her present costume suited her, the canvas jumper and the battered straw hat setting off to perfection her slim figure and the naturally graceful poise of her head.

For the four or five hours all went well with the Argonauts, but about midday the breeze died utterly away and the boat drifted idly with her sails drooping listlessly from the yards. The heat was terrific. Almost overhead the sun blazed down mercilessly, while the reflected rays from the mirror-like ocean seemed almost as hot as the sunshine itself.

With the paint blistering and the woodwork too hot to touch comfortably the boat was like a small furnace. Even the water left in the lands and bilges quickly disappeared, throwing out a noxious-smelling vapour.

Leaving one man to keep watch, the rest of the crew sat under hastily-devised awnings over which salt water was frequently poured in the hope that the rapid evaporation would lower the temperature under the canvas. Sleep was an impossibility; speech became a matter of difficulty, for even frequent small draughts of water failed to keep their throats from being parched and dry. Sweltering in the enervating heat they existed listlessly, their jangled nerves still further jarred by the monotonous slatting of the canvas and the steady thud of the yards against the gently-swaying masts.

Suddenly Mostyn, whose turn it was to keep a lookout, startled the others by shouting:

"Land ahead!"

Shaking off his lethargy Burgoyne emerged from under the awning. For some reason he could see nothing but a red mist that swam in front of his eyes.

"Where away?" he inquired.

"Right ahead," repeated the Wireless Officer, rather astonished that Alwyn could not see what was only too clear to him: a dark line almost on the horizon.

"Land!" exclaimed Burgoyne, his normal vision returning. "That's not land, old son. It's a breeze ruffling the water, and pretty strong, too. We'll have it in a few minutes—and dead in our teeth, worse luck."

Aided by Minalto, Burgoyne quickly stowed the awning, then casting loose both sheets he awaited rather anxiously the approach of the breeze.

"Looks more like a squall," he said, half to himself. Then raising his voice he continued: "Stow the mizzen. Mostyn, you stand by the fore halliard, and douse the sail in a brace of shakes if I give the word."

Soon there was no doubt about the nature of the approaching wind. It was a white squall—one of those dangerous puffs, often attaining a strength of from forty to sixty miles an hour, that swoop down with devastating effect upon the vessel whose careless look-out has allowed it to take him unawares.

"Down foresail!" shouted Burgoyne. "We'll have to ride to a sea-anchor."

Abandoning the useless tiller, which Mostyn had already yielded to him, Alwyn sprang forward to assist the rest of the crew in preparing a floating breakwater to which the boat could with safety ride to the wind and waves. Quickly the kedge was attached to the clew of the sail, a span bent to the yard and at its centre the whole scope of the boat's painter with an additional length of rope.

In desperate haste the whole contraption was hove overboard. The yard and sail, weighed down by the kedge, sank like a stone.

The next instant, with a weird, almost blood-curdling shriek, the squall burst. In an instant the hitherto placid surface of the ocean was lashed into an expanse of white foam.

Caught fairly on the broadside the life-boat was knee deep in water before she took up the strain of the sea-anchor. Then riding to a tautened cable she swung round bows on to the now

threatening breakers.

The three men baled desperately. Hilda, too, realizing the importance of freeing the boat from water, plied an empty bully-beef tin vigorously. Her straw hat had been whisked off, although Mostyn had caught it as it swept to leeward; her short locks were streaming in the wind, spray lashed her face like the sting of a whip, yet in the wild display of Nature's elements her faith in the prowess and skill of the three men was undiminished. Without a trace of fear she was toiling, not because she thought she was in danger, but because she knew she could be of assistance to her companions.

In ten minutes the worst was over. The wind dropped considerably, and though the waves were not running exactly mountains high, they had quite a menacing appearance. Yet the sea-anchor, which was now only a few feet below the surface, and fifty yards ahead of the boat, broke the angry seas in a way that imparted confidence to all hands.

It was an hour later before Burgoyne thought it prudent to rehoist sail. The mizzen, close-reefed, was first hoisted and sheeted home. Then the foresail got inboard, single-reefed and set. The boat's head fell away, then gathering way she darted buoyantly over the long, crested waves.

Contrary to Alwyn's expectations the wind had neither veered nor backed. It blew strongly from the same quarter, which meant that for every mile made good the boat had to sail thrice that distance.

For the rest of the day they sailed close-hauled, tacking at the end of every hour. All three men knew how to get the best out of the boat, keeping her sufficiently full to allow the canvas to draw well.

Sunset came with every indication of bad weather. The sun sank behind a bank of copper-coloured clouds, while the sky resembled what Minalto described as a "basin o' pea-soup".

"We're in for it, I think," remarked Burgoyne to Mostyn. "I think we'd better close reef the foresail while it's light. Then you take first watch—two hours only this time, mind; I'll take the next, and Minalto carries on after me. That will give you four hours' sleep."

"Right-o," agreed Mostyn, preparing to go for'ard with Minalto to reduce canvas still further. "Go about at the end of each watch, I suppose?"

"Yes," agreed Alwyn, "unless, of course, it's blowing too hard for one hand to dip the sail. In that case it'll be all hands 'bout ship."

At about nine o'clock Burgoyne awoke and relieved the Wireless Officer at the helm. During a lull in the wind the manoeuvre of putting the boat on the port tack was a fairly simple one.

Left to himself the Third Officer steered by the wind, occasionally checking his course by means of his pocket compass. It was now pitch dark, not a star was visible. Very soon it began to rain—big drops that borne by the stiff breeze rattled with considerable force against the helmsman's face. Spray he could and did endure with equanimity; in fact he rather revelled in the salt-laden showers, but Burgoyne had the deep-sea man's rooted objection to rain.

Pulling the peak of his disreputable cap well down over the left side of his face and drawing a piece of painted canvas over his shoulders, Alwyn settled down to make the best of things.

His trick was almost done when it suddenly occurred to him that the seas were no longer regular; in fact the boat was entering a patch of confused water.

Thinking it was a sudden shift of wind that accounted for the nasty cross seas Burgoyne glanced at his compass. The wind had backed; a point, perhaps, not more; and that was not sufficient to justify the agitation of the water.

He glanced to leeward. Above the howling of the wind his ear caught the unmistakable sound of surf. Not only abeam but ahead a line of milky foam warned him of the peril that threatened. The boat, close-reefed, was driving to leeward, and was already within two hundred yards of one of those dangerous coral reefs with which certain parts of the Pacific Ocean are studded.

"All hands!" he shouted. "Stand by and 'bout ship."

CHAPTER XXI

The Castaways

Mostyn was awake instantly. The burly Scillonian was slow to grasp the significance of the

peril. Burgoyne stirred him with his foot.

"We're close on a lee shore," warned the Third Officer. "Look alive and 'bout ship."

The two men were almost lost to sight in the darkness as they clambered for'ard over the thwarts.

"Hope to goodness they don't bungle," thought Alwyn, as he remained on the alert, ready to put the helm down. "If she fails to answer this time we're done."

But before Jasper could uncleat the halliard a vicious puff struck the stiffly strained canvas. No doubt the sail was in a bad condition owing to its having been stored so long under a galvanized iron roof exposed to a broiling sun. Without warning the centre cloth split from top to bottom, and the hook securing the tack burst from its cringle. The next instant the torn fragments of the useless sail were streaming from the yard like washing on a line on a windy day.

Instantly the life-boat flew up into the wind under the action of the still close-sheeted mizzen; then, gathering sternway, she began to drift rapidly towards the reef dead to leeward.

The best seamanship in the world could not have saved her. To resort to the oars would have been a hopeless expedient. Even had the oars been double-banked and the boat manned by a full crew of stalwart oarsmen, she would not have been able to make headway in the howling wind and in the grip of the breaking seas.

For some moments the men were dumbfounded. They could only grip the gunwale and await the development of events. Then Burgoyne's voice stirred them to action.

"Come aft!" he shouted, relinquishing the now useless tiller. "Mostyn, you do the best for yourself, and the best of luck. Jasper, we must do our best to save Miss Vivian. Wake her, quickly."

But Hilda was already awake. The loud frapping of the canvas, sounding like a succession of pistol-shots, was enough to rouse the soundest sleeper, even if the erratic motion of the wave-tossed boat failed to do so.

"Come aft," shouted Burgoyne. "For heaven's sake keep clear of that awning. We're in a bit of a hole, but we'll get you out, I hope."

He spoke bravely, but the words belied his thoughts. It seemed as if nothing alive could pass through that cauldron of broken water, thundering upon the cruel coral reefs.

Swept with the velocity of an arrow the boat, travelling on the crest of an enormous wave, was borne towards the reef. Burgoyne, holding on to the mizzen-mast, grasped the girl by one arm while Minalto's huge fist gripped her left shoulder. Then they waited.

They had not long to wait. With a crash of shattering timber the boat struck—struck so violently that Burgoyne had a momentary vision of the iron watertank being thrown right out clear of the side. Then as the battered craft reared itself as if to fall upon and entomb her crew, Burgoyne and Jasper leapt, literally carrying the girl between them.

They rose to the surface in the midst of a smother of foam. The wrecked boat swirled past Alwyn's head, missing it by a couple of feet or less.

Then ensued a terrible struggle. Wave after wave pounded down upon them, driving them, so it seemed, fathoms deep, until their lungs felt on the point of bursting. Once and once only did Burgoyne's feet touch the reef with a jar that seemed to snap his backbone. Then another breaker crashed, whirling the three human beings like leaves in an autumn gale.

Down went Burgoyne, retaining his grip with the energy of despair, and when next he came to the surface he was aware of two hands grasping his shoulder. Minalto had vanished, while Hilda, only just conscious, was instinctively clinging to her now sole support.

After that things became a bit hazy. Alwyn found himself swimming mechanically with one arm, while the other held up his charge. He was dimly aware that the sea was no longer breaking but was a succession of heavy, crestless rollers, the tops feathered with spray flung upward by the howling wind.

"We're over the reef!" he exclaimed to himself. "But what's beyond?"

That was the question. If there were land he knew that he would have to contend with the dreaded undertow, and already well-nigh exhausted the prospect was not inviting. But if there were no land—? He shuddered to think of that possibility, when, drifting farther and farther from the lee of the reef into a boundless waste of tempestuous water, nothing but a slow death by drowning confronted all the crew of the luckless life-boat. He wondered, too, what fate had befallen Mostyn and Jasper. The latter had gone, no doubt dashed against the reef that had let Alwyn and Hilda down so lightly. And Mostyn? He had seen nothing of him. Whether he leapt with the others or was crushed under the wreckage of the life-boat there was no telling.

"Tany rate," muttered Burgoyne, tightening his grip upon his now senseless burden, "we're going to make a good old fight for it. Now, then!"

Borne just in front of a huge wave that was on the point of breaking, the man and the girl were projected towards the unknown; submerged, twisted about and rolled helplessly in the smother of agitated water. Then Burgoyne's feet touched ground—sand, by the feel of it.

For another twenty yards he felt himself being impelled forward. Then his feet found a grip, but only for a brief instant. The horrible undertow—the back lash from the breaking waves—was commencing.

Planting his heels deeply in the yielding sand and gripping Hilda with both arms he braced himself to withstand the retrograde movement. Slipping slowly and surely he resisted strenuously, but with every remaining effort of his sorely-taxed strength. Like a mill-stream the creamy-white foam receded, until Burgoyne's head and shoulders emerged.

The next instant he saw the rearing crest of another huge wave about to break. There was no avoiding it. He was still too deeply immersed to hope to stagger even a few yards from its impending grip.

Down it crashed. Rolled over and over, with the breath well-nigh dashed out of his body, Burgoyne and his burden were swept onward for yet another fifty yards... back twenty, and then almost by a miracle his disengaged hand clutched and held a piece of rock.

Ten seconds later his prostrate form was uncovered by the receding undertow. With the frenzy of despair he regained his feet, and bending low under the weight of his burden—he was now carrying Hilda across his back like a sack of flour, but how he managed it he had not the slightest idea—he staggered rather than ran up the shelving, yielding sand until he dimly remembered stumbling blindly against the trunk of a tree.

Driven by the instincts of self-preservation and the desperate determination to save his charge, Burgoyne staggered another half a dozen yards inland and collapsed like a wet rag upon the wind and spray-swept ground.

For how long he remained unconscious he was totally unable to gauge. When he opened his eyes he was aware that he felt numbed to the bone, except his right hand, from which the blood was flowing freely. In gripping the sharp rock that had proved his salvation he had gashed his palm in half a dozen places. He tried to move, but his limbs were powerless and incapable of responding to the dictates of his will.

It was still dark. The wind was howling through a clump of coco-palms, bending the supple crests almost to the ground. Spray, too, was hissing with almost clock-like regularity as the breakers dashed themselves against the shore.

Some time elapsed before the events that led to his almost helpless predicament dawned upon him. He recalled the struggle in the darkness, the agony of the grip of the undertow, and the nameless fear that his precious burden would be torn from his grasp. Then the last, almost automatic dash for land... and where was Hilda?

With a supreme effort he moved his benumbed arm, half-dreading that the limb was broken. To his mingled satisfaction and alarm his almost nerveless fingers touched the cold face and dank hair of the object of his search.

Was she dead? he wondered.

For some moments he contented himself by rubbing his own benumbed limbs, slowly at first, then warming to his task as the blood began to circulate through his veins. Then, half-rising, he crawled to Hilda's side. Her heart was still beating, though feebly.

Racking his brains to remember the instructions laid down for the restoration of those apparently drowned, and then puzzled whether to treat the case as that of a half-drowned person or one suffering from cold and exposure, he decided to act upon the latter supposition, and proceeded to chafe the girl's limp hands.

As he did so he became aware that dawn was breaking—breaking with the rapidity usual in tropical climes. In a few minutes it was light, and the ruddy orb of the sun appeared to shoot up in a cloudless sky above the eastern horizon.

How he blessed the rapidly increasing warmth as the sun mounted higher and higher! Warmth meant life. He cast about him for a suitable spot, open to the glorious rays yet sheltered from the still flying spindrift.

He found what he required in a grassy hollow, screened by palms from the worst of the wind yet exposed to the slanting rays of the sun, which were momentarily increasing in brilliance and strength.

How he contrived to carry the seemingly lifeless form of Young Bill from the shore he hardly

knew. It was a triumph of sheer determination over utter fatigue.

Again he chafed the nerveless arms, never desisting until the girl's lips moved and her eyes opened with a startled expression, like one waking from a troubled dream.

"Where am I?" she demanded feebly.

"Safe ashore," replied Burgoyne cheerfully enough. He was content for the time being to find Hilda restored to life. "Can you walk?" he continued, although the absurdity of putting such a question to one who had been unconscious but a few moments previously struck him rather forcibly as soon as he had uttered it.

"I'll try," she replied pluckily, greatly to his surprise. "Why? Must we be going anywhere?"

"No," he reassured her. "We're stopping on the island a little while, but if you can you ought to keep moving."

He assisted the girl to rise, and the pair, both excessively weak, walked unsteadily, although the movement was beneficial to both.

Hilda had come through the ordeal comparatively lightly. Beyond a graze on the back of her right hand and a slight cut on her forehead she was unhurt, although she complained of stiffness in her ankles and wrists.

"But I *am* hungry," she added plaintively.

The words brought before Burgoyne's eyes the vision of that grim spectre starvation. All their provisions had been lost when the boat broke her back on the reef. Unless the natural resources of the island could provide sufficient food to sustain life their predicament was a serious one.

"There are coco-nuts," he said apologetically, as if it were his fault that more substantial fare was not forthcoming. "I'll get you some."

He knew that he was too weak to climb. He had nothing with which to cut down the tough and supple palms, but it was quite likely that some of the trees exposed to the gale might have been uprooted.

As he was walking away Hilda recalled him.

"Where are the others?" she asked. "Mostyn and Jasper?"

"Somewhere about," he replied vaguely. "They may be along presently."

Somehow he could not bring himself to tell the girl the hideous truth: that as far as he knew the two men had been overwhelmed in the breakers on the reef. Yet in his mind he had an idea that Hilda guessed what had befallen their companions, and that she expected confirmation of her fears.

Returning to the beach Burgoyne took stock of his surroundings. The wind, though strong, was moderating rapidly. Not a cloud obscured the sky. It was now close on low-water, the tide having fallen about eight feet, which for that part of the Pacific was exceptional and was undoubtedly caused by the terrific wind.

The reef, which at this part of the island was within one hundred yards of the shore, was showing up about four or five feet above the now placid water of the lagoon—a succession of jagged clumps of coral intersected by narrow channels which were now drying out. On the seaward side the breakers were tumbling heavily, for in the open the waves were still lofty and menacing. Viewing the reef at this state of the tide it seemed impossible that any human being could have been hurled across that formidable barrier without being battered out of recognition.

Away to the south-eastern extremity of the island was another piece of dry land, low-lying and not more than a hundred yards in length. On it were three solitary palms. Round it, and extending far in an easterly direction, were reefs and atolls, terminating in a rock quite two miles from the large island. Had the life-boat crashed upon these reefs—which she would most certainly have done had she held on her course—the fate of all on board would have been sealed. And, even if Burgoyne had succeeded in putting the boat on the starboard tack, she was embayed to such an extent that there would have been no escape. Providentially the castaways had been driven ashore on the larger island and the only one not liable to be completely swept by the breakers.

The eastern part of the island, off which side the boat had suffered disaster, ran in a fairly even direction north and south, terminating in two sandy spits about a mile apart. As far as Burgoyne could see there was no sign of any indentation; the coral strand formed a straight expanse from end to end.

Looking towards his left, or in a northerly direction, Alwyn noticed a dark object lying close on high-water mark and half-buried in sand. It was the after part of the life-boat.

Thinking that by a rare slice of luck some of the provisions might have remained in the after locker, he made his way painfully towards the wreckage, conscious of a burning pain in the heel—the legacy of a violent contact with the reef. His damaged hand, swathed in a strip of his last remaining handkerchief, was throbbing excruciatingly.

As he approached his attention was attracted by the sight of a man's hand and arm projecting beyond some scrub and driftwood within a few yards of the boat. The arm was bare, brown, and muscular, and lavishly embellished with tattoo marks.

"Minalto!" exclaimed the Third Officer, and, forgetting his injuries, hurried to the spot to confirm or dissipate his worst fears.

Jasper was not only alive but conscious. He had been cast ashore in a battered condition, being flung on the crest of a wave right into a clump of undergrowth. Bruised from head to foot he had lain in a torpid state, until the warmth of the sun had roused him from his lethargy but a few minutes before Alwyn's appearance.

"Sure, 'tes a rum world," he remarked. "Didn't think tu see you agen-like, sir. And the young leddy? Where she be tu?"

"Safe," replied Burgoyne. He was going to add "and sound ", but checked himself. "You've seen nothing of Mr. Mostyn?" he added anxiously.

Minalto slowly extricated himself from his bed of scrub and driftwood.

"No, sir," he said slowly. "I aint. Fact is I've just come-tu-like, bein', in a manner o' speakin', fair-flummoxed. Ne'er clapt eyes on 'im arter the boat struck."

The two men searched the fragments of wreckage. In the stern locker they discovered two tins of beef. The rest had vanished. Two of the copper air-tanks were still intact, while wedged in between the stern bench and a broken oar was one of the two buckets.

"Better'n nothin'," observed Jasper philosophically "S'pose we du search round-like. Might find somethin' worth our while."

It was a strain of his wrecker ancestors that prompted this remark, but the suggestion was worth acting upon. With the wind on shore and a heavy sea tumbling in there might be valuable spoil from the ocean.

The search resulted in the discovery of the mizzen mast with the sail still set. The mast had been broken off close to the thwart-clamp. A little farther on they discovered an oar, a length of grass rope, and another copper air-tank, all of which they collected and placed well above high-water mark.

"We'll get along, now," declared Burgoyne. "I came to look for coco-nuts, not wreckage, although I admit the search has not been exactly fruitless."

"One minute, sir," interrupted Minalto. "What be that? We ne'er had no li'l barrel in the boat, did us?"

He pointed to a small cask, half buried in the sand. It was encrusted with barnacles, and growing marine whiskers a foot or more in length.

"Heavy 'un be, too," continued Jasper, searching round for a stone to knock out the tightly fixed bung.

"Later on will do for that," declared the Third Officer. "Roll it up under that bush."

Reluctantly Minalto turned away from his find, like a dog ordered by his master to drop a succulent bone. In his present appearance—hatless, with a lavish growth of beard, bare almost to the waist, having lost most of his shirt in the struggle with the waves—he looked more like a seventeenth-century wrecker of the inhospitable Scillies than a steady-going quartermaster of the Mercantile Marine.

Burgoyne's appearance was very little better. He, too, was sporting a bristling beard. He was capless—a fact to which the now powerful rays of the sun was calling pressing attention. His one-time white patrol-jacket was torn, dirty, and had half of one sleeve missing. His trousers ended at the knees, while his shoes, cut by contact with the sharp coral, were little more than a pair of ragged canvas uppers, held together by fragments of once good British leather. Slight gashes on his forehead and cheek, and his bandaged hand, completed his dishevelled and disreputable appearance.

On the return journey Burgoyne discovered an uprooted coco-palm, from which he gathered some green nuts, sufficient to provide liquid refreshment, but of small value from a life-sustaining point of view. But with the tins of beef, even if nothing else of an edible nature were found, they might with luck eke out an existence for days.

CHAPTER XXII

Making the Best of It

"Mornin', young leddy!" exclaimed Jasper, decorously attempting to make good the obvious deficiencies of his wardrobe. "Hope this finds you like as it leaves me at present."

Hilda smiled encouragingly. She had made good progress towards recovery during Burgoyne's absence. A warm colour was suffusing her sun-burnt cheeks, her hands had lost the clammy coldness following a prolonged immersion. Her short locks had dried, and, thanks to the genial rays of the sun and to the fact that she had persistently kept moving, her clothes were once more in normal condition. She was bare-headed, her straw hat having vanished during the struggle to gain the shore. Her greatcoat—Captain Davis's parting gift—was thrown over a bush to complete the drying process.

"I'm awfully glad to see you, Jasper," said the girl. She never took kindly to the Scillonian's surname.

"An' so be I," rejoined Minalto.

"We've brought a few coco-nuts," announced Alwyn. "Just enough to carry on with. You're looking better already, Miss Vivian."

"I am," declared Hilda. "But where's Mr. Mostyn?"

"That's what I'd like tu know, Miss," said Minalto promptly, before Alwyn could frame an evasive reply. "'Tis too much tu ax o' Providence that all four o' we should come through las' night. A nice lad e' wur, but nothin' to speak of far's strength goes, 'specially seein' as 'ow he wur that knocked about when they pirates blowed the wireless cabin ower th' side. 'E'll come ashore sure now, young leddy, feet first-like, and then us can bury 'im proper-like."

"Shut up, Jasper!" exclaimed the Third Officer sharply. "You don't know what you're talking about. We've got to work, not cackle. There's plenty to be done before night, and the sooner we get on with it the better."

"How long do you think we shall have to stay here, Mr. Burgoyne?" asked the girl. "I mean, does it depend upon whether we can get away on our own account or have we to wait until a vessel takes us off?"

"We will possibly be here for some time, Miss Vivian," replied Alwyn. "We've found part of the life-boat, but even with her air-tanks intact it would be a tough proposition to construct anything sufficiently seaworthy to make another start. You see, we have no tools and precious little material. And, of course, the chance of a ship picking us up is a very slight one. We are out of the recognized routes, and unless a trading schooner comes along—if she knows the dangerous reefs of the island she won't—we may be here for weeks and months."

"Proper Crusoes!" exclaimed Hilda enthusiastically. "It sounds too exciting to be true."

"Strange things happen at sea," observed Burgoyne oracularly. He was far from feeling enthusiastic. The problem of warding off starvation had yet to be solved. "However, we'll set to work. There's a shelter to be rigged up for you, Miss Vivian, some sort of caboose for Jasper and me, fresh water to be found, and some sort of provisions laid in. We've two tins of bully beef—that's all."

"An' the li'l ole keg," interposed Minalto. "Might be spirits. Come in handy-like—not that I wants 'en, bein' teetotal-like come twelve or fifteen year—almost."

The al-fresco meal consisted of taro (eaten raw in default of a fire), and bully beef with coco-nut milk. It served its purpose in quelling the pangs of hunger, but the opening of the tin of beef caused Burgoyne some qualms. Its contents were far more than sufficient for three persons. It ought to last them a week, but the difficulty was how to keep the meat when once exposed to the air. To leave it in the battered tin would result in the beef's turning bad very quickly. At Hilda's suggestion they wrapped the remnants in palm leaves and placed them in the shade, hoping that the heat would not spoil their scanty stock.

"We're just off along the beach," announced Alwyn, who, having recovered from his exhausting experience, was now full of energy.

"May I come too?" asked Hilda.

"Certainly, Miss Vivian," was the reply. "That is, if you feel equal to it."

"I am quite all right, thank you, Mr. Burgoyne," declared Hilda. "Provided you don't want me to

climb trees or swim off to the reef, I think you won't find me an encumbrance."

"Right-o," assented Alwyn cheerfully. "Let's make a move. I don't suppose this island is so very big. We may as well explore it and find out how we stand, before we decide upon the site for our camp. A lot depends upon where we find fresh water."

"Will there be any?" asked the girl.

"I should think so," replied Burgoyne, pointing to a hill about a hundred feet in height. "That rising ground points to it, and the fairly dense vegetation is another hopeful sign. I suggest we try to walk right round the island—it can't be so very far—before we start exploring the interior."

They gained the beach, and instead of turning northward—Burgoyne had already examined the beach for about two hundred yards that way—they walked in the opposite direction. Before they had gone more than fifty paces Minalto, whose eyes incessantly scanned the shore, stooped and dragged from the water's edge a canvas sack containing the life-boat's stock of biscuit, utterly spoilt by the salt water.

"Things be a-comin' ashore-like," he remarked. "When flood-tide makes then te's time to look."

"I wonder if we soaked the biscuits in fresh water and thoroughly got rid of the salt we could bake them again?" asked Hilda. "I'll try it. How do we make a fire?"

Burgoyne shook his head. He had already tried his hand at rubbing together two sticks on the chance of obtaining a flame, but without success.

"I'll have another shot at it," he continued, when he had related his failure. "Perhaps the wood wasn't perfectly dry. Savages obtain fire that way, but I've never watched them do it. Wish I had."

Suddenly Hilda laid her hand on Burgoyne's arm and pointed.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "There's smoke!"

"Sure enough!" ejaculated Alwyn. "No, steady; we don't want to rush into a native kitchen before we find out who the gentlemen are. Stay here, Minalto, with Miss Vivian, while I do a little observation work."

The smoke, rising in the now hot and almost motionless air, was ascending beyond a clump of palms about a quarter of a mile away. It was not a forest fire; the column of vapour was too small for that. The logical conclusion was that it had been started by human agency.

Keeping close to the brushwood that skirted the beach above high-water mark, Alwyn approached the scene of his intended investigations. But after he had gone almost two-thirds of the distance, farther progress was barred by an inlet invisible from the spot whence the three castaways had set out on their tour of exploration. The entrance to the creek was narrow and shallow, being at that state of the tide barely three feet deep. Farther inland it opened out into a fairly wide basin, about eighty yards in width and almost entirely surrounded by dense vegetation, except for two converging glades at the head of the natural harbour.

High and dry just above the reach of the water was a dark object, which Alwyn recognized as the bow portion of the life-boat, while the otherwise smooth sand all around it bore traces of several footprints of a person or persons going and returning.

"Natives, perhaps," thought Burgoyne. "They've found the wreckage and stripped it of everything of value, unless— But I may as well make sure."

Working his way inland and cautiously forcing his passage through the scrub, Burgoyne drew nearer and nearer the fire. He could hear the crackling of the burning wood; a savoury smell assailed his nostrils. Save for the spluttering of the fire, the utmost silence prevailed.

As he carefully parted the brushwood he came in full view of the fire. He stopped dead in sheer astonishment, hardly able to credit his senses.

The fire was burning in an open space. Close to it two pieces of cane had been set up derrick-fashion, while a longer and heavier piece, with one end pegged to the ground, projected beyond the fork with its end immediately over the flames. From the extremity hung an iron bucket emitting steam and a delicious odour of stewing fowl.

Three or four paces from the fire and with his back turned towards Burgoyne was a man, naked from the waist upwards and bare below the knees. He was busily engaged in setting up a pointed bamboo, one end of which he had charred in the fire, while close to him was a roll of canvas. It was Peter Mostyn.

"Hello!" shouted Alwyn.

Mostyn turned sharply.

"Hello," he replied, and recognizing the voice continued; "you're just in time for some grub, old

bird."

"Hope there's enough for three more, anyway," rejoined Burgoyne.

That was the greeting between two men each of whom had thought the other dead. Typically British, they concealed their emotions under two cheerful grins, afraid lest they should make asses of themselves by betraying what they termed "sloppiness".

"Miss Vivian is safe, then?" asked Mostyn eagerly. He could ask *that* question without reserve.

"Rather! She's over there. Better get your things on."

Mostyn seized his ragged garments and proceeded to dress.

"It was so jolly hot," he explained. "I just had to strip. Felt a bit like a savage... where have you been? I looked along the beach several times."

"You didn't look far enough, my festive," said Burgoyne. "How did you get ashore?"

"Just hung on to the boat," replied Peter. "Or rather, what was left of her. Had quite a soft passage. Nothing much to complain about. The wreckage drove into this cove, and I waded ashore with hardly any trouble. Then I walked up and down the beach for nearly half the night, I should imagine, trying to find you. Never saw a sign, so I came to the conclusion—well, I was wrong."

"You're in luck," remarked the Third Officer, nodding in the direction of the fire and the savoury contents of the bucket.

"Yes, rather," admitted the Wireless Officer. "I knocked over a fowl with a chunk of coral. There are hundreds of them up there—fowls, I mean. Wasn't certain altogether how to clean the brute, but I've done it after a fashion. Fire? Easy, when you know how. One of the things we used to practise when I was a Scout."

"It was beyond me," declared Alwyn.

"I'll show you later on," promised Mostyn, struggling into his ragged coat. "Now I'm ready. Where are the others? 'Spose the jolly old pot won't boil over?"

Ten minutes later a light-hearted, reunited party gathered round the steaming pot. Water, copious and wholesome, was to be found near at hand. There were hundreds of fowls in the woods, and, Mostyn had good reason for believing, pigs. Yams, taro roots, and coco-nuts grew in profusion, so for the present all fears of a lingering death by thirst and starvation vanished.

"I boiled the brute because it was less trouble," explained Mostyn apologetically as he severed a portion of the steaming fowl by means of a strip of dried coconut shell. "You may find a few feathers, but I singed most of 'em off. Next time I'll try roasting a bird in clay."

It was a most appetizing meal, in spite of the fact that Peter's companions had only recently eaten bully beef and drunk coco-nut milk.

"One of the buckets came ashore with the boat," continued the Wireless Officer. "It'll have to serve for both cooking and fetching water, I'm afraid—"

"We've a bucket and a baler," interrupted Burgoyne, not to be outdone.

"An' a li'l cask o' spirits," chimed in Jasper. "Not that I'm fond o' a drop, like, but it may be mighty handy—"

"Sun's well over the foreyard," announced Alwyn, stifling a yawn. "A jolly good caulk will be the thing."

"Cork—what for?" inquired Hilda.

"Caulk—sea term for a nap," explained the Third Officer. "We can't do much in the hot sun, and we all want to make up arrears of sleep, I take it."

Spreading out the canvas in the shade of the palms, the four castaways—comrades in peril and sharers of the limited supplies of the world's goods provided in present condition—were soon slumbering soundly, their cares, troubles, bruises, and other ailments of body and mind relegated to the Back of Beyond as if they had never existed.

Peter Mostyn was the first to awake. In spite of his physical shortcomings he was active and wiry, and of the four had had the least strenuous struggle with the elements following the capsizing of the boat. Acting upon previous instructions, he roused Burgoyne and Jasper. Hilda still slumbered peacefully.

The first task was to construct shelters sufficiently strong to withstand the force of the wind. Leaving Mostyn to carry on with his interrupted work of rigging up a tent, Alwyn and Minalto

walked along the beach to the wreckage of the stern part of the lifeboat. This they dug out of the sand, and, attaching some of the halliards to it, dragged it sleigh-fashion over the smooth sand, stopping on the way to pick up the gear they had discovered that morning. The latter included, to Minalto's evident satisfaction, the "li'l cask", which upon examination was found to contain Jamaica rum.

Burgoyne had already decided to form a camp on the site Mostyn had chosen. For one thing it was sheltered, while fresh water was obtainable close at hand.

In about an hour the two ends of the boat were set up about eight feet apart and connected by the mizzen yard and one of the oars. Over the ridge-poles was thrown a large square of canvas, its ends being sunk in the sand and weighted with stones. On one side a flap was left in order to allow admittance to the timber-and-canvas dwelling, which was to be devoted to the use of Miss Vivian.

The structure was barely completed when Hilda awoke.

"Why, what is this?" she inquired.

"Your quarters, Miss Vivian," replied Alwyn.

"Mine? How quaint!" she exclaimed rapturously. "It reminds me of Peggotty's Hut, made out of an old boat."

"Do we keep the fire up all night?" asked Mostyn.

"Better not," replied Burgoyne. "We'll have to be careful in case Strogoff sends a boat after us."

"How will he know?" said Peter. "He thinks that Minalto and you were drowned on the *Donibristle*, and the pirates probably fired on us while under the impression that a strange craft had approached the island."

"H'm," replied Alwyn dubiously. "I wish I could agree with you on that point. Strogoff will find that you are missing, my festive, and probably Young Bill as well. Also, if he takes the trouble to look—as quite probably he may do—he'll find that the life-boat's no longer pinned down by the ship. He'll be in a tear, not because he has any regard for us, but because he knows that Ramon Porfirio will have the wind up when he returns. Why? He'll know that if we do reach a civilized port we'll spoil his little game. So if a craft shows up here we'll have to make sure of her character before we start hoisting distress signals."

Well before sundown the camp was in a fair state of completion, considering the limited resources at the disposal of the castaways.

Not only had a fairly commodious tent been erected—the boat's sail and spare canvas being pressed into service—but Minalto had built a fire-place of rocks, over which he placed three iron bars obtained from the broken keel-band of the boat. The air-tanks, since they could be put to no better use, served as seats, while the boat's back-board, supported on Minalto's li'l ole cask, formed a table.

Then Jasper vanished for about an hour, returning with five flat-fish, which he had speared in the clear water by means of a nail jammed into a broken oar, and a number of oysters found in a rocky pool towards the southern extremity of the island. Meanwhile Hilda, with the experience gained while in the "galley" at the Secret Base, had baked a loaf of taro, which everyone pronounced to be excellent and "top-hole".

They spent quite a delightful evening.

CHAPTER XXIII

Where the Pig Went

"Now show me how you start the jolly old fire," requested Burgoyne on the following morning.

Already the two officers had bathed in the sheltered creek, revelling in the warm water in spite of the fact that not so very long before they had been in dire peril in the self-same element. They recognized that there is a vast difference between "being in the ditch" involuntarily and taking a swim simply for the health-giving pleasure it affords.

And now, feeling fresh and in the best of spirits, they were about to prepare the morning meal.

"Right-o," agreed Peter, and proceeded to uncover a quantity of tinder-like wood from beneath

an inverted bucket, where it had been placed to shelter it from the heavy dew. "I'm not very keen on the two pieces of wood method. I prefer drilling—like this."

He produced a strip of bamboo about two feet in length, with both ends rounded off. Arranging the tinder in a hollow piece of wood, he inserted one end of the bamboo, bending the latter by the pressure of his chest, which he protected by means of a hollow shell. Then, rapidly twirling the bow-shaped bamboo much after the fashion of a centre-brace, he persevered with the operation. Presently, thanks to the friction, a faint smoke arose from the heap of tinder. Gently blowing, he still continued to revolve the bamboo until the soft, dry wood burst into a tiny flame.

"That's the trick!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "It takes a lot of doing, I admit; but with a little practice one soon learns the knack of it. Now for breakfast: cold boiled fowl, taro bread and eggs roasted in hot ashes—how will that do?"

"Scrumptious!" declared Burgoyne. "You must be rated *chef* of this establishment, old son."

Mostyn shook his head.

"It's all very fine when you do it for fun," he said. "When it's a matter of routine it's deadly monotonous. I vote we take turns."

"I might poison the lot of us," objected Alwyn.

"I'll risk that as far as I'm concerned," declared Peter cheerfully. "Now, then, let's search for eggs. There are dozens under the bushes. This island's like Covent Garden or Leadenhall Market. It's a wonder to me how these birds get here. Few of them seem to be able to fly."

With keen appetites, the four castaways sat down to breakfast. Deftly Peter extricated the eggs from the warm embers and distributed them amongst the hungry crew. Then in the height of his culinary triumph came the anti-climax. Every egg was addled.

"We're not running a parliamentary election, Mr. Mostyn," declared Hilda, when the high-flavoured relics of by-gone days were consigned to the sea.

"Aren't we, though?" rejoined Peter. "Burgoyne was proposing the election of a chef. I'm disqualified straight away, so that's all right."

"I believe you knew they were duds," said Alwyn.

"Pon my word, no," replied Mostyn emphatically.

"Another time you might try the water-test," suggested Hilda. "If they float in fresh water, then they are either stale or bad. New laid ones ought to sink."

"Thanks," said Mostyn. "I'll try and bear that in mind. Now, Miss Vivian, cold fowl? Sorry there's no bread sauce, and I've mislaid the salt."

"We'll try and obtain salt by evaporation," suggested Burgoyne. "How about that bully beef with the fowl? It won't keep, and it's a bit salt, too."

Breakfast over, Alwyn proposed a thorough exploration of the island—a task interrupted on the previous day when Mostyn was found. Burgoyne had great ideas about keeping all hands busy. Provided they had plenty to do to occupy their minds, they would be happy enough. He had a horror of "slacking", contending that it was the first step towards discontent and misery; and the possibility of each of the castaways being at loggerheads with everyone else was to be sternly discouraged.

Accordingly the four set out on their tour of investigation. The men went barefooted. Their footgear was worn out, but, as Alwyn remarked, they might just as well get accustomed to do without as wait. Hilda's shoes were badly worn. She had left the secret base wearing canvas deck-shoes already rather dilapidated. At Mostyn's suggestion they tore strips of canvas, which the girl bound round her shoes. This, she found, wore remarkably well, but Mostyn promised to find an early opportunity of making her a pair of leather sandals, for which he intended using the leather from the oars.

Burgoyne took with him his revolver. He had carefully dried it after its immersion. The cartridges, being well greased and guaranteed damp-proof, should be serviceable, but his reserve of ammunition was too small to justify a trial.

Mostyn carried a coil of rope that had once been the boat's halliard. Beyond remarking that it might be useful, he gave no reason for this apparently unnecessary encumbrance.

Jasper Minalto took his improvised fish-spear, which quickly proved to be of use in clearing a path through the brush-wood.

Following a narrow glade which had been recently traversed by a number of hooved animals whose tracks were fairly well defined, the quartette walked in single file, Burgoyne leading, followed by Peter; then Hilda and Minalto bringing up the rear.

Their first objective was the hillock Burgoyne had previously noticed from farther along shore. It stood well above the palm tops, rising abruptly on three sides and shelving gradually towards the east. A few coco-palms grew on the southern side, but elsewhere it was covered with comparatively short grass.

Arriving at the summit, the explorers found that the island was but a mile or so broad but nearly twice that distance in length, the land on the north side forming a long tapering neck averaging but a hundred yards in width, with the whole of the neck thickly wooded. It was on this strip of land that Burgoyne, Hilda, and Minalto had come ashore.

The reef entirely surrounded the island, although there were numerous gaps affording a communication between the open sea and the lagoon. It was on the edge of one of these channels that the life-boat struck. Had she been a couple of yards more to the south'ard she might have driven ashore on the island with very little damage, or none at all had she been swept into the small harbour where Mostyn was fortunate enough to land.

As the tide was almost at its ebb all the outlying reefs were exposed, disclosing a veritable death-trap for any vessel unfortunate enough to become entangled in the intricate shoals. At high-water the reefs surrounding the smaller island that Burgoyne had previously noticed were awash, only the mere hummock crowned by three palm trees being visible.

"There's one disadvantage that this island has and which Porfirio's island hasn't," observed Burgoyne. "In calm weather a boat can land here almost anywhere. Properly we ought to maintain a look-out station on this hill, especially if the pirates do attempt to find us."

"Do you think they will?" asked Hilda.

"They may try," replied Alwyn. "That's almost a foregone conclusion. But they'll think we've tried to make Honolulu, which is the nearest known civilized town in this part of the Pacific. If so, they're right off their course."

"Why didn't we?" inquired the girl.

"Head wind and adverse current almost the whole distance," said Burgoyne laconically.

"I'm not questioning your seamanship, Mr. Burgoyne," Hilda hastened to add, imagining by the Third Officer's somewhat brusque reply that he thought she had cast aspersions upon his sound judgment.

"I never had the slightest idea that you did, Miss Vivian," rejoined Alwyn earnestly. "I ought to have explained. Briefly, in a sailing craft the shortest distance between two ports is not always the quickest passage. One must take prevailing winds and currents into consideration. But to get to the look-out question. I think we ought to make a point of having someone up here four times a day, just to make sure that no suspicious craft is bearing down on the island. And there's another question: will Porfirio make use of that seaplane of his to try and spot us?"

"That'll be awkward," remarked Peter "unless we can collar the blighter when she's sitting."

"Not much use that," said Alwyn. "None of us could fly the thing even if we did capture it. No, I don't want to see that seaplane again except through the sight of an anti-aircraft gun. Now, suppose we push on."

"Aren't we going to give the island a name, Mr. Burgoyne?" inquired Hilda. "It's the usual thing, I believe."

"Right-o," agreed Alwyn. "I propose we leave the selection of a name to you."

"Then why not 'Swan Island'," said the girl. "From here the outline looks awfully like a swan with an exaggerated neck."

"So it does," agreed Peter. "Done it in one, Miss Vivian."

"An' thet rock out along," said Minalto. "Ut ought to have a name. They three trees make un look like an ole man-o-war. How'd 'Man-o-war Rock' suit?"

"The very ticket," agreed Burgoyne. "So that's that."

Descending the hill, the four castaways proceeded in the direction of the west side of Swan Island. Here the coco-palms were thinner in point of number, but the scrub was if anything denser than on the eastern side.

Suddenly there was a commotion in the undergrowth, and three or four fat porkers dashed frantically across the path.

"Pork for supper!" shouted Peter. In his excitement he hurled the coil of rope at the animals, without doing the slightest good.

But before the last pig had disappeared in the brushwood Jasper hurled his spear with

tremendous force. The aim was good, and the nail-shod tip struck the luckless animal just behind the fore-quarters.

Squealing horribly; the pig rolled over on its side but before Jasper or anyone else could secure the prize it recovered its feet and dived under the thick scrub.

Reckless of the consequences and loth to lose the brute, Minalto crawled under the spiky bushes, while Burgoyne and Mostyn made their way round the patch of scrub in order to try to cut off the wounded animal's retreat. Hilda, holding her hands to her ears to shut out the piteous squeals, remained on the path.

The two officers were baulked in their attempt, for on the remote side of the belt of scrub the ground rose steeply to a height of about twenty feet, running right and left in an almost unbroken wall of soft rock.

"The brute can't climb that," declared Alwyn. "You stop here, Peter, old son. I'll work round to the other side and we've got him cold. How goes it, Jasper?" he shouted to the intensely excited and exasperated Minalto, whose efforts to follow the pig were considerably hampered by hundreds of aggressive thorns.

"E be gone down to girt big hole, sir," replied Minalto breathlessly. "Don't 'ee take on. Us'll get 'un."

"A hole, did you say?" inquired Burgoyne. "Go slow then."

"Ay, ay, sir," replied Jasper; then after a pause he added: "Could you be comin' here, sir? If so, would 'ee bring my spear?"

Alwyn agreed to the suggestion rather hesitatingly. In default of suitable spare clothing, he was reluctant to sacrifice his already ragged garments to the attentions of the spiky thorns. Recovering the weapon that had wounded the pig, he crawled under the thicket until he rejoined Jasper.

Sounding with the pole, Minalto found that the floor of the hole or cave was level, but the extreme reach of the spear failed to find the extremity of the hollow. The while the squeals of the porker were growing fainter and fainter, showing that it was on the point of death.

"What's doing, old son?" inquired Mostyn from afar.

"Come and see, my festive," replied Burgoyne. "No more of your 'wait and see' business. Bring your rope with you."

Undergoing more than his fair share of laceration, Peter crawled under the brushwood. The three men crouched in the dim light that filtered through the thicket, and silently contemplated the mouth of the cave.

Minalto looked upon it as a place where fresh pork was to be obtained and that soon; Peter, in the light of romance, tried to conjure up visions of the long-gone buccaneers; Alwyn, in view of possibilities, regarded it and its approach as a hiding-place should Black Strogoff and his satellites succeed in finding the castaways.

"May as well see the thing through," observed Burgoyne. "It's no use hanging on to the slack."

"Certainly, sir," agreed Minalto, and proceeded to secure the rope round his waist by means of a bowline. "Du you pay out, sir, 'n case there's a big drop."

Prodding the ground with the haft of his spear, Jasper cautiously entered the cave. For the first eight or ten paces the sides of the tunnel-like entrance were fairly regular and less than a yard apart. Then he found that the cave expanded both in height and width, until it was impossible even with the spear to reach from one wall to the other. Standing upright, Minalto found that he could just touch the roof with his extended hand.

Guided by the faint squeals, Jasper followed the right-hand wall until his knees came in contact with what he thought to be a large ledge of rock. Groping with his hands, he discovered that the obstruction was a large box with a hinged lid.

Instantly all thoughts of the pig vanished from the man's mind, and again the long-dormant strain derived from his wrecking and smuggling ancestors reasserted itself.

"Ho! ho!" he shouted in stentorian tones. "We'm in luck, sir. Treasure an' all!"

He fumbled with the lid, then, struck by the thought that a lot of the glamour of the discovery of hidden specie and bullion would be lost unless he viewed his find in the glare of a torch, he retraced his footsteps and rejoined Alwyn and Peter.

"Girt sea-chest!" he announced excitedly. "Lifted 'en lid, I did."

"And the pig?" asked the matter-of-fact Burgoyne.

"Drat that pig!" exclaimed Minalto explosively. "The chest, sir. Ef us had a light, like... sort o' torch, now say?"

"How about it, Peter?" asked Alwyn, turning to the Wireless Officer.

"We'll manage that," replied Mostyn confidently. "Let's get out of the thicket. Suppose we ought to beat a clear path through this stuff?"

Burgoyne shook his head.

"No," he decided; "we won't disturb it more than necessary. The less we do the better. If we're careful we ought to be able to take a lighted torch into the cave without setting fire to the brushwood outside."

Returning to the open, they explained the delay to Hilda, whose eagerness to explore the cave was only quelled by the knowledge that the dying pig was somewhere in that gloomy vault. She would have endured the thorny passage without complaint; but there were limits, and the expiring porker was beyond them.

Hurrying back to the camp, Mostyn returned with his fire-making gear, and proceeded to work. Meanwhile Burgoyne and Minalto had wrenched off some resinous branches to serve as torches.

"All ready!" announced Peter.

With a torch burning faintly, Minalto forced his way under the scrub, Burgoyne and Mostyn following in his tracks. At the mouth of the cave they coaxed the flames into greater activity, and from it lighted two more torches.

Jasper advanced boldly. He had been there before. His companions followed cautiously, until the glare of the reddish flames revealed the treasure-chest.

It was in fairly good condition, having been painted white with a black lid. There were rope becketts at each end, rove through two large half-round wooden chocks.

The lid creaked on its hinges as Jasper threw it back. Then he gave a howl of disappointment. All the chest contained was a rusty cutlass, a clay pipe with a broken stem, and a number of brown paper bundles containing candles all stuck together by the heat.

"So much for your treasure, Jasper!" said Burgoyne with a laugh. "Never mind; we found something useful, the candles especially."

"P'raps 'en buried et," suggested Minalto hopefully, casting anxious glances at the walls and floor of the cave.

Burgoyne made no remark. He was deeply interested in the construction of the cave. It was partly natural and partly artificial. Human hands had enlarged the entrance and "faired off" the walls. In length it was about forty feet, and twenty in breadth, with a hewn pillar in the centre to give greater support to the roof. Except for the chest there were no other relics of the previous occupier. In one corner lay the pig, by this time quite dead.

"No use stopping here," decided Alwyn. "Bend that rope round the pig, Minalto, and we'll haul the brute out. Yes, bring the cutlass, Peter, and a couple of packets of candles. The others can stop, in case we want them here."

"Want them here?" repeated Mostyn.

"Rather," replied his chum. "This cave will make an ideal retreat if we have to hide. I hope we shan't, but we must look things fairly in the face. That's why I didn't want the brushwood cleared away. Had it not been for the pig we should not have found the cave, and so most likely no one else will."

"Someone did at one time," remarked Peter.

"Yes, but how long ago we don't know, unless that cutlass gives us a clue. I'll have a look at it when we get into the open. You see, the person or persons who enlarged this place threw the excavated material on a mound just outside. That shows they hadn't any idea of concealing the cave. Since then this scrub has sprung up and hidden it. Now then, Jasper, all ready? Heave away!"

At the mouth of the cave they extinguished their torches, leaving them leaning against the wall in case they might be required again. Then, carrying and hauling their various trophies, the three men rejoined Hilda in the open.

"Now, where's that cutlass?" inquired Alwyn, after relating the story of how their high expectations had been thwarted. "H'm, thought so. Our predecessors on Swan Island weren't so very ancient after all. This is a cutlass-bayonet, Peter, issued to the Navy in the late '70's and '80's. That ring in the guard is where the muzzle went, but I see the spring socket is rusted away. Nice job for you, Peter. You can clean the thing up. It'll do to carve the Christmas dinner if we're

here long enough."

CHAPTER XXIV

The Cave proves Useful

During the two days following all hands were kept busily employed. In addition to carrying out the usual routine, they made preparations to lay in a stock of provisions. Mostyn tried his hand at obtaining salt by evaporation, and succeeded in making about a pound of very saline powder. Minalto cut up the porker, reserving some of the meat for present use and pickling the rest. Hilda experimented with making biscuits of taro root finely powdered and bruised between two large stones.

In addition the three men took turns at climbing to the summit of the look-out hill. This they did every four hours in calm weather, and every two hours when the wind blew with any strength, so that no sailing vessel could close with the island between those intervals without first being sighted in the offing.

On the morning of the fourth day Jasper called Burgoyne's attention to a rectangular object lying on the top of a low-lying part of the reef. The tide had fallen exceptionally, and more of the reef was exposed than they had seen before.

"I believe it's our water-tank," declared Alwyn. "That's about where the boat broke her back."

"So I think, too, sir," agreed Minalto.

"In that case we'll have the thing ashore," declared Burgoyne. "It would never do to leave such a monument to our mishaps lying in such a conspicuous position."

"How would you bring it across?" asked Mostyn.

"It looks as if it is lying on its side," replied the Third Officer, shading his eyes with his hand. "We'll have to up-right it and let the rising tide float it off. A couple of us could easily swim over there and push it across the lagoon. No, not yet. We'll have to wait for the young flood to make. Meanwhile it's your turn, Jasper, to climb the hill. Nothing like exercise before breakfast."

Minalto swung off, and hurried to perform his task of look-out man. In less than a quarter of an hour he was back again, breathless with running.

"A sail!" he announced pantingly. "Away to nor'ard."

"Dash it all!" exclaimed Burgoyne.

The information disconcerted him. For the sake of his companions both on Swan Island and in the hands of the pirates at the secret base, he would have welcomed the intelligence if he knew for certain that the strange craft was a friendly one. But an instinctive feeling told him that the craft was manned by some of Ramon Porfirio's ruffianly crowd, and that the object of her voyage was to recapture the four fugitives.

Without undue delay all hands hurried to the summit of the hill, Alwyn pausing only to scatter the burning logs over which the morning meal was boiling, Hilda suffering the interruption of her culinary task without protest.

From the elevated look-out post the vessel could be seen fairly clearly. The morning was bright, with no sign of haze, and the craft appeared nearer than she actually was. In spite of the light breeze she was approaching rapidly, so that it was evident that she was equipped with a motor.

She was then about a mile and a half or two miles off the northern part of the island, shaping a course for the eastern side. She was a fore-and-aft schooner, carrying jib-headed top-sails, and was of about eighty tons displacement. She flew no colours.

"What would I not give for my prism binoculars?" sighed Alwyn. "Seen her before, Minalto?"

Jasper nodded. He was still rather breathless.

"Yes," continued Burgoyne, "unless I'm much mistaken she was one of those small craft lying in the pirates' harbour; but I'm hanged if I noticed whether any of them had motors. Well, we'll have to get a move on, Miss Vivian. I'm sorry to say that your wish of a few days ago will have to be complied with. We must hide in the cave, perhaps for several days. I don't suppose those rascals will abandon the search until they've examined every visible part of the island."

"How about the water-tank?" asked Mostyn.

"Too late, now, I'm afraid," replied his chum. "It will be as much as we can do to transfer ourselves and our traps to the cave.... This way down; in case they've a glass bearing on us."

Keeping to the south slope of the hill until the tree-tops shut out the sight of the approaching vessel, the fugitives returned to the camp.

There was much to be done in a very short time. The tent was levelled and packed up in the smallest possible compass. The canvas between the two upturned parts of the broken life-boat was removed. The hot embers of the dying fire was carefully scattered, lest they might kindle into flame and smoke. Then, heavily laden with stores and provisions, the four hastened towards the cave.

"One minute, sir!" exclaimed Jasper, stopping short in his tracks and setting down his burden. "If us ain't forgotten the li'l ole cask o' rum."

Burgoyne glanced behind towards the lagoon, a small portion of which was visible through the glade.

"Too late, now," he replied. "The schooner's passing through the reef. Yes, she has an engine right enough. The water-tank must have given us away. Come along, Jasper; you've seen the last of your li'l ole cask, I'm thinking."

There was a stubborn look on Minalto's bronzed and bearded face as he reluctantly re-shouldered his burden. It went sorely against the grain, this tame surrender of what he considered to be his property by finding.

"Come along!" repeated Burgoyne sternly.

"Ay, ay, sir," replied Minalto; then under his breath he added: "an' I hope th' li'l ole cask'll poison the lot o' they."

It was now a slow and cautious business getting the stores and gear into the cave, and in spite of every care Burgoyne noticed with concern that the tracks under the scrub were by no means covered. A keen Malay tracker would be able to find their retreat with little difficulty. The only hope lay in the fact that the crew of the schooner were unskilled in woodcraft, and that the broken twigs and brushwood would escape notice.

"Here's our present abode, Miss Vivian," announced Burgoyne, when the four and their portable property were inside the cave, a couple of candles lighted, and a double sheet of canvas hung across the entrance to screen any gleam from within.

"It reminds me of London during an air-raid," observed Hilda. "I had to spend several nights in a cellar—I was made to go down, but I would have much preferred to stop in an upper room. But there is nothing to be afraid of here as far as bombs are concerned."

"No; silence is the chief consideration," cautioned Alwyn. "I don't suppose they've sent a boat ashore yet, but I think I'll find out."

"Don't run unnecessary risks, please, Mr. Burgoyne," said Hilda.

"Trust me for that, Miss Vivian," declared the Third Officer earnestly. "Risks, yes; unnecessary risks, no. I've no use for the fellow who goes out asking for trouble."

"I'm going with you, old son," said Peter.

"My festive Sparks, you are not," decided Burgoyne. "For the present this is a one-man show. You stop here, and don't stir outside till I come back. All being well, I'll return in twenty minutes, if not before."

Withdrawing the cartridges from his revolver, Alwyn carefully tried the mechanism of the little weapon. Then, after reloading, he thrust the revolver into his hip-pocket, and, with a wave of his hand, disappeared behind the canvas hanging.

It was a tedious wait for the three who remained. Without means of knowing the time, the minutes passed very, very slowly. Peter tried to gauge the interval by observing the burning down of one of the candles. The others waited and listened intently for any sounds that might reach their ears from without the cave. Even the practical Hilda Vivian looked anxious and worried. Mostyn, not usually observant of people's characters, noticed that, and wondered whether the girl was anxious on Burgoyne's account or merely because of the peril that threatened her.

At length Minalto stood up, stretched his huge arms and picked up the cutlass, which Mostyn had brought to a state bordering on perfection, for the blade had been cleaned and sharpened, and the hilt shone like a convex mirror in the candle-light.

"I'm going to look for 'e," he declared in a hoarse whisper.

"You're going to stay here," said Mostyn firmly. "Officer's orders, you know."

Minalto was about to frame an argumentative reply, when a chorus of raucous voices sounded in the distance.

Without further delay Jasper pulled aside the canvas screen, only to collide violently with Alwyn Burgoyne.

"Ssh!" exclaimed the latter warningly. "Get back. They're ashore."

"The pirates?" asked Mostyn.

"Yes, unfortunately," replied Burgoyne. "They brought up off the little creek and hoisted Yankee colours. Thought they'd have us cold, but it didn't come off. I waited under a bush—rather longer than I intended, perhaps; but, you see, I wanted to make sure of their little game. After a bit they got tired of seeing the Stars and Stripes at the main truck, so they hauled the bunting down. Up to that point I'd seen only three men aboard; but by this time they'd come to the conclusion that we weren't having any. So they launched a boat and rowed ashore: eight men armed with rifles, and our old friend Strogoff sporting a pair of automatics. I thought it high time to sheer off, so I crept back for about fifty yards and again watched developments."

"Eight of 'em, not a-countin' Black Strogoff, were you sayin', sir?" inquired Minalto thoughtfully. "Sure, 'tes long odds, wi' only a pistol an' a cutlass 'twixt three on us. Was there more on 'em left aboard, sir?"

"I cannot say, Jasper. More than likely there were, but I didn't see them. They'd hardly all go ashore."

"Ef us could slip along, like," resumed Jasper, "an' swim off to the schooner—— When all's nice an' dark like."

"They'll probably go on board again to-night," said Burgoyne. "We'll have to think things out a bit. But when I left them they were smashing up our happy home just out of sheer mischief. When they've got tired of that they'll begin searching the island, so we had better lie low and keep quiet."

Presently the four fugitives heard the sounds of men forcing their way through the undergrowth, uttering fierce oaths in half a dozen different languages and occasionally firing their rifles. During intervals between the din, Black Strogoff's voice could be heard shouting an ultimatum to the objects of his search, to the effect that if they gave themselves up without further trouble, "including the young woman" ("so they know," thought Alwyn), their lives would be spared. Otherwise he, Strogoff, would search the island from end to end and shoot the men down without mercy.

The pirates were evidently following a trail, which turned out to be the well-trodden path leading to the summit of the look-out hill. So keen were they on the obvious track that they failed entirely to notice the tell-tale broken brushwood concealing the mouth of the cave.

After the sounds of the pursuit had died away in the distance, Jasper proposed that he should go out and see what was happening in the lagoon.

"No, you don't," said Burgoyne decidedly. "Ten to one you'll play straight into their hands, if you did. I shouldn't be at all surprised to know that they had posted snipers at various intervals to pick us off if we ventured out. Patience and discretion, Jasper. That's our motto for the present. How about grub?"

Another candle was lighted. They were of a kind known in the Royal Navy as "candles, lantern, ship's police", and in their present condition might be reckoned upon to burn four or five hours; so with the stock at their command the fugitives were not likely to be compelled to sit in the darkness.

Slowly the long day passed. At intervals the voices of the pirates could be heard, as they returned to the boat apparently to hold a council as to the next course to pursue. Black Strogoff had abandoned his delivery of an ultimatum. He was still sanguine of success, since the discovery of the wreckage of the life-boat and the hot ashes of the camp-fire proved almost conclusively that his quarry was on the island and unable to leave it.

At last night fell upon the scene. Although it made no visible difference to the interior of the cave, the darkness was noticed by the four fugitives mainly by the change of temperature, and the fact was confirmed when Burgoyne cautiously drew the screen and looked out.

"We'll have to be jolly careful with that light now," he observed. "A glimmer escaping and shining on the brushwood would give the show away in a brace of shakes. Put the candle in the old chest, Jasper; that will screen it a bit."

After a cold supper Hilda and Mostyn dropped off into fitful slumbers. Alwyn and Jasper remained on watch, straining their ears to catch any sound that might indicate the presence and

occupation of their pursuers.

Soon there were no doubts on the matter. The rogues had not gone on board the schooner but were carousing on shore. Some of them in wanton mischief and with the lust of destruction had fired the brush-wood. The roaring of the flames outvoiced that of the pirates, but fortunately the nor'east wind kept the fire from spreading towards the mouth of the cave.

"They're going it strong," remarked Burgoyne. "It must be long after midnight. They've started to quarrel now, I think."

"An' the li'l ole cask," said Minalto broodingly. "Ef I'd but taken ut away...."

The distant pandemonium waxed and waned according to the temper and excitability of the roysterers. The ribald singing was succeeded by a volley of oaths and rifle-shots and blood-curdling shrieks.

Minalto jogged his companion's elbow.

"That's fine!" he exclaimed with marked approval.

For the next hour the loud roar of the flames, as the fire overwhelmed the coco-palms, completely muffled all other sounds, but when at length, towards morning, the conflagration burnt itself out, there was a strange uncanny silence.

"Have a caulk, sir," said Jasper. "I'll be wide awake, if you'm of a mind to sleep."

"I think I will, then," replied Burgoyne gratefully, and for the next two hours he slept like a log.

The slanting rays of the sun were penetrating the brushwood when Alwyn awoke and lifted the canvas covering the entrance to the cave. The air was thick with pungent smoke.

"Wake up, Peter!" exclaimed Burgoyne. "Stand by till we return. We're going out to see what's doing."

CHAPTER XXV

The Tables Turned

Gripping the cutlass, Jasper Minalto followed the Third Officer into the open air, or rather to the edge of the belt of undergrowth that marked the fugitives' hiding-place.

This part of the island had undergone a complete transformation. Trees, scrub, and grass had vanished, leaving an expanse of blackened, still smouldering ashes. The lagoon, previously screened from the mouth of the cave, was fully exposed to an extent of almost a mile. On it, riding to a cable that hung perpendicularly from the hawse-pipe, was the schooner, with her sails lowered but loosely furled in a way that no self-respecting seaman would have been guilty of performing. There was the camp, too, with the shelter constructed from the wreckage of the life-boat lying upon the ground, and a fire still burning in the fire-place.

But what particularly attracted the attention of the two men was the sight of half a dozen or more motionless figures lying in strange attitudes upon the ground.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Burgoyne. "Minalto, my lad, your li'l ole cask has done us a good turn. They're all dead drunk. Two, four, six, eight of them. One's not accounted for. We'll risk that one. Stop here, and don't let yourself be seen. I'll go back and bring Mostyn along."

Burgoyne returned to the cave.

"Game for a big stunt, Peter?" he inquired.

"Rather, I'm on," replied Mostyn promptly. "What's doing?"

"Bring as much rope as you can carry," said Alwyn, "and come along. We've got them cold. Yes, and bring Minalto's spear. We may have to do a bit of gentle persuasion in the clubbing line."

The three men advanced cautiously upon the silent forms of the prostrate pirates, but it was not until they were within twenty paces of their intended prey that Burgoyne checked his companions.

No words were necessary. The three men could see for themselves what had happened.

There were eight pirates all dead. One, a Malay, was lying with his head and shoulders in the

still-smouldering embers. The others, all bearing wounds of bullets or knives, had fought to a finish. Jasper's li'l ole cask had vindicated its existence. Unused to spirits for months past, the pirates had hailed the discovery of the keg with wild delight. The potent stuff had made them mad drunk, and in their beastly state of intoxication they had quarrelled, using knives and rifles to back up their senseless arguments until all had fallen. Apparently the Malay had survived the others, but had rolled helplessly into the fire.

"Sarve 'em right!" exclaimed Jasper.

None of the three men felt any sense but that of gratitude for their deliverance. Humane though they undoubtedly were, they had no pity for the ruffianly crew now lying dead almost at their feet.

"Now for the schooner!" exclaimed Peter, stooping and securing a rifle and ammunition that had belonged to one of the villainous dead—an example which Jasper was not slow to follow.

"Steady!" cautioned Burgoyne. "There are eight here; where is the ninth?"

"Black Strogoff?"

"Ay; he'll want watching. He's not on board."

"How do you know that?" asked Mostyn.

"The boat isn't alongside. Come on; we'll find her along the beach."

Skirting the shore of the little creek, they gained the beach fronted by the lagoon. Rather more than a stone's throw away was the schooner's boat with her bow a good twelve feet from the water's edge. Tugging and straining at the boat was Black Strogoff, trying in vain to anticipate the rising tide by launching the small but heavily-built dinghy into the water.

Revolver in hand, Burgoyne stealthily approached the pirate lieutenant. The latter, furtively turning his head, caught sight of the three men whose capture he had so ardently desired, and now as devotedly wished to avoid.

"Hands up, Strogoff!" ordered Burgoyne.

For answer the rogue whipped out an automatic, at the same time kneeling behind the boat and resting the muzzle of the weapon on the gunwale.

Without hesitation Mostyn and Jasper both raised their rifles and took rapid aim. Both weapons barked simultaneously, even as Black Strogoff wildly loosed ten rounds from his pistol. The next instant the automatic was violently wrenched from the pirate-lieutenant's hand, leaving Strogoff not only defenceless, but with a dislocated wrist and his face cut in half a dozen places by fragments of the splayed nickel bullet.

"Surrender!" shouted the Third Officer, brandishing his revolver as he leapt towards the pirate.

Strogoff had not the faintest desire to avail himself of the offer. He knew that capture meant death at the rope's end.

"Shoot away!" he replied tauntingly.

Burgoyne did nothing of the sort. It was one thing to exchange shots in hot blood with a criminal; another to strike a human being down in cold blood.

Strogoff saw the Englishman's hesitation and took his chance. Wading waist-deep, he began swimming for the schooner, which was lying at anchor less than four hundred yards distant.

"Don't fire!" cautioned Alwyn.

"Don't mean to," rejoined Peter, snapping the safety-catch of his rifle.

"Launch the boat," continued Burgoyne. "We'll nab him long before he gains the schooner."

It was a man-hunt with a vengeance. The excitement of the chase provided far greater scope than merely shooting the swimmer through the head. To effect a capture appealed to their sporting instincts. Taking human life, or any animal life for that matter, did not, unless there were ample justification for it.

"What are you going to do with him?" asked Peter, when by the united efforts of the three men the boat was launched and the oars manned.

"Maroon him on the island," replied Burgoyne grimly. "He'll have the same chances as we did, anyway, and if he wins through——"

He stopped suddenly, let go the tiller, and sprang to his feet.

"Your rifle—quick, Peter!" he exclaimed hurriedly.

Mostyn handed over the weapon. The rowers laid on their oars and turned their heads to see what their companion was aiming at.

Black Strogoff was now only fifty yards ahead, swimming strongly in spite of his broken wrist, but close behind him was a dark, triangular-shaped object following the disturbed wake of the swimmer.

It was the dorsal fin of an enormous shark.

The pirate, unconscious of the dire peril that threatened him, swam steadily towards the schooner. Burgoyne, looking along the sights of the rifle, hesitated to fire, for the shark and the swimmer were in line with the muzzle. He might hit the shark, but the bullet would then ricochet and settle Strogoff into the bargain.

"Look out!" shouted the Third Officer. "Sharks!"

At the warning the pirate-lieutenant turned his head just in time to see the monster's dorsal fin disappear. The shark was turning on its back in order to seize its prey.

With a blood-curdling scream Black Strogoff threw up his arms and disappeared.

Thirty seconds later the boat was over the spot, where an ever-widening circle of ripples surrounded the blood-tinged patch that indicated the manner of Black Strogoff's death.

Burgoyne, pale under his tan, slipped the safety-catch of his rifle, laid the weapon in the stern-sheets, and resumed the tiller. As he did so he noticed that the boat's bottom boards and gratings were awash.

Kicking aside the stern-sheets grating, Alwyn felt for the plug. It was in position and jammed hard into the bung-hole.

"We've sprung a leak!" exclaimed Mostyn, stating an obvious fact; then, laying aside his oar, he quickly extracted a cartridge from one of the rifles, and inserted the bullet in a small hole just under the middle thwart.

Peter and Jasper exchanged meaning glances. One of the two had fired the shot that had completely penetrated both sides of the boat, although one of the holes was above water-line. Each, by that glance, tried to insinuate that the other was the culprit, at the same time proving that the shot that had disabled Black Strogoff was his.

"We'll appraise responsibility when we've finished the job," declared Burgoyne. "Now, steady all. Give way."

Keeping a keen watch on the apparently deserted schooner, the Third Officer steered the boat in her direction, holding a rifle ready to fire at the first sign of resistance.

"Easy all! Lay on your oars," ordered Burgoyne.

The boat, being bluff-bowed and laden, soon lost way, drifting idly at a distance of about twenty yards from the schooner.

Burgoyne fancied he heard a scuffling sound like metal being dragged across the deck. It might have been the grinding of the badly secured main-boom and yard as the vessel rolled sluggishly in the gentle swell.

"Take both oars, Minalto," continued Burgoyne. "Peter, old son, stand by with a rifle. Unless I'm much—"

Before he could complete the sentence the head and shoulders of a negro appeared above the low bulkhead. There was a flash, and a bullet sung past Burgoyne's right ear.

The rifles of the two Englishmen cracked in unison. Leaping a full three feet in the air, the negro fell writhing across the rail, and, slowly overbalancing, toppled into the sea.

The boarders waited, finger on trigger, for a full minute. All was quiet on board. Burgoyne judged it prudent to take possession of the craft.

"Stroke ahead, Jasper.... Good enough."

Minalto fended off the dinghy as she ranged up alongside. Then, holding the slack of the painter in his left hand, he grasped the main shrouds and swung himself on to the chain-plate.

Burgoyne was about to follow Minalto's example when Jasper, relinquishing his hold and raising a shout of alarm, fell backwards. Missing the gunwale of the boat by a hair's-breadth, he fell with a terrific splash into the water. Where his hand had been grasping the bulwark not a second before, a glittering knife was quivering, its point sunk an inch deep into the teak rail.

Leaving Jasper to shift for himself, Burgoyne leapt on deck just in time to see Ah Ling

disappearing into a low deck-house just for'ard of the wheel.

The door crashed to. Alwyn could hear the Chinaman hurriedly barricading it. Then a spurt of flame leapt from one of the side scuttles, and a revolver bullet chipped the mainmast.

"Keep where you are, Peter!" shouted Burgoyne. "I'll manage this part of the show. Where's Minalto?"

"In t' boat," replied that worthy.

"Hurt?"

"No, sir."

"Then stay there," said the Third Officer peremptorily.

Burgoyne had already thrown himself flat upon the deck behind the raised coaming of the main hatch. With his rifle by his side he exposed no more than a part of his head, his right shoulder and arm to the fire of the trapped Chinaman.

Ah Ling was evidently prepared to put up a stiff fight. With Oriental fatalism he seemed to realize that his chance of escape was hopeless, but at the same time he had no intention of surrendering. Nor had Burgoyne any desire to invite the Chink to give himself up, for with Ah Ling a prisoner the fugitives would be constantly in fear that the Celestial would free himself. And Alwyn had had experience of the ferocity and diabolical cunning of Chinese.

"Tany rate," he soliloquized. "It's a fair scrap. One against one, not three."

A hand grasping an automatic appeared through one of the scuttles on the port side of the deck-house. Burgoyne promptly fired at it. The hand remained, although the marksman felt sure that at that comparatively short range it was impossible to miss.

Ejecting the still-smoking cylinder, Burgoyne thrust another cartridge into the breech, keeping the cut-off of the magazine closed in order to provide against the possibility of a blind rush on the part of his yellow antagonist.

At the second shot the automatic fell to the deck and the hand was withdrawn. Yells of pain issued from the deck-house.

"That's got him!" ejaculated Burgoyne, and, springing to his feet, he rushed towards Ah Ling's retreat. It was a false, almost fatal move, for as the Third Officer emerged from behind the cover of the hatchway a tongue of flame leapt from the deck-house close to the rise of the door-step. The bullet literally sent some of the Englishman's hair flying.

Partly dazed by the nickel missile, Burgoyne retained sufficient presence of mind to drop flat upon the deck and wriggle back to his cover, but not before Ah Ling had fired two more shots that were quite ineffectual.

Burgoyne decided that he was up against a tough proposition. He had to take into consideration the fact that he was not only fighting a well-armed man but a wily one into the bargain. Ah Ling had certainly got the best of the first round, for Alwyn's rifle was lying on the deck beyond reach of his hand and in an uninterrupted line of fire from the deck-house.

"That hand was a dummy," decided Burgoyne. "The whole time the Chink was lying on the deck waiting for me. When I get hold of that rifle again, I'll let him know what's what."

He scorned the idea of calling upon his comrades to throw him another rifle, nor would he entertain the suggestion that they should join in the scrap. Somehow it didn't seem quite British. The odds were level, and that appealed to his sense of fair play.

Keeping close to the deck, Burgoyne crawled to the base of the main-mast, thanking his lucky stars that nine inches of heavy oak faced with iron comprised the construction of the main-hatch coaming. That was sufficient to stop a bullet, otherwise Ah Ling would have raked the woodwork and rendered the Englishman's position untenable.

From the spider band of the main-mast Alwyn took a coil of light rope. With this he retraced his course, and, arriving at his "sniper's post", proceeded to throw a bight of the rope over the rifle until it engaged in the upturned bolt.

"That's the ticket!" he chuckled, as he retrieved the weapon. "Now, my festive Chink, you're going to have the time of your life."

Aiming at the lower part of the door at a height of a foot or eighteen inches from the deck, Burgoyne sent bullet after bullet crashing through the woodwork; then, varying the performance, he peppered the whole exposed front of the deck-house indiscriminately until he could see daylight through it.

Not a sight nor a sound of the Celestial could be seen or heard.

"No hurry," decided Alwyn, bearing in mind his former rashness. "By Jove! This is where a stink-bomb would come in jolly handy."

"When you've done smashing up his happy home, old bird!" sung out Mostyn from the dinghy, "where do we come in?"

"You sit tight," replied Burgoyne. "The Chink very nearly pipped me. He's as artful as a waggon-load of monkeys. I'll let you know when you're wanted."

Placing his rifle by his side, Alwyn resumed his passive attitude towards the silent and invisible Celestial. There could be very little doubt, he reasoned, that Ah Ling had survived that fusillade.

For quite five minutes he remained on the alert, but a strange, uncanny silence seemed to brood over that bullet-riddled structure.

"I'll put in five more rounds," he decided. "Then I'll investigate at close quarters. The blighter must be done in absolutely by this time."

He was on the point of carrying his intention into effect when Mostyn hailed excitedly:

"He's done you, my festive! The Chink's half-way to shore."

Burgoyne sprang to his feet and looked over the side. Swimming towards the little inlet was a Chinaman, bareheaded and with his pigtail trailing in the water. Ah Ling, he knew, wore a pigtail. Very few of the Chinese pirates did, but he was evidently not a believer in the Western craze that was sweeping over the yellow republic. But it might be just possible that there had been a third man on board the schooner.

Unhesitatingly the Third Officer ran aft and peered into the riddled deck-house. It was empty as far as human beings were concerned. There were a couple of rifles and several pistols, while raised at an angle of about 45 degrees to the floor was a sheet of steel that, while not stout enough to stop a direct hit, was capable of deflecting an obliquely striking bullet.

Unseen and unheard, Ah Ling had abandoned his defences and had slipped over the taffrail. He was now within fifty yards of the shore, where, to the horror of Burgoyne and his companions, Hilda Vivian was standing gazing with perplexity at the captured schooner.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Fate of Ah Ling

"I've made a thorough mess of things this time," thought Alwyn, angry with himself that his idea of a "one man show" had run Miss Vivian into danger. "If I'd had Peter and Minalto to bear a hand, we'd have settled the Chink on the spot."

Jumping into the stern-sheets of the dinghy, Burgoyne urged his companions to "pull like blue smoke", then, shouting at the top of his voice, he warned Hilda of her peril.

Hitherto the girl's attention had been centred on the dinghy lying alongside the schooner. She had heard the fusillade, and, unable to remain any longer in suspense, she had left the cave and made her way to the shore, fortunately giving the site of the camp and its ghastly occupants a wide berth.

The fact that Peter and Jasper were in the boat reassured her to a great extent, but she could not think of a satisfactory explanation of Burgoyne's disappearance.

The Third Officer's stentorian warning called her attention to the yellow, expressionless features of the Chinaman as he swam for the beach. For a moment Hilda hesitated, half inclined to swim off to meet the rapidly approaching boat, but the danger of being intercepted by the Celestial urged her to make for the cave.

She had a little less than a hundred yards start when Ah Ling gained the shore. Brandishing a knife in one hand and an automatic pistol in the other, he ran in pursuit.

Thrice did Alwyn fire at the Chinaman before he disappeared behind the palm trees, but the jerky motion of the boat spoilt his aim. Ah Ling paid not the faintest attention to the shots. He seemed to ignore the fact that he was being pursued, and devoted all his energies to overtake the terrified girl. In short, he had a fixed idea that he would soon be killed, but before he died he would take care to slay the "white she-devil", in quest of whom his companions had met with utter disaster.

Well before the dinghy's forefoot grounded on the sandy beach, Burgoyne leapt out of the boat and ran in the direction taken by Hilda and the Chinaman, Mostyn being a good second, while the heavily built Minalto followed at his top speed, which was barely half that of his agile companions.

Alwyn had discarded his rifle on account of the weight of the weapon, trusting to his small but powerful revolver. The others carried rifles, Jasper in addition having the naked cutlass stuck in his leather belt.

The dull thud of Ah Ling's wooden shoes upon the hard ground guided them until with uncanny suddenness the sounds ceased. The hitherto clearly defined trail of moisture dropping from the Chinaman's sodden clothes also failed. Burgoyne, revolver in hand, found himself standing at the junction of two forked paths, utterly uncertain which direction to take.

He was afraid to shout to Hilda lest her reply should betray her whereabouts. Listening intently, he could hear nothing of either the pursued or the pursuer.

"Take that path, Peter!" he said hurriedly, as Mostyn overtook him. "I'll take this one. Let the brute have it on sight if you spot him."



Alwyn, following the left-hand branch of the fork, had barely covered a hundred paces when he almost stumbled over the motionless figure of Hilda Vivian lying face downwards in a patch of trodden grass. Before he could get to the girl he heard a heavy body crashing through the brushwood.

Wild with fury and desperate to wreck vengeance upon the Chinaman, Alwyn dashed in pursuit, forcing his way at breakneck speed through the dense undergrowth. With feelings of grim satisfaction he realized that he was gaining on the object of his pursuit.

Meanwhile Jasper Minalto, proceeding as fast as he could along the path, was beginning to grasp the fact that his companions were forging ahead hand over fist. More than once the cutlass nearly tripped him up, and the weight of the rifle proved a heavy encumbrance. Pausing for breath, he laid his rifle against the trunk of a tree, removed the cutlass from his belt, taking in the slack of the latter.

The temporary halt had caused the perspiration to run freely. Before he resumed his way he was obliged to wipe the moisture from his face and eyes with the broad leaf of a large plant.

Then, grasping the cutlass, he was about to start running again, when to his surprise he saw Ah Ling's head and shoulders cautiously appear from behind a clump of canes.

The Chinaman's tactics were fairly obvious. He had worked to the rear of his pursuers by a circular route, hoping to be able to take them unawares and shoot them down. His strategy was good up to a certain point. He had reckoned that the three white men would keep together, not knowing that the giant Scillonian was eighty yards or more behind the others.

Well it was that Minalto had made no sound during his brief halt; and so intent was Ah Ling upon stalking his foes that he was quite unaware that one of them was stalking him.

There were moments when the usually slow-working mind of Jasper Minalto moved rapidly, and this was one of them. In a trice the now keen cutlass, wielded by a brawny muscular arm, flashed in the sunlight. The swish of the blade through the air was followed by a dull, indescribable thud, as Ah Ling's head parted company with his shoulders.

During the Great War Jasper Minalto had seen some ghastly sights. He had served on board a Q-boat when shells from a U-boat were taking heavy toll of the devoted crew; he had seen the same Q-boat, almost a wreck, suddenly spring into activity and send the Boche to the bottom with one well-directed salvo. On another occasion the same ship had rammed a U-boat with all hands. And on board the *Donibristle* he had seen his unresisting comrades mown down by shells from the pirate *Malfilio*. But never before had he knowingly killed a man. He had assisted in the slaughter of dozens, but that was hardly the same thing as personally sending a human being—even though he were a Chinese pirate and ruffian—into the unknown. The thought of it made him feel sick. Like most men of great stature, he was a child at heart, although brought up in a rough school.

Having deliberately cleaned the blade of the cutlass by thrusting it into the ground, Jasper leisurely resumed his way. He decided that, Ah Ling being of no further account, there was no need to exert himself. At the fork of the path he stopped irresolutely, until a rifle-shot fired at no great distance stirred him to action.

Hurrying along the left-hand path, he, too, almost stumbled over the unconscious form of Hilda Vivian. Her white canvas coat was stained with blood that flowed copiously from a small wound in the left shoulder.

Horror stricken, Jasper raised the girl. Then in helpless perplexity he raised his voice and shouted, calling to Burgoyne for aid.

Totally unaware of the rapid events of the last few minutes, Alwyn was closely following up his prey. Suddenly he noticed a movement in the brushwood, not five yards ahead of him. Raising his revolver, he sent a bullet straight at the writhing object. An unearthly groan followed the report of the weapon, and a heavy body collapsed on the hard ground.

"That's done for you!" ejaculated Burgoyne wrathfully.

Then, tearing aside the undergrowth, he found that the supposed Chinaman was a young boar, killed outright by the severing of the spinal cord.

Alwyn decided that his luck was right out. There was Hilda lying murdered while her ruffianly assailant Ah Ling had escaped, and was probably hiding safe from pursuit in the dense undergrowth that covered the greater part of the island.

"I'll have the brute yet," he vowed, "even if we have to burn the rest of the scrub."

He was on the point of hailing Mostyn to warn him of what had occurred, when he heard his own name shouted in a voice that he hardly recognized as Minalto's.

Retracing his course, Burgoyne found Jasper trying to restore Miss Vivian to consciousness.

"I've lost the blighter, Jasper," announced Alwyn regretfully. "He's somewhere in the scrub."

"He is, sir," agreed Minalto with firm conviction.

"I'd give my right hand," continued the Third Officer, "to see Ah Ling dead as a door-nail."

"Then put it here, sir," rejoined Jasper, extending his hand.

"What do you mean?" demanded Burgoyne.

"Same's what I was a-sayin', sir," replied the imperturbable man, for his agitation had vanished at his companion's return. "But seems best as if we wur tu tak the young leddy out o' this. She ain't much hurt as I can see. Looks more like a graze than a bullet hole or a stick wi' a knife."

"Right-o," agreed Alwyn. "What we want is fresh water to dress the wound. Yes, you're right, Jasper; it is a graze."

Burgoyne raised the unconscious girl.

"Best let me, sir," interposed Jasper. "Seein' as 'ow we might be fallin' foul of that there Chink, an' I left me rifle up along."

Realizing the soundness of Minalto's advice but ignorant of the motives that prompted the tendering of it, Burgoyne transferred the girl's limp form to Jasper's massive arms. Then, with his revolver ready for instant use, Alwyn led the way back to the spring hard by the devastated camp.

Suddenly he stopped dead, hardly able to credit the evidence of his eyes, for lying in his path was the head of the pirate Ah Ling.

Burgoyne glanced over his shoulder and met the stolid gaze of his companion.

"You did this, then," he said.

"Ay, ay, sir," was the calm admission.

"Then why on earth didn't you tell me?"

"I never was axed; arter all, it wurn't much tu brag about, seeing as 'ow I took 'im unawares-like. An' me bein' a quiet, well-disposed man. But, there, sir; I did gi' ye my 'and when you offered yours, so you'm no call to say I didn't warn 'ee."

Although considerably nettled by the bad breakdown of his method of conducting operations, Burgoyne was quite ready to admit that the fault was his. After all, success had crowned the united efforts of the castaways. Black Strogoff, Ah Ling, and the rest of the pirates were back numbers, and the schooner was a prize to Burgoyne and his companions. As an off-set Hilda Vivian had been stricken down, but how as yet remained an unsolved problem. Had the Chinaman been her assailant she would not have got off so lightly.

For her injuries were found to be slight. Beyond the wound in her shoulder and a slight gash on her forehead there were no evidences of injury.

Deftly Burgoyne and Minalto dressed the hurts and bathed her temples and wrists in cold water. By the time Peter Mostyn returned, having scoured the greater part of the island in an unsuccessful search, Hilda was able to sit up.

She was considerably shaken, and her nerves, already subjected to a severe strain, were on edge, but she was able to give a clear account of her adventures after the three men had sallied forth from the cave to try conclusions with the crew of the schooner.

For a considerable time after their departure Hilda remained in her retreat, until, unable to resist her anxiety, she had cautiously made her way down to the shore, without seeing anything of the dead pirates lying around the ashes of the camp-fire.

When Burgoyne's shouts warned her of her peril, the girl saw Ah Ling's evil face as he swam towards the shore. Once she made up her mind she started to return to the cave, but the Chinaman had already cut off her retreat in that direction; or at all events she would not have been able to regain the shelter without betraying its whereabouts.

So she took to the woods, hoping either to elude the Chinaman or else to make a circuitous route back to the beach, where by that time Burgoyne and his companions would have landed.

Then, as luck would have it, a boar dashed out of the undergrowth, and, charging, threw her violently to the ground. She remembered nothing more until she found herself on the shore with

Burgoyne and Jasper bathing her face and hands with cold water.

"There's nothing now to fear from the pirates," Alwyn reassured her. "We've captured the schooner, and as soon as we can we'll leave Swan Island astern of us. But try and get a few hours' quiet sleep. By that time we ought to be ready to go aboard."

Hilda obeyed readily enough. She was too weak to do otherwise, although she would have liked to take an active part in the preparations for continuing the interrupted voyage.

"Now, lads," said Burgoyne. "We've work to do, and the sooner the better. We'll have to make the schooner habitable. I don't know what she's like 'tween decks, but I can guess. And another thing: Miss Vivian mustn't be allowed to see our old camp. We'll square things up a bit, but that isn't everything."

"I suppose the schooner's properly moored," remarked Mostyn.

"I doubt it. Single anchor," replied Alwyn. "We'll tow her into the creek at high water; there'll be depth enough and more over the bar, and once inside she'll be safer and easier to provision."

While waiting for sufficient depth of water to float the captured schooner into the creek, Burgoyne and his companions proceeded to the spot where lay the bodies of the eight pirates. As they expected, nothing of use was left in the camp. Even the bow and stern portions had been smashed up and burnt, but the staves of Minalto's li'l ole cask were still in evidence.

Presently Peter touched Alwyn's arm.

"Come here a minute," he said, and led him to where one of the men lay with his skull battered in, and a broken rifle by his side.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated Burgoyne. "It's Miles, or what's left of him."

The treacherous Canuk bagman had met with his just deserts. It was he who had betrayed the identity of Young Bill, hoping to curry favour with the pirate leaders. Black Strogoff, in Ramon Porfirio's absence, decided to act upon the information, but he was a few hours too late. Miles's reward was not at all what he expected. He was curtly ordered to join the band of pirates told off to man the schooner that was to set sail in pursuit of the English girl and her three companions. And the traitor was to a great extent responsible for the disaster that had overtaken the pursuers, for it was he who had found the li'l ole keg, and had started the quarrel when most of the men were drunk with the well-matured rum.

CHAPTER XXVII

Farewell to Swan Island

Launching the dinghy, Burgoyne and his companions rowed off to the schooner. It was now close on high water and the wind had dropped to almost a flat calm. Laboriously they manned the winch until the cable was up and down, then for half an hour they toiled before they succeeded in breaking out the heavy anchor from the tenacious hold of the bed of the lagoon. Then followed a strenuous task under the broiling rays of the afternoon sun as they towed the vessel into the creek.

By that time Burgoyne realized that he had been over sanguine in his surmise. He had not taken into account the almost inevitable hitches in his plans, and he had forgotten the now patent fact that none of them had had a good sleep for the last thirty hours.

"She'll lie there nicely," he decided, as the anchor was let go and a stout warp taken ashore and made fast to a sturdy palm tree. "We'll spend the rest of the day making everything ship-shape, but I don't quite fancy sleeping aboard to-night."

The work of cleansing this maritime Augean stables proceeded with a will, for the schooner was indescribably filthy both on deck and below. Her paraffin motor was in a terribly neglected state, so that it was a source of wonder to Alwyn and Peter that the pirates ever succeeded in getting the engine to perform duty at all. Most of the running gear was good, having been renewed from cordage taken from the captured merchantmen; but the sails, though serviceable in light winds, did not appear to be capable of standing up to a stiff blow.

Of provisions they found a liberal quantity, although the quality left much to be desired. Aided by stores from the island, the new crew ought to be able to subsist comfortably for a month without having to reprovision the grub-lockers. Particularly acceptable were air-tight canisters of tea, coffee, and cocoa, boxes of sugar, and an unopened crate of condensed milk, as well as a variety of cooking utensils.

"Knock off time!" declared Burgoyne, to the relief of his weary and tired companions, although they had no cause for complaint that he had shirked his fair share. "We'll turn in in the cave tonight, since most of our gear's there. Bring that grub along, Jasper; I'll see to the kettle and the tea-pot; Peter, you cart along the knives, and milk, sugar, and tea. We're going to surprise Miss Vivian when she wakes up."

Soon after they landed a fire was blazing merrily. While the kettle was boiling Mostyn made some tea-cups by cutting out a section of several coco-nut shells. Although there were enamelled tea-cups in plenty on board, the three men could not bring themselves to make use of them. They were not fastidious, but they drew the line at drinking out of cups used by pirates.

Compared with the food to which they had been accustomed during their captivity at the secret base and their subsequent escape, the meal promised to be a sumptuous one.

When all was in readiness they roused Hilda from her slumbers. Beyond a slight stiffness she felt little the worse for her alarming experience. A refreshing sleep had driven away her headache, and, to quote her own words, she felt ready to go anywhere or do anything.

"Then, how about tea?" asked Burgoyne. "Real tea?"

Hilda looked a bit doubtful. She rather fancied that Burgoyne was "chipping her". Then she caught a whiff of the fragrant odour as Peter poured the boiling water on to the tea.

"Oh, how nice!" she exclaimed enthusiastically, and almost in the same breath she added anxiously: "but I hope you washed the tea-pot thoroughly?"

The meal over, another surprise was forthcoming when Minalto proudly produced a tin of tobacco and some cigarette papers, which he had found in the after-cabin of the schooner. With unexpected dexterity Jasper's huge and clumsy-looking fingers rolled half a dozen cigarettes, and soon the three men were enjoying the long-denied luxury of smoking the fragrant weed; while Hilda, not to be left out in the cold, proceeded to make appetizing coco-nut cakes of flour, sugar, and grated nuts, which she baked on a piece of sheet iron over the fire.

Early next morning all hands were up and doing. Each had his or her allotted task: the men to overhaul and clean out the schooner, while Hilda baked biscuits and boiled ham for the voyage.

By noon the schooner was presentable. The decks had been scrubbed down with sand and water, the paintwork in both cabins washed down, and everything well aired. Mostyn tackled the motor, an American kerosene engine, taking down the four cylinders, cleaning plugs and magneto, and overhauling the thoroughly dirty carburettor.

"I don't know what her consumption is," he observed to Burgoyne, "but assuming that it is three gallons an hour, we have only enough fuel for a twenty-four hours' run."

"Ought to be enough unless we strike bad luck in the way of calms," replied Alwyn. "We'll carry on under sail whenever possible, and only use the motor in cases of emergency. Think she'll fire?"

"We'll try her," said Mostyn hopefully. "We can declutch, but we can't go astern. Not that that matters very much. Flood the carburettor, old son, while I dope the cylinders. Yes, that's the petrol-tap. When she's warm we can change over to paraffin. Ready?"

A dozen swings of the starting-handle failed to produce the desired effect. The two men, perspiring profusely, looked at one another more in sorrow than in anger.

"Try advancing the ignition," suggested Alwyn.

"She may back-fire," demurred Peter, "but I'll risk it. Give her more dope. Sure the carburettor's flooding?"

Again they swotted at turning the engine over, Peter at the fly-wheel and Burgoyne at the starting-handle.

"Obstinate as a mule," declared Mostyn. "Get Jasper to bear a hand, while I 'ot up them plugs—you remember old Paterson's recipe for a refractory motor?"

They heated the sparking-plugs, primed them with petrol, and replaced them. Minalto at the starting-handle heaved until the veins in his forehead looked to be on the point of bursting, but not the faintest sign of an explosion on the part of the motor rewarded his efforts.

"I say," remarked Alwyn; "I suppose you've switched on the ignition?"

Mostyn pointed to the switch. The knob was down right enough.

"Swing her again, Jasper," said Burgoyne coaxingly.

Placing his fingers on the magneto, Alwyn received what he described as a "beautiful shock".

"The mag's all right," he announced, rubbing his tingling elbow. "Now, once more, Jasper, while

I try the plug terminals."

Not the suspicion of a spark was obtainable with any of the four plugs. Burgoyne scratched his head in his perplexity.

"Faulty insulation, I believe," he hazarded.

"Perhaps the ignition-switch has to be up, not down," he said. "Sometimes they fit the wiring so that the current is 'shorted' and not broken by the switch. Now try."

The result surpassed expectations, for the engine back-fired, throwing the starting-handle violently against the roof and barking Minalto's knuckles into the bargain. But the motor was buzzing round with the precision of a steam-engine.

"*Experientia docet!*" exclaimed Peter, raising his voice above the din of the whirring machinery.

"Ay, ay, sir," agreed Minalto, wiping the back of his hand with a piece of cotton waste. "Experience does it. Does she kick every time we'm starting her like? Ef so my name's Johnny Walker this trip."

At length Mostyn decided that the initial trial was satisfactory. The ignition was cut off, and the engine clanked into a state of coma.

The midday meal over, the task of conveying the treasured relics of their stay on Swan Island from the cave to the schooner was begun. The provisions were shipped and the water-tanks replenished—the latter a tedious task, since it necessitated twenty journeys between the spring and the schooner. By four o'clock in the afternoon, according to the schooner's chronometer, all was in readiness to heave up anchor and get under way.

"We'll be well clear of the reefs before sundown," said Burgoyne. "If we keep her under easy canvas all night and crack on during daylight, we ought to make a fairly good passage."

Hilda was below, arranging to her requirements the after-cabin which had been allotted to her. The clanking of the winch, and the grinding of the cable as it came in link by link through the hawse-pipe, warned her that the last material bond with Swan Island was about to be broken. She hurried on deck to find the dinghy already hoisted inboard, and the cable almost hove short.

"Good enough for the present," exclaimed Burgoyne. "Start up, Peter. Well, Miss Vivian, we're saying good-bye to the island."

"I'm sorry—and glad," replied Hilda. "We—at least, I have had some good times on Swan Island. Until the pirates came I rather enjoyed it, although the thought that my father and the others were suffering hardships made me feel as if I were wasting time. Not that it could be helped."

For a few moments her gaze rested on the blackened slopes of the fire-devastated part of the island; then her eyes travelled in the direction of the still verdant part where the marauding pirates had not left their mark.

She remained silent for a little longer, feasting her eyes on the picturesque scene, then with a sigh she turned abruptly and looked resolutely seaward.

"All ready, skipper!" shouted Mostyn from below, as the deck quivered under the rapid impulses of the engine.

Going forward, Burgoyne assisted Minalto to break out and heave up the anchor. Then, leaving Jasper to secure the ponderous "mud-hook" in its proper place, Alwyn returned aft to the wheel.

"Easy ahead."

The schooner forged gently through the placid water. A few turns of the wheel steadied her on her course, and in a few minutes she was clear of the inlet and slipping quietly across the lagoon.

Keeping the schooner almost dead slow, Burgoyne nursed her through the narrow southern passage between the reef. Then, porting helm to avoid the ledges off Man-o'-War Island, he steered for the open sea.

Half an hour from the time of getting under way, the schooner was curtsying to the deep blue waters of the Pacific. Ahead as far as the eye could see—and much farther—was a vast expanse of ocean.

"Do you mind taking her for a few minutes, Miss Vivian?" asked Burgoyne, standing aside to let the girl grasp the spokes of the wheel. "Yes, south by west, please."

Then, stepping to the motor-room hatchway, he called to Mostyn.

"Finished with the engines, my festive. All hands make sail."

For the next quarter of an hour the three men were busily engaged in hoisting the head-sails,

since the wind was almost right aft, and then the fore- and mainsails. In view of the approach of night, they decided to dispense with the jib-headed top-sails. Not until the canvas was well peaked up, and the falls of the halliards neatly coiled down, did the crew relax their efforts, and by that time the highest part of Swan Island had vanished in the gathering darkness.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The "Titania"

The next three days passed without incident. The breeze held steadily, but owing to the foul state of the schooner's bottom, which was encrusted with barnacles and growing marine "whiskers" up to a yard in length, her speed was less than five knots. There were navigation instruments and nautical works on board, so that Burgoyne was able to determine the latitude with tolerable certainty. The finding of the ship's longitude was a doubtful operation, since Alwyn was in ignorance of the exactness of the chronometer, but since the course was almost due south, and the ultimate goal a wide one, Burgoyne felt no misgivings on the score of longitude.

At sundown on the third day the wind died down to a flat calm, and the schooner rolled sullenly in the long swell. So violent was the motion of the main-boom, that the crew were compelled to stow the mainsail. Even then the gaff of the fore-sail was charging about like a flail, while every movable object on deck was chattering with the erratic motion of the vessel.

In case of a sudden squall blowing up during the night the three men remained on deck. There was nothing to be done. The wheel, lashed down in a vain attempt to subdue the disconcerting jerk of the rudder chains, required no attention. The side lights were burning brightly. The air was warm, although there was a heavy dew. So the night passed slowly, the crew passing the time by yarning and considerably reducing the stock of tobacco that Black Strogoff had unwittingly left for their comfort.

Day broke. The weary crew looked in vain for the signs of an approaching breeze. Even the swell had subsided until the surface of the sea looked like a burnished mirror against the rising sun. A few dolphins playing near the ship were the only signs of life.

"A regular Paddy's hurricane," remarked Burgoyne. "Looks as if it's going to last. We may as well start up the engine, old son. The sooner we get out of this belt of calm the better."

"All right, skipper," replied Mostyn cheerfully, his tiredness temporarily forgotten at the thought of once more getting way on the vessel.

In less than ten minutes the motor was running, and the schooner bowling along at a speed of seven and a half knots by the patent log. Giving time for the engine to get sufficiently hot for the paraffin to vaporize, Peter turned off the petrol and opened the paraffin-tap. Satisfied with the running of the engine, Mostyn returned on deck.

"That's more like it," he exclaimed, as the faint draught of air set up by the motion of the craft fanned his heated face. "How long do you think it will be before we pick up a breeze?"

"Four or five hours, I expect," replied Burgoyne. "These belts of calm rarely extend more than forty miles in the tropics."

"She'll do that on her head," declared Peter. Then he listened intently. His ear, trained to catch the faint buzzing of a wireless receiver, had detected a pronounced slowing down of the hitherto regular pulsations of the engine.

Without a word he dived down the motor-room ladder. He had not been mistaken. The engine was slowing down. A rapid test located the fault. The carburettor was almost empty.

"Choked jet," he said to himself; then, as an afterthought, he "turned over" to petrol again. Almost immediately the motor picked up and the shaft resumed its normal revolutions.

"That means a choke in the feed-pipe," he decided, and, selecting a small shifting spanner, proceeded to disconnect the unions.

No paraffin flowed through the pipe. Mostyn glanced at the gauge on the tank. It registered zero. Unaccountably the tank had emptied itself of more than seventy gallons of paraffin during the night.

Further researches discovered the cause, although that could not give back the wasted fuel. The paraffin-pipe was fractured, possibly by the starting-handle when the engine back-fired, and now only about a gallon of petrol was available.

Burgoyne looked grave when Mostyn reported the latest misfortune.

"We've paraffin for the lamps," he remarked. "About ten gallons in a drum in the forepeak. Can you patch up the pipe?"

"If that were all the damage, old thing, it wouldn't much matter," declared Peter. "I can fix that up with insulating tape in a couple of minutes. It's the wasted kerosene that worries me."

"S'pose we couldn't pump it out of the bilges?" asked Burgoyne.

"We'll have to, in case it vaporizes and explodes," replied Mostyn. "Of course, it isn't nearly so dangerous as petrol, but in hot weather——"

"I mean to use it again," interrupted Alwyn.

"Fraid not," said the temporary engineer. "It's all slushing about in the bilge-water. If the schooner had been bone dry we might have managed it. However, ten gallons is better than none. I'll fix up that pipe at once."

Mostyn effected the temporary repair, poured the remaining oil into the tank, and had turned over from petrol to paraffin in less than twenty minutes. He even added a gallon of lubricating oil to the fuel, knowing that with the engine well warmed up the motor would take almost anything in the way of liquid fuel.

Thus nursed, the engine continued running for nearly three hours and a half; then, every drop of combustible being used up, the motor stopped. The flat calm still held.

It held the rest of that day and the following night. Morning found the climatic conditions unchanged, and at noon Burgoyne ascertained that in twenty-four hours the schooner had drifted a little more than ten miles in a nor'-westerly direction, or in other words, she had been carried by the North Equatorial Current farther from her destination.

In vain the men took turns in going aloft to the cross-trees in the hope of seeing the water ruffled by a welcome breeze. As the sun rose higher and higher the heat was so intense that the deck was almost too hot to tread upon, while below the air was suffocating. Although Mostyn and Minalto had pumped the bilges dry, the whole craft reeked of paraffin, mellowed by a dozen distinct odours.

"Cheer up," exclaimed Burgoyne, trying to rouse his companions from a state of lethargy. "Things might be a jolly sight worse. Remember the men who made the British Empire what it is to-day had to endure this sort of thing every time they encountered the Doldrums."

"Yes," grumbled Peter. "They might have; but they knew what to expect—before steam was known, I mean. We are different. Spoilt by civilization, so to speak, and when we are deprived of luxuries which we call necessaries, we grouse. Our motor, for example, it's like a half-baked chestnut, neither one thing nor the other."

"It has helped us, Mr. Mostyn," observed Hilda.

"True, Miss Vivian," agreed Peter guardedly. "Helped us move with the patch of calm. What was the old seamen's dodge of raising the wind?"

"Pitching a tale of woe to charitable passers-by, I guess," replied the girl.

"No, not that way, I mean," continued the Wireless Officer. "Wasn't it whistling or scratching the mast, or some such stunt? I'm afraid I've forgotten."

"Sail-ho!" shouted Minalto from the fore cross-trees. "On our port bow, sir."

The schooner, drifting idly on the placid surface, had swung round so that her bows were pointing nor'-nor'-east. Consequently, if the vessel sighted were approaching, her course would be roughly the same as that of the schooner if the latter had had steerage-way.

"What is she?" inquired Burgoyne, preparing to swarm aloft with Black Strogoff's binoculars slung round his neck.

"Can't make out, sir," was the reply. "Steamer. I think, 'cause there's no canvas as I can see."

"Let's hope it isn't the *Malfilio*," thought Alwyn, as he grasped the hot, tarry shrouds, and cautiously ascended the none too sound ratlins.

Gaining the elevated perch, Burgoyne levelled the glasses in the direction of the distant vessel.

"She's not the *Malfilio*, thank goodness, Jasper," he remarked. "She's a steamer schooner-rigged, and with one funnel; hull painted white. We'll signal her and get her to give us a passage."

In default of a set of International Code flags, Burgoyne hoisted a dark blanket rolled into a

ball, and under it two pennants hastily contrived by cutting up one of the cabin curtains. This was a substitute for the special long distance signals made by a ball and two cones point downwards, but its significance was clear to every experienced seamen. It meant: "Come nearer; I have something important to communicate".

Rather anxiously Burgoyne watched the approaching vessel. From his own point of view he would have preferred to let her pass by. He would have liked to bring the schooner into port solely on his own responsibility, even if it took a couple of months. But there were important considerations. There were his comrades in captivity; there was Hilda. It was highly important that the proper authorities should be informed of the actual fate of the three missing merchant ships in order that Ramon Porfirio and his band of pirates should be rendered incapable of doing further mischief.

In about half an hour after the hoisting of the signal, the approaching craft altered helm and steered towards Burgoyne's command.

She was a schooner-bowed vessel of about 400 tons, painted white hull with a green boot-top. Her single funnel emitted no smoke except little puffs of bluish vapour. She flew no ensign. Most of her crew were blacks, but on the bridge were two white men in white drill uniforms.

"She's motor driven," declared Peter. "That funnel is only a concession to appearance, even though it does carry out the exhaust. Wonder what she's doing here?"

"We'll soon find out," replied Burgoyne. "She is or was, at one time a private yacht. Have you collected all the gear you require, Miss Vivian? We are going to beg a passage in yonder vessel, and they may be in a hurry."

The stranger slowed down, but made no attempt to lower a boat. When within hailing distance, one of the officers on the bridge shouted through a megaphone.

"Schooner, ahoy! What do you want?"

"What ship is that?" inquired Burgoyne.

"*Titania*, of Southampton," was the reply. "What are you?"

"No name," replied Alwyn. "We're survivors of the S.S. *Donibristle*. Can you give us a passage?"

Evidently the name of the missing merchant vessel was unknown to the officers of the *Titania*. They conferred for a few minutes, then the one who had previously hailed raised his hand.

"Right-o!" he replied. "Stand by to take a warp. I'll run alongside you."

Under the action of the twin screws, the *Titania*, skilfully handled, ranged up alongside the diminutive schooner. In a very short space of time the crew of the latter with their scanty belongings stood on the *Titania's* deck.

They must have been a source of wonder to the neatly groomed and attired officers. They were all more or less in rags, and tanned almost to a deep red colour. Burgoyne, Mostyn, and Minalto all sported beards of different hues: red, blond, and black. Hilda, in her man's dress, bareheaded, and her growing locks nearly reaching her shoulders, was for the first time since leaving the secret base painfully conscious of her unorthodox appearance.

The *Titania's* skipper stepped forward to greet them, smartly saluting the girl.

"My name's Swayne," he announced. "This is my partner, Paddy O'Loghlin. Pleased to be of service to you."

"Thanks awfully," replied Burgoyne. "I've met you before. You were in the old *Bolero* in '18."

"I was," admitted Swayne, "but I can't recall your tally."

"Not in these whiskers," agreed Alwyn with a laugh, after he had introduced himself and his companions. "I was R.N. in those days. Our light cruiser was moored ahead of your packet in Dover Harbour."

"Good old days!" exclaimed Swayne whimsically. "Not that I've much to complain about as things go nowadays. We're bound from Nua Leha for Sydney. Will that suit?"

"Admirably," agreed Burgoyne.

"Your schooner," continued the skipper of the *Titania*. "Seems a pity to cast her adrift."

"Please yourself," said Alwyn. "We came by her cheaply enough, and she's served our purpose. If she's of any use to you, take her by all means."

"You've an engine on board," remarked O'Loghlin.

"But no petrol or kerosene," announced Mostyn. "Jolly good little motor, too."

"I'll accept your offer, Mr. Burgoyne," said Swayne. "We'll put a crew on board, and a hundred gallons of fuel, and let them navigate her to Nua Leha. We can pick her up later on. I've a fairly smart Kanaka navigator, and plenty of natives to spare until later on. We've been doing a bit of salvage work amongst the islands, and now we're off back to Sydney to replenish stores. Come below. Will you have anything to eat? As regards cabins we can easily fix you all up. Last trip we had thirteen all berthed aft. No, it wasn't unlucky for us. Quite the reverse. 'Spose you heard about the treasure recovered from the Fusi Yama? Kit? H'm, we can rig you out all right, but the lady—yes, Miss Vivian, we've a sewing-machine on board. A couple if you like."

While the crew of the *Titania*, under the supervision of O'Loghlin, were preparing the schooner for her independent cruise, Swayne busied himself to attend to the wants of his self-invited guests.

Pending the making up of suitable attire, Hilda was provided with new clothes of masculine cut. Burgoyne and Mostyn, after the luxury of a hair trim and shave, were completely "kitted out" from Swayne's and O'Loghlin's ample wardrobes, while Fontayne, the third Englishman of the *Titania's* complement, took Minalto in hand if for no other reason than that Fontayne hailed from the county nearest the Scillies.

"They've fuelled and provisioned the schooner," announced Swayne when Hilda, Burgoyne, and Mostyn returned to the saloon. "You may as well see the last of her. By that time grub will be ready."

They went on deck. The schooner's motor was running free, emitting dense columns of bluish smoke from her exhaust. Half a dozen Kanakas, under the charge of a big, full-faced Fijian, were in possession.

"All ready?" shouted O'Loghlin. "Let go."

The schooner forged ahead, ported helm, and swung round in her course towards the distant island of Nua Leha. Five minutes later the *Titania's* engines began to purr rhythmically, and at a steady twelve knots she headed south. Soon the schooner was a mere dot on the horizon, and then only did her late crew go below.

The meal was a sumptuous one as far as the guests were concerned. In honour of their fair passenger Swayne and his companions spared no effort to do the thing in style. Rose-tinted shades newly placed over the electric lamps threw a warm glow on the clean linen table-cloth. (The table-cloth was the only one on board, and usually the three men sat down to a coverless board, but that fact was sedulously kept dark.) The cutlery had been brightly polished; china took the place of the customary enamelled ware. Mahommed Bux, the Indian steward whom Swayne had engaged at Sydney, had risen splendidly to the occasion, and a dinner served in a style that would have done credit to many a noted French chef was duly appreciated.

They celebrated the occasion—the men being ex-officers of His Majesty's Service—by loyally drinking the King's health, then over the wine the story of the captured *Donibristle*, the secret base, and the adventures on Swan Island were related to the attentive and astonished hosts. Burgoyne kept back nothing in the recital.

"All I ask," he concluded, "is to keep the matter dark when we arrive at Sydney. The safety of our comrades in captivity depends largely upon a swift and successful coup, and I haven't the faintest doubt but that the Australian Navy will see to that, and do the job as effectually as the *Sydney* tackled the *Emden* at Cocos Keeling."

"You'll be there to see it done, you lucky dog," remarked Swayne.

"I don't know. I hope so," replied Burgoyne.

CHAPTER XXIX

The Admiral's Promise

"By the by," remarked Alwyn to the skipper of the *Titania* just before the former turned in, "do you happen to have a White Ensign on board?"

"By Jove, no," replied Swayne, somewhat astonished at the unusual request. "I'm not one to risk chucking away five hundred of the best for unlawfully flying colours to which I am not entitled, my pippin."

"I don't suppose you would be fined—in the circumstances to which I'm going to refer," said Burgoyne earnestly. "It's quite possible that we may fall in with the *Malfilio*. She's away cruising,

and she may be well south of the Line. The Pacific's wide, I know, and the probability of running up against her is small; but strange things happen at sea. She's got the speed of you by at least six knots."

"Well?"

"Then you'll have to bluff her," continued Burgoyne. "She'll fight shy of a White Ensign, even if flown from a mud-hopper, although she hasn't hesitated to use it herself.... If you had wireless ___"

"We haven't," said Swayne. "Didn't have any use for it."

"Perhaps it's as well," agreed Alwyn. "But let me advise you to get a White Ensign made up in case of emergency."

"Right-o, I will," replied Swayne. "We've a spare Red Ensign. It won't be much of a job to work in white bunting where necessary. I'll put a couple of hands on that at once. I don't fancy Miss Vivian borrowed both sewing-machines; but I do know she took one into the cabin and yards of white duck and drill."

At one bell in the forenoon watch a vessel was sighted broad on the starboard beam, and shaping a converging course towards the *Titania*.

"What do you make of her, George?" inquired Swayne.

Burgoyne had already brought his binoculars—formerly the property of the late Black Strogoff and possibly that of an honest man before the pirate lieutenant acquired them—to bear upon the stranger.

"Make of her?" he repeated softly. "There's not much doubt about it. That vessel is the *Malfilio*."

"But the third funnel?" demurred Mostyn.

"A fake," replied Burgoyne promptly. "I'd keep your dusky crew out of sight, Swayne, if I were you; and the sooner we run up the White Ensign the better."

Swayne was no coward—far from it—but he felt decidedly uncomfortable. It is one thing to face a Hun when your vessel is armed; another to attempt to bluff a pirate when your armament consists merely of one or two shot-guns, a couple of rifles, and a few automatics, and the pirate was able to back up his argument with six-inch quick-firers. To make matters worse the *Titania* carried 20,000 pounds worth of silver in her hold, the result of ten months' hard and dangerous toil under the sea, and it would be very hard lines if the fruit of her labours was simply snapped up by Ramon Porfirio and his gang of freebooters.

Remembering Burgoyne's warning of the great disparity in speed between the two vessels, Swayne resisted the impulse to put the helm hard over and show his heels to the cruiser.

"Right-o," he assented. "Up with the Ensign."

The impromptu emblem of the Royal Navy fluttered out bravely. Anxiously the crew of the *Titania* awaited developments. For some minutes the *Malfilio* held on. She was flying no flag. Possibly it had been her intention of hoisting the White Ensign, too; but the appearance of a similar flag on the little white craft rather upset Porfirio's calculations.

"By Jove! if we only had wireless," sighed Mostyn. "Wouldn't we have a game with him, calling up imaginary battle-cruisers and all that sort of thing."

A minute or so later the *Malfilio* hoisted the Rising Sun—the ensign of Japan, and still closing made the International Signal, "What ship is that?"

"Port helm a point, please," said Burgoyne; "we'll get within semaphore distance and then we'll puzzle him a bit."

The *Titania* rapidly closed her distance, for the *Malfilio* had slowed down and was doing about eight or nine knots. This manoeuvre undoubtedly perplexed Ramon Porfirio. Although he could have blown the former craft clean out of water, he had a wholesome respect for men-of-war of any description.

Burgoyne balanced himself on the weather stanchion-rails. There was no chance of the pirates recognizing the clean-shaven man as being one of the officers of the *Donibristle*.

Waving the two hand-flags Alwyn spelt out the following message: "H.M.A.S. *Titania*. We are escorting submarine flotilla carrying out quarterly torpedo exercise. Please keep clear. Other vessels of the squadron are also exercising in vicinity. Caution necessary especially at night."

Ramon Porfirio swallowed the fable. The word "submarine" scared him stiff, and he had not the faintest desire to run up against any of the powerful cruisers of the Royal Australian Navy.

Thrice the Japanese Ensign was dipped on board the *Malfilio*, a compliment that Swayne reluctantly returned. Then turning eight points to starboard the pirate cruiser made off at full speed.

"Burgoyne, dear old thing!" exclaimed Swayne exuberantly, "you've more than earned your passage. But for you we should have been properly in the *consommé*. Well, I hope I've seen the last of that blighter."

"I won't reciprocate your wish," rejoined Alwyn. "In fact I rather want to meet her again on a strictly business footing. I think we can now tell Miss Vivian that she is at liberty to come on deck."

Hilda was delighted to learn that another serious danger had been averted.

"How did you manage it?" she asked.

"Better inquire of this merchant, Miss Vivian," replied Swayne indicating Burgoyne, who turned a dusky red and shuffled his feet.

"The *Malfilio* sheered off. That's the long and short of it, Miss Vivian," he replied gruffly, in a vain attempt to deprecate his share of the affair.

The rest of the run down to Sydney passed almost without incident. Fine weather favoured the *Titania* until she made her landfall at Moreton Island, off the extreme south-east corner of Queensland. From there right down to Sydney she bore the brunt of a stiff easterly gale, and all hands were glad when the little craft passed between The Heads into the land-locked Port Jackson.

"Now we are in civilization once more, Miss Vivian," remarked Burgoyne, as the *Titania* approached the wharf where she was to be berthed. "You have no friends in Sydney, I suppose?"

Hilda shook her head.

"Then," continued Alwyn briskly, "you are still under my charge. I must be responsible for you until I hand you over to your father. As a matter of fact I've an uncle and aunt living at Balmain, just over there, and they'll make you welcome."

The girl had resumed feminine attire for the first time on board when the *Titania* "made her number" to the Outer North Head Lighthouse. For several days she had been most industrious, spending hours in her cabin with a sewing-machine for company. The result of her labours was a neat, well-fitting coat and skirt of plain workmanship and a shady hat to match.

"You seem to take your guardianship for granted, Mr. Burgoyne," she remarked with mock severity, although in her heart she admired the masterful way in which he had gone about things.

"Precisely," he rejoined. "Having had the responsibility of looking after you for so long, I am not going to throw up my trusteeship at this juncture, Miss Vivian. I mean to see this business through, and until I can report to Captain Blair and Colonel Vivian that I have done my duty you must consider yourself as—as—what shall I say?—a piece of merchandise of great value. You understand?"

"Yes," replied the girl. "We'll leave it at that, Mr. Burgoyne."

As soon as the *Titania* was moored. Burgoyne and Mostyn took Hilda ashore after she had said farewell to the good-natured Swayne, Fontayne, and O'Loughlin. Mr. and Mrs. Dalrymple Burgoyne readily consented to have Miss Vivian with them until the Colonel came to claim her, and this arrangement being satisfactorily transacted, Alwyn and Peter bade Hilda good-bye promising, if possible, to be back within a month or six weeks.

"Now, old son," remarked Burgoyne, as the two officers made their way back to the *Titania*, "we've business to attend to. You and I must try and wangle a place in the operations against our friend Porfirio. It'll take some doing. Pukka naval officers don't take kindly to outsiders when there's a job on. They'll probably try and get us to give all the information we can, and then tell us to stop still and be good boys while they go out and mop up the pirates. I rather fancy Swayne and the others want a look-in, too."

That was precisely what the part-owners of the *Titania* wanted, although they were not sanguine about it. Finally it was decided that the five should go in a body to the Senior Naval Officer, report the fact that the *Donibristle*, *Kittiwake*, and *Alvarado* were not lost at sea but were captured by pirates, and request that the five ex-officers be employed during the operations necessary for the destruction of the pirates.

That same afternoon they secured an interview with the Senior Naval Officer. The Admiral heard Burgoyne's startling statement without a sign that betrayed his surprise. In his mind he was sceptical. He had a suspicion that his visitors were skylarking young Australians "trying to pull his leg". Neither Alwyn nor Peter could produce documentary evidence proving what they claimed to be—officers of the Mercantile Marine belonging to the lost S.S. *Donibristle*.

Spreading out a chart of the North Pacific the Admiral questioned Burgoyne at some length. Alwyn's answers, prompt and to the point, carried conviction, and the naval officer had to admit that the existence and deeds of Ramon Porfirio formed one of the most surprising pieces of information that he had heard in the whole course of his career.

When Burgoyne came to that part of the story in which a vessel arrived off the island and displayed her searchlights the Admiral inquired:

"How long ago was that?"

Alwyn told him. The Admiral rang a bell and one of the officers on his staff appeared.

"Bring me the docket containing the report of Captain Consett, of the U.S.S. *Yosemite*, please," he said.

In a few minutes the document was forthcoming. The time given by Burgoyne and the Captain of the American cruiser exactly tallied, while there was a further similarity between the description of the island as recorded by the written reports and by Burgoyne, except that the former had not discovered the existence of life on the island.

"There's one thing," remarked the Admiral, "we have the exact position of this island. You say it is fortified? Can you let me have a rough plan of the anchorage, the approaches, and the batteries?"

Burgoyne complied. The Admiral looked at the drawing carefully and critically.

"You're a bit of a cartographer, I see," he remarked. "Where did you learn that?"

"At Osborne and Dartmouth, sir," replied Alwyn. "I was one of the 'redundant' officers, withdrawing with a gratuity in 1920. Since then I have been in the Mercantile Marine."

Three hours passed before the deputation withdrew. Its members were in high feather. The Admiral had given his word that the five should be temporarily engaged for special duties with the Australian squadron ordered to the North Pacific.

At 8 p.m. orders were issued for two light cruisers, a seaplane carrier, and three destroyers to proceed under sealed orders at noon on the following day.

CHAPTER XXX

The End of the "Malfilio"

Burgoyne and Mostyn were radiant when they left the Admiral's presence. By contrast the faces of Messrs. Swayne, Fontayne, and O'Loghlin were glum. The promptness with which the Senior Naval Officer acted had taken the wind out of their sails. They had reckoned upon the preparations taking from five to seven days, during which time the *Titania* was to be unloaded of her valuable cargo.

"We can't all three go," declared Swayne. "One must stop behind to superintend the unshipping of the stuff and to pay off the Kanakas. Candidly, now the excitement of salving the silver is over, I'd rather go to sea with the squadron any old time. But duty's duty all the world over."

Neither Fontayne nor Paddy O'Loghlin showed any willingness to forgo their share in the marine picnic to the secret base. The old chums looked very much like "parting brass rags" until Peter Mostyn chipped in with a suggestion.

"Why not toss for it?" he asked. "Sudden death. Odd man stays behind."

Three coins spun in the air and were deftly caught by their respective owners.

"Heads!" announced Swayne.

"Same here!" shouted Fontayne. "We're all right, Swayne. We're in the same galley. Now then Paddy."

Lugubriously O'Loghlin began to uncover his coin. Then his features expanded into a broad grin as he, too, disclosed the King's effigy.

The next trial resulted in Swayne having a head and Fontayne a tail. That meant that one of the two was bound to be out.

"Get a move on, O'Loghlin," yelled Fontayne.

Paddy was in no hurry. He rather enjoyed prolonging the agony in view of his chum's cheerful announcement in the first round. It was a head.

"You're ship-keeper, old son," remarked Swayne to the now downcast Fontayne.

"I say, let's go back and interview the secretary-bird," suggested Burgoyne.

"What for?" asked Swayne.

"To tell him that Fontayne's not going," replied Alwyn. "I'll get him to ask the Admiral to let Jasper Minalto go instead. He jolly well deserves to go, and I've been kicking myself for not asking permission for him before."

This suggestion was acted upon, with the result that the Admiral's secretary promised to put the matter before the Admiral after dinner. He also added that perhaps it would be as well if he provided an additional letter of introduction to the Commodore of the squadron detailed for the operations.

Punctually at noon the enumerated vessels left Port Jackson, the destroyers leading, the seaplane carrier coming next, and the light cruisers *Armada* and *Rockhampton* bringing up the rear.

On the fore-bridge of the *Armada*, the light cruiser flying the Broad Pennant of the Commodore of the squadron, were Burgoyne, Mostyn, Swayne, and O'Loughlin, whose presence gave rise to wild surmises on the part of the ship's officers and crew.

Jasper Minalto, as lively as a sand-boy, was in one of the petty officers' messes of the same ship, and although his tongue "went nineteen to the dozen" not as much as a hint did he let fall of the reason for the presence of the visitors on the fore-bridge.

At two bells in the afternoon watch the squadron was well clear of The Heads, and was plunging into the steep head seas, for the gale still held. At that hour the skipper of each ship opened his sealed orders and communicated their contents to the officers under his command. Within five minutes every man of the squadron knew that the objective of the operations was the destruction of a pirate vessel. Authentic details would reach them later, but until then the wildest reports pervaded the lower deck.

The Commodore of the Australian flotilla was not taking undue risks. His orders were to capture or destroy, and he meant to carry out his instructions with all the means at his disposal.

Having asked Burgoyne a number of questions he decided upon his plan of action. The ships were to approach to within ten miles of the secret base, the *Armada* and two destroyers on the eastern, and the *Rockhampton* and one destroyer on the western side. By means of aerial reconnaissance he would ascertain whether the pirate cruiser had returned to the anchorage. If she had, then a long-range bombardment of the harbour would either sink her or else compel her to come out. The batteries would be attacked by bombing machines, assisted by the guns of the cruisers.

"There are no anti-aircraft guns on the island, I presume?" asked the Commodore.

"No, sir," replied Burgoyne. "At least, not to my knowledge. I've seen almost every battery, and they are armed with 6-inch and 4.7-inch naval guns."

"The *Malfilio* when under the Russian flag had four submerged torpedo tubes," continued the Commodore. "Do you happen to know if she has any torpedoes on board?"

"I cannot say, sir," replied Alwyn. "I was never on board; but, as the result of conversation with survivors from the *Alvarado* and *Kittiwake*, I know that she never employed these against any of the three vessels captured by her up to the time I left the island. She carries a small seaplane for scouting purposes."

On the evening of the eighth day after leaving Sydney the squadron, maintaining a speed of eighteen knots, arrived at the rendezvous fifteen miles due south of the secret base.

For the whole of the night vessels cruised east and west, turning sixteen points at the expiration of each hour. No steaming lights were shown; the ships were cleared for action and the guns' crews slept by their guns. No wireless was permitted. The destroyers were ordered to stand in pursuit of any vessel that might be sighted, acting upon the supposition that the pirate island was well out of the regular steamer tracks, and signal to her to stop instantly and disclose her identity. If the command were disobeyed the delinquent was to be torpedoed.

But nothing occurred to necessitate this drastic step. The night wore on without anything of a suspicious nature being reported.

At the first streak of dawn two scouting aircraft rose from the deck of the seaplane carrier, and disappeared in the direction of Ramon Porfirio's stronghold. In two hours they were back again, having made an exhaustive survey of the island, without, apparently, being spotted by any of the garrison.

They reported that there were two merchantmen and four schooners lying in the harbour, but the *Malfilio* was not visible.

A council of war was held to decide upon the course to be pursued. Some of the officers were in favour of attacking the island at once; others advocated the finding and destruction of the pirate cruiser as the first phase of the operations, backing up their arguments with the theory that if Porfirio discovered that his base were captured he would steam away at once to an unfrequented part of the Siberian coast. He might, then, have to run the *Malfilio* ashore, but there would remain the discouraging knowledge that the arch-pirate was still at large.

The Commodore fell in with the second suggestion, and decided to keep his flotilla out of sight of the secret base, and to keep a sharp look-out for the pirate cruiser by means of destroyers and aircraft, the light cruisers being stationed as previously arranged, one to the east and one to the west of the island.

At one bell in the first Dog Watch (4.30 p.m.) the look-out in the fore-top of the *Armada* reported a seaplane approaching from the nor-east. At first the seaplane, which was flying at 5000 feet, was taken to be one of the naval scouts returning; but, when she made no attempt to descend and circled high above the cruisers, suspicions were aroused as to her ownership.

Presently the *Armada* picked up wireless messages in code, and since none of the squadron was permitted to use her radio instruments for transmitting the inference was positive.

"She's warning the *Malfilio*," declared the Commodore. "We'll try her with the antis."

The cruiser's anti-aircraft guns opened fire simultaneously. Judging by the mushroom-shaped clouds of white smoke that marked the bursting of the shrapnel shells, it seemed as if the seaplane could not escape being hit. But to the disappointment of all on board the *Armada* the seaplane turned and flew away apparently unharmed.

All necessity for secrecy being now at an end the Commodore wirelessed the seaplane carrier, ordering two fast battleplanes to stand in pursuit, and giving instructions to the destroyer Dawson to support the aircraft.

The battleplanes ascended promptly, but an hour later they returned without having sighted the pirate seaplane. The pilot of the latter was a bit of a strategist, for instead of flying back to the *Malfilio* he had made a wide circle with the intention of returning to the secret base, having already warned Porfirio of his great danger.

But the pirate scout's luck was out. When still a good twelve miles from the island he was sighted by one of the seaplanes engaged in searching for the *Malfilio*. The two Australian airmen did their work neatly and effectively. Standing in pursuit they sat on the tail of the pirate seaplane, and with one burst from a Lewis gun sent the latter down in a spinning nose-dive, with the machine a mass of flames.

Ramon Porfirio knew now that the game was up. One chance remained—to seek safety in flight. He had provided for the contingency, for practically the whole of the specie and bullion found on his prizes had been transferred to the *Malfilio's* strong room. Could he but get away with the treasure without having to share it amongst his crew he would be a rich man. He decided to take a northerly course, lie low amongst the desolate Aleutian Islands until the coast was clear, and then double back to a South American port.

Unfortunately for him he had underrated the capabilities and universal use of wireless. Within an hour and a half from the time the *Malfilio* received the warning from her seaplane, the pirate cruiser sighted a small American tramp steaming east. The Yankee also sighted the *Malfilio*, and when the former picked up a non-code general call from the *Armada* asking all vessels in that part of the North Pacific to report if they sighted a warship answering to the *Malfilio's* description, Captain Hiram Stott pulled his goatee beard and looked wise.

With a keen commercial instinct he inquired by wireless whether there were any pecuniary reward for the desired information, and a reply being received in the affirmative he then promptly gave the latitude and longitude of the position where he had sighted the pirate, and also the approximate course that the *Malfilio* was taking.

Ramon Porfirio intercepted the message. Had time permitted he would have turned in pursuit of the tramp and sent her to the bottom; but urgent affairs compelled him to carry on under every ounce of forced draught.

Meanwhile the *Armada*, doing thirty-three knots to the *Malfilio's* twenty-two, was rapidly standing in pursuit of the pirate cruiser. Night fell, without the sighting of the latter. The Commodore, inwardly perturbed, showed no trace on his bronzed features of the doubts that assailed his mind. It was quite easy, in spite of the numerical superiority of the squadron, for the pirate cruiser to be lost in the vast expanse of the moonless ocean.

About one bell of the Middle Watch the masthead light of a steamer was reported, bearing 105°. A little later on her red light and then the green were visible.

Thinking it advisable to dispense with wireless during the rest of the night, the Commodore gave orders for the on-coming vessel to be communicated with by means of a masthead flashing lamp.

In reply to the request for her name the stranger Morsed: "KJVT—AUBX—APVE", which, by reference to the Mercantile Shipping Register and the International Code, revealed her to be the S.S. *Lanzorate* of San Francisco, bound from Olympia, U.S.A., for Batavia.

The *Armadale* then repeated her general wireless message, and asked if the *Lanzorate* had seen anything of the pirate ship *Malfilio*, to which the vessel replied that she had seen a two-funnelled craft answering the description proceeding south by east just before sunset. A hasty reference to the chart proved conclusively that either Captain Stott or the skipper of the *Lanzorate* had engaged in the pleasurable pastime of talking through his hat. By no possibility could the pirate cruiser travel from one position to the other in even twice the time stated.

Meanwhile the *Lanzorate* was passing about two miles astern of the *Armadale*. The former was brilliantly illuminated. Every scuttle and every window of her deck-houses was lit up; while the *Armadale* was now in total darkness.

"We'll have a look at that hooker," said the Commodore to the Navigating Lieutenant. "Take us to within a couple of cables of her—broad on her port beam."

A warning to the searchlight men to stand by was followed by instructions to the 9.2-guns' crews to load with armour-piercing shells with delayed action fuses. The quick-firers and machine-guns were to be trained on the stranger's bridge.

Describing a wide turning circle the *Armadale* closed on the stranger's port beam, which was the last thing her skipper would have expected. When the *Armadale's* masthead signal lamp flashed, the cruiser bore one point on to the former's starboard bow, so the sudden apparition of a huge warship on her port beam was to say the least most disconcerting.

Simultaneously four searchlights were unscreened from the *Armadale*, and four powerful beams were focused upon the stranger. Instead of showing up a small "intermediate" liner the rays revealed the pirate cruiser *Malfilio*.

Ramon Porfirio, although unprepared for such a manoeuvre, had already cleared for action. The moment he saw the game was up he gave the order to open fire.

The *Malfilio's* six-inchers crashed. Blinded by the glare of the searchlights, the gun-layers, smart enough at their work when shelling an unarmed merchantman, were frantic with the knowledge that they were up against a heavily-armed vessel. Most of the shells flew high, but one, exploding outside the shield of the *Armadale's* for'ard 9.2, played havoc with the fore-bridge, wounding two officers and a signalman, and carrying away part of the chart-room.

The *Armadale's* reply was prompt and terrible. Every gun that could be brought to bear upon the pirate cruiser opened fire almost before the last echoes of the *Malfilio's* salvo had died away.

With a blinding flash that outshone the glare of the searchlights the main magazine of the *Malfilio* exploded. A dense cloud of smoke, like a silvery mist, hid the pirate cruiser from view; and when the last of the far-flung fragments had fallen either into the sea or upon the *Armadale's* deck, the shattered hull of the *Malfilio* had vanished, and with her went Ramon Porfirio and four hundred of the vilest sweepings of the South American and Eastern Asiatic ports.

The whole business was over almost before Burgoyne and his companions realized that an action was in progress. Within a few minutes from the time when the *Malfilio* opened fire her disintegrated remains were foundering to the bed of the Pacific.

For fifteen minutes the searchlights were kept playing upon the spot where the pirate cruiser had disappeared on the faint chance that there might be survivors. Civilization decrees that a pirate can be hanged or shot, but he must not be allowed to die a lingering death by drowning. But the search revealed no trace of any of the crew of the *Malfilio*.

"On bow and steaming lights! Wireless the rest of the squadron to take up pre-arranged positions off the secret base!"

Then at a modest fifteen knots, the *Armadale*, bearing evidences of the scratches she had received, steamed westward. One part of her mission was accomplished: the destruction of the hornet. There remained more work for her to do: to assist in the wiping out of the hornet's nest.

The Capture of the Secret Base

"Yes, I'll admit that," conceded Captain Blair to Captain Davis, late of the S.S. *Kittiwake*. "We've had bad weather. It blew like great guns twelve hours after the life-boat got away from here. But Burgoyne knows what he's about. He's used to small sailing craft and so are the other fellows. He'll win through."

"A good many days have passed since the boat left," remarked Captain Davis. "He has had time to fetch the Marshall Islands and get a warship here long ago. Of course, he might have escaped the gale, or even struck the tail end of it."

The two skippers were having their after-supper yarn, and as usual conversation turned upon the subject of Burgoyne's dash with the life-boat. Both men had their doubts, but Captain Blair refused to admit his. The skipper of the *Kittiwake*, sanguine for the first fortnight, was beginning to express grave concern as to the possible fate of the life-boat and her crew.

"That bilious-faced Strogoff isn't back yet," continued Captain Blair. "There's no doubt about it, he's in pursuit of Burgoyne. If he'd found him he'd be back before this, especially as the *Malfilio's* expected back at any moment."

"Mind you, I'm only speculating on it," said Captain Davis. "But I've a notion that Strogoff took that Canuk passenger of yours along with him. When did you see the lubber last?"

"The night the life-boat got away," replied Captain Blair. "Or, rather, Mr. Tarrant saw him talking to Strogoff just before the evening muster."

"Pity you hadn't—" began Davis, then, clutching his companion's arm, he pointed to the two block-houses by the gate of the compound. "Something up over there," he added.

In the light of a couple of portable petrol lanterns considerable activity was observable amongst the guards. Their numbers were being much diminished by the withdrawal of twenty armed and obviously excited pirates, while the remainder were gesticulating violently, some pointing to the compound, others to the two machine-guns that commanded that far from delectable spot.

Presently the gate of the compound was unlocked, and Fernando, accompanied by half a dozen armed men, entered the enclosure. A whistle sounded—the signal for the prisoners to assemble.

In five minutes every officer and man remaining out of the original crews of the three captured vessels turned out and fell in, taking up their allotted positions, and forming three sides of a hollow square.

Into the centre strode Fernando and his bodyguard, and without further ado, without even calling the roll, the half-caste began reading in execrable English the orders for the night.

All lights and fires were to be extinguished. No one was to leave his hut until further notice. No shouting or demonstration of any sort was to be permitted. Any breach of these regulations would be punished by a heavy and prolonged burst of machine-gun fire upon the prisoners' camp.

"This looks like business, Angus," remarked Captain Blair to the Chief Engineer, after the parade had been dismissed and Fernando had left the compound.

"Ay, sure," agreed Angus. "Weel, I doot we'd best bide the noo. I ken fine yon Porfirio person has took mair than he can abide by. We'll be seein' shot and shell flyin' come the morn."

The Chief Engineer's surmise was a correct one. A wireless message from the *Malfilio's* seaplane had just been picked up in which the pilot informed Porfirio of the disconcerting news that a couple of large cruisers, some destroyers, and a few aircraft were looking for him.

The news was enough to strike terror into the hearts of the pirates who formed the garrison of the secret base. They knew perfectly well that it mattered little as to whether the *Malfilio* escaped, returned to the island, or was sunk. In any case they couldn't get away, and before long they would have a powerful squadron trying conclusions with them. They might fight to the last, but there was no escape. Surrender meant death, save for those who might obtain respite by turning evidence against the others.

To increase their desperation was the belief that Porfirio, Henriques, and Black Strogoff had deliberately abandoned them to their fate. The prolonged absence of the *Malfilio* and the disappearance of Strogoff with a band of boon companions seemed to confirm this theory, and when rogues distrust each other their plans fall to the ground.

All that night the feeling that there was something in the air kept everyone awake. The pirates were apprehensive and jumpy; their captives sanguine and excited, in spite of the tedious passage of the night hours.

Just as dawn was breaking Phil Branscombe went to the open window of his hut and listened intently. Then he turned to Withers, his "cabin-mate".

"Old bird," he announced, "I hear an aeroplane."

"The *Malfilio's* seaplane returning, I expect," rejoined Withers, stifling a yawn.

"Wrong, my festive!" exclaimed Phil ten seconds later. "They're British seaplanes."

Of that there was no doubt. Flying high they were already in the rays of the sun, while the ground was yet in shadow—three large biplanes fitted with both floats and landing-wheels. Above the island they separated, one passing over the harbour, another circling above the Observation Hill, and the third, swooping down to within a couple of hundred feet, described figures of eight above the prisoners' huts.

Presently a powerful Aldis light flashed from the third seaplane. Blinking rapidly it Morsed the following, "Are prisoners compelled to man batteries?"

Regardless of Fernando's warning, at least half a dozen men signalled replies, using any fabric nearest to hand to "flag-wag" the reassuring message that all hands were within the limits of the fence.

"O.K." flashed the seaplane's lamp, and then the information was promptly transmitted by wireless to the *Armada*le.

Meanwhile the second seaplane had dropped a message, with distinctive streamers attached, close to the Observation Hill. It was an ultimatum, ordering the garrison to surrender at discretion, and signify the same by hoisting a white flag within thirty minutes of the receipt of the demand.

But the ill-advised action on the part of the machine-gunners in the block-houses destroyed the chance of the pirates surrendering without bloodshed. The seaplane over the prisoners' camp offered an irresistible bait, and a burst of machine-gun fire was directed upon the rapidly-moving aircraft.

Retribution came swiftly. The seaplane, absolutely untouched, rose steeply until it was impossible for the pirates to elevate their machine-guns sufficiently to bear upon the aerial target. Then in quick succession it released four powerful bombs. One secured a direct hit, blowing a block-house to atoms, while the others, falling close to the second machine-gun post, damaged it so severely that only three badly-scared men emerged from the ruins, and fled panic-stricken to a shelter of a more substantial nature.

Remaining aloft sufficiently long to wireless the news to the Commodore and to wind up her trailing aerial, the seaplane volplaned down and made a faultless landing close to the huts occupied by the *Donibristle's* crew.

"We'll hike you all out of this in another three or four hours," declared the flight-lieutenant to the crowd of merchant seamen gathered round the machine, "but you'll have to bear a hand. In case the pirates start reprisals on you, take these."

He handed out canvas bags containing Service revolvers and ammunition, sufficient to arm eighty men.

"Right-o!" he continued. "Our heavy guns will start firing in half a shake, but don't get the wind up. We've located your position all right. Your only danger is if these yellow blighters start running amok this way. If they do, shoot hard and straight. Well, cheerio! My work's not done yet. I'm spotting for the *Armada*le—one of our crack cruisers."

"One moment," interposed Captain Blair. "Have you any news of my Third Officer, Mr. Burgoyne?"

The Flying Officer shook his head.

"Never heard of him," he replied. "What do you want?"

"He got away from here in a boat to obtain help," replied Captain Blair. "We thought perhaps it was he who reported the existence of the pirate Porfirio."

"May have done," rejoined the Australian flying officer dubiously. "I'm from the seaplane carrier *Murchison*, and all I know is that we received sealed orders to proceed here. Well, s'long, and the very best of everything."

The seaplane had barely risen a thousand feet, when with a shrill scream a heavy shell hurtled through the air from one of the invisible warships. From a distance of twelve thousand yards the 9.2-inch missile struck its objective with a precision that was the result of the work of the highest scientific instruments purposely constructed for the destruction of mankind and mankind's defences.

Landing fairly upon the cup-shaped summit of the Observation Hill, it completely transformed the configuration of the landscape. Jagged scraps of sheet-iron and splintered baulks of timber flew high in the air, accompanied by a cloud of black smoke and dust. In an instant the pirates'

carefully camouflaged observation post was wiped out, and with it the principal range-finding station of the secret base.

For the next half-hour the bombardment was hotly maintained. At first the pirates replied feebly, but by degrees they warmed to their task, working their 6-inch quick-firers well in spite of the numerous disadvantages under which they were placed.

One by one the concealed guns on the edge of the cliff were knocked out by direct hits upon the concrete gun-pits. Occasionally a battery would cease fire for about ten minutes; then the desperate gunners, who were fighting with halters round their necks, would re-man their weapons in the faint hope of "getting one home" on the daring destroyers which were rapidly approaching the island.

At length the 6-inchers of the secret base ceased to reply. Not a pirate remained in the emplacements save the dead and dying. The rest had fled to their deep subterranean retreats, whence by bombs and machine-gun bullets they still hoped to take a heavy toll of the invaders.

By ten in the morning the heavy gun-fire had almost died down. The cruisers had reduced distances to 2500 yards, and were occasionally firing mainly with the idea of keeping the pirates penned down to their underground shelters.

A quarter of an hour later the crews of the captured merchantmen, who were now able to roam at will over the north-western part of the island, noticed a destroyer negotiating the intricate passage between the reefs and the northern side of the secret base. She had run the gauntlet of the light quick-firers commanding the main approach channel, and had not come off lightly, for the funnels were riddled in several places, while there was a gaping hole in her hull just abaft her after torpedo-tube. Although the damage was mainly above the water-line, her powerful steam-pumps were hard at work.

She was no longer in danger of being under fire, for not a gun could be brought to bear upon her now that she had rounded the north-eastern extremity of the island. Moving slowly, and with the leadman in the chains continually sounding, she weathered the north-western end of the island, and, lowering boats, dropped anchor almost directly abreast of the cave which Burgoyne had found so helpful during his preparations for flight.

Presently a rocket soared from the destroyer's deck taking with it a line that fell well beyond the edge of the cliff.

Instantly there was a rush on the part of the merchant seamen, and in twenty minutes four stout rope ladders afforded communication between the beach and the top of the cliff.

Up the ladders swarmed bluejackets, armed with rifles and bayonets, while boxes of smoke bombs, Lewis guns, and ammunition were dexterously hauled to the summit.

During these operations a second destroyer entered the lagoon and added her quota to the landing-party. By noon the entire force of three hundred men, including a draft hastily transhipped from the *Rockhampton*, was ready to move forward.

One of the observation seaplanes gave a pre-arranged signal to the cruiser and the bombardment ceased. Simultaneously the landing-party advanced for a systematic searching of the pirates' subterranean lairs.

Their method of working was simple and effective. At the entrance to each dug-out they summoned the inmates to surrender. The invitation was invariably declined with expressions of rage and defiance until a smoke bomb was neatly lobbed into the underground retreat. In a very brief space of time a dozen or more half-suffocated rogues would appear staggering through the smoke, to be secured and bound almost without resistance by the burly Australian bluejackets.

Work over, the conquerors settled down to play. Their first effort in that direction was to provide a sumptuous meal for all hands.

There was fresh meat in plenty, and ample stocks of flour, tea, sugar, and coffee. The bluejackets, taking possession of the galleys, soon had enormous fires going. Those not employed as cooks whiled away the time in playing rounders, football, and leap-frog until a bugle sounded for tea.

It was a joyous feast. The bluejackets enjoyed it with the zest of men having successfully accomplished a difficult task; the merchant seamen, because for the first time for many weeks they were revelling in the delights of freedom. Their irksome captivity was fast fading into the limbo of reminiscence. Once more they were at liberty to do almost as they wished without the ever-present dread of their armed guards. No longer had they to toil under conditions approaching slavery at the behest of Ramon Porfirio and his minions.

Although Captain Blair and the remaining officers of the *Donibristle* made many inquiries, no one seemed to be able to supply any information concerning Burgoyne and his companions. None of the landing-party was aware of the presence of two of the officers of the scuttled merchantman on board the *Armada*. All they could say was that they sailed in execution of sealed orders, but

as to what prompted these orders they were entirely in the dark.

Amongst the hilarious throng there was one man who felt utterly despondent. Although Colonel Vivian had borne up wonderfully from the time Hilda had left the island, he was now overcome by the thought that he had lost both wife and daughter. In the case of the latter he felt sure that, had she survived, the story of her rescue would have been known throughout the length and breadth of Australia. He forgot that the success of the expedition depended upon absolute secrecy, and from the fact that none of the men from the *Rockhampton* and the two destroyers knew anything of the missing life-boat and her crew, he formed the conclusion that the boat had been overwhelmed by the furious gale.

After the meal Captain Blair, in the course of conversation with the officer commanding the landing-parties, asked what steps he proposed taking with regard to the embarkation of the former captives.

"Sure, I don't know," replied the Commander "The Commodore will have to settle that point. See, the *Armadale's* making for the anchorage."

Slowly, and with just sufficient way to enable her to answer to the helm, the cruiser, flying the Broad Pennant of the Commodore of the squadron, approached the deep channel through the reef. Men were in the chains, heaving the lead, but she came in with a decided assurance as if her navigating officers were well acquainted with the intricate passage. Two cables astern came the *Rockhampton*, followed by a destroyer, while in the rear of the procession steamed the seaplane carrier, which had already received all the members of her aerial brood.

Splendidly handled, although the bend in the approach channel was so acute that the helm had to be supplemented by reverse action of their twin propellers, the cruisers gained the inner harbour of the secret base, where they moored with ample room in the spacious land-locked basin, amidst the cheers of the men lining the lofty cliffs.

Suddenly Phil Branscombe gripped Captain Blair's arm.

"Look, sir!" he exclaimed. "On the after-bridge of the nearest cruiser. Yes, by Jove! it's old Burgoyne and our wireless merchant. They're waving to us."

"So they are, by thunder!" almost yelled the excited Old Man. "Lads! There's Burgoyne and Mostyn. Give them a loud one."

And for once not in accordance with the accepted ideas of British reserve, the survivors of the *Donibristle* let themselves go. Their enthusiasm was caught up by their former comrades in adversity, and the cliffs echoed and re-echoed to the stentorian cheer.

CHAPTER XXXII

And Last

The Commodore received a rousing reception when he landed to inspect the captured island, but his welcome was completely outclassed by the frantic demonstration that greeted Burgoyne, Mostyn, and Minalto. The three well-groomed, clean-shaven men were almost swept off their feet by the excited mob of ragged, bearded scarecrows who had been their shipmates.

Waist deep in water the seamen had waded out to greet the heroes of the moment. Shoulder high they bore their three comrades through the shelving tunnel, making the confined space ring with cheers and shouts of boisterous delight.

At the upper entrance Burgoyne and his companions were met by Captain Blair.

"So you pulled it off all right," exclaimed the Old Man.

"Yes, sir," replied Alwyn.

"And Miss Vivian?"

"Safe in Sydney," declared Burgoyne. "But where's Colonel Vivian?"

"Here I am, Mr. Burgoyne," replied the Colonel, making his way through the press. He seized the Third Officer's hand and wrung it. He could say no more.

"Miss Vivian is quite all right, sir," reported Burgoyne. "She is now with relations of mine at Sydney."

Very briefly Burgoyne related the story of the adventures of the life-boat and their rescue by the *Titania*. Mostyn, surrounded by another mob, was similarly engaged, while Minalto was holding forth to a group of eager listeners as he sung the praises of Alwyn Burgoyne and his companions, while Swayne and O'Loghlin came in for a full share of appreciation and attention on the part of the former captives of the secret base.

The appearance of a lieutenant of the *Armada* interrupted the demonstrations.

"When you've finished with your jamboree, gentlemen," he observed pleasantly, "the Commodore would like to see the officers of the three captured ships."

"Say!" exclaimed Captain Davis, "can't he give us time to have a hair-cut and shave?"

The lieutenant laughed.

"He won't mind," he replied. "'Sides, you might catch cold, skipper, if you took all that lot off at once."

The conference was of a brief yet important nature. The captains of the three merchantmen were asked where they wished to be taken—whether to Honolulu or to Sydney. Captain Blair and most of the officers of the *Donibristle* chose Honolulu, whence they could obtain a passage to Esquimalt, and from there to Vancouver. The skipper of the *Kittiwake* declined both offers, saying that he preferred to sail in his own craft, and Angus and Withers offered to fill vacancies in the *Kittiwake's* engine-room staff. Finally the *Alvarado's* Old Man expressed a belief that he, too, could recondition his ship and take her back to Frisco.

"Good man!" exclaimed the Commodore. "If I were in your place, by Jove! I'd do the same. We'll be here for another six or seven days, so if you want any assistance my artificers are at your disposal."

"And if—" added Captain Davis to the skipper of the *Alvarado*. "And if you aren't ready by that time I'll tow you across to Hilo or Honolulu."

When the conference was over the Commodore asked Burgoyne to remain.

"Mr. Burgoyne," he began without any preliminaries, "are you fond of the Merchant Service?"

"I am, sir," replied Alwyn. "It's a life afloat."

"You would prefer the Navy, I take it?"

"Yes, sir; but that is——". He broke off, unable to express his thoughts.

"Out of the question, eh?" added the Commodore. "I think not. How would a commission in the Australian Navy appeal to you?"

Burgoyne's eyes sparkled.

"If it could be managed, sir," he replied.

"I think it can be," said the Commodore. "We'll leave it at that for the present. I can offer you a passage back to Sydney, and I think you will do well to accept."

"Then you think there is a chance, sir?"

"Most certainly. Apart from the valuable services you have rendered to the expedition, the fact that you have been trained for the British Navy is in your favour."

Burgoyne thanked the Commodore and withdrew, feeling as if he were walking on air. If the "stunt" came off he would be once more an officer of the Royal Navy, although in a branch that displays on its ensign the Southern Cross.

During the next few days the utmost activity prevailed on the island. Demolition parties blew up the gun-pits and levelled the defences. The store-houses were overhauled, and the plunder carefully examined and labelled with a view to restoring it to its lawful owners. Work, too, proceeded at high pressure on the *Kittiwake* and *Alvarado*, and both vessels soon looked like being able to get away under their own steam.

At length the day fixed for the departure of the Australian Squadron arrived. In the morning there was a ceremonial parade ashore, attended by every available man of the warships backed up by the crews of the three merchant vessels.

Amidst the ringing cheers of the officers and men, the Union Jack was hoisted, and the secret base taken over as a dependency of the Commonwealth of Australia.

The few surviving members of Ramon Porfirio's mob were then embarked on board the seaplane carrier. A garrison of fifty volunteers from the squadron was left to take charge of the new acquisition, together with a few of the merchant seamen, who, curiously enough, showed no

immediate desire to quit the island.

One of the destroyers was ordered to Honolulu to take the survivors of the *Donibristle's* crew. Colonel Vivian and Mr. Tarrant had accepted the Commodore's offer to give them a passage to Australia.

Phil Branscombe eyed his chum curiously when Burgoyne told him of his intention to return to Sydney.

"I think I know why you're shaping that course, old bird," he remarked sagely.

"I bet you don't, any old way," rejoined Alwyn.

"Oh, anyone would know that," continued Phil. "There's a lady in the case. Look here, I'll bet you a hundred Havanas that you'll be engaged to Miss Vivian within the next three months?"

"Done," agreed Burgoyne. He was none too certain that Phil would lose; on the other hand if Branscombe won, he, Alwyn, would pay up most cheerfully.

"Right-o!" exclaimed Branscombe. "And the best of luck to you, old bird. Send 'em along to me care of the Company's agent at Vancouver."

At noon the *Kittiwake* and the *Alvarado*, having raised steam, weighed anchor and proceeded, escorted by a destroyer conveying the majority of the *Donibristle's* crew.

An hour later the *Armada* and the rest of the squadron got under way, and soon the island—the secret base no longer—vanished beneath the horizon.

During the voyage Colonel Vivian mentioned to Alwyn that he had had enough of the sea to last him for a good many years, and that he proposed buying a property somewhere in the neighbourhood of Sydney.

"Quite a sound scheme, that, sir," observed Burgoyne.

"I think so," agreed the Colonel. "And, of course, we may see a good deal of you, especially if you get a berth on a liner calling at the principal Australian ports."

Three weeks after the *Armada's* arrival at Port Jackson, Alwyn Burgoyne received his papers appointing him, as a full-blown lieutenant of the Royal Australian Navy, to the light cruiser *Brisbane*.

He received the official notification at 11 a.m. At once he proceeded to Penrith, where Colonel Vivian had purchased a small but picturesque house. At ten in the evening, looking absolutely pleased with himself and the world at large, Burgoyne was writing an order for a hundred choice Havanas to be sent per registered post to an address in far-off Vancouver.

Transcriber's Notes:

This book contains a number of misprints.
The following misprints have been corrected:

[\[the stacatto sound\] ->](#)
[\[the staccato sound\]](#)
[\[minature rainbows\] ->](#)
[\[miniature rainbows\]](#)
[\[was blockhouse on a\] ->](#)
[\[was a blockhouse on a\]](#)
[\[declared Branscombe sentitiously.\] ->](#)
[\[declared Branscombe sententiously.\]](#)
[\[Christmas dinne\] ->](#)
[\[Christmas dinner\]](#)

An inconsequent spelling is used for a shortened version of the word [suppose]: ['spose] and [s'pose]. Because they are equal in number of occurrence they have been left unchanged.

[when Robert was lost overboard]. Earlier this man was called "Andrew Roberts", therefore "Robert" is probably not correct, but this has not been corrected.

A few cases of punctuation errors were corrected, but are not mentioned here.

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

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