

IN THE SECRET SEA

W.E. CULE



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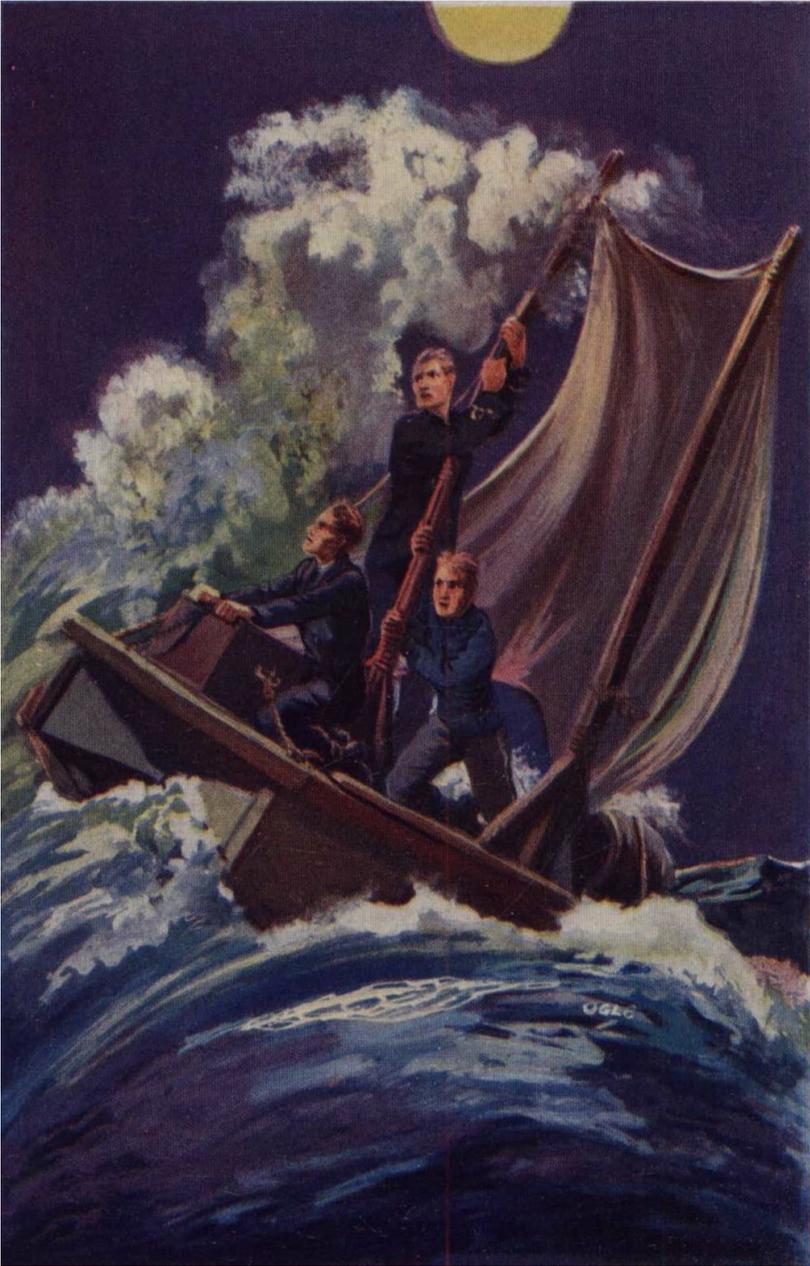
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In the Secret Sea. See p. 164.

“IT’S A WAVE! HOLD FAST FOR YOUR LIFE.”

IN THE SECRET SEA

BY

W. E. CULE

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"RODBOROUGH SCHOOL," ETC.

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CHAPTER I

THE SEA GIVES ME A SURPRISE

On the night before we sighted Honeycomb Island, my uncle, Captain James, held fast to his post on the bridge almost from dark till dawn. He took rest for an hour between three and four, and it was during this time, while the first mate occupied his place, that a singular incident occurred. One of the watch, a man named Jenkins, gave a false alarm by reporting a light on the starboard bow. No one else saw it, and under cross-examination Jenkins admitted that he might have made a mistake; so the Captain was not disturbed, and the matter became something of a sea-joke.

“When a man has been staring into darkness for two hours he is quite likely to see stars,” said Ralph Oliver next day, when I was with him in the charthouse. “He said he had seen a kind of glare in the sky. It came and went in about half a second, or perhaps less; so there wasn’t much time for making notes.”

“Perhaps he was a little bit tipsy?” I suggested.

“Well, he’s not one of our total abstainers,” said the third officer, with a bit of a smile, “and he’d just had his special storm ration.”

At this time the *John Duncan* was creeping steadily down the eastern side of the island, to seek her refuge on the southern coast. The towering heights of the Honeycomb were wreathed in great banks of mist, and though we were all glad to see land, there was a grim loneliness about this desolate place that seemed to chill every heart on board. Above, heavy banks of mist and cloud upon a stark line of uneven rocks a thousand feet high; below, a troubled sea that beat unceasingly upon an iron rampart with a dull, monotonous roar and a broad white bar of foam and spray.

“For cheerlessness this is hard to beat,” said Ralph Oliver grimly. “But it’s a case of any port in a storm. Gibbon says that he’ll get the engines right if he can have twelve hours at a quiet anchorage. Just see for yourself what the *Navigator* says.”

The *Atlantic Navigator* was lying open on the table, as Captain James had left it. One paragraph had been marked in pencil, and I read it aloud:

“The Honeycomb (Lat. 35 S., Long. 25.42 W.) is apparently so called from the curious appearance of some of the cliffs. The coast is precipitous, rising everywhere to a height of 1,000-2,000 feet. The only practicable landing is on the S.W., where there is a sheltered

cove and a good supply of fresh water from a cascade. The island measures some five miles by four. The cliffs are often enveloped in cloud. There is no vegetation, and there is a complete absence of animal life. Even the sea-birds appear to avoid the spot. The British gunboat *Lizard* was cast away here in 1899 and every soul lost.”

“No,” said Oliver, “it isn’t a cheerful prospect. But no doubt the place will serve our turn.”

His face bore that strained look which marked every face on board, from the Captain’s to that of the cabin boy. Nor was it anything to wonder at. On the fourteenth of the month the *John Duncan*, churning her way laboriously from Monte Video towards Table Bay, had found the North-West trade wind rise to a gale of unusual violence for those latitudes at this season. The wide waste of grey sea had darkened with wind and rain into a vast, murky battlefield, where mountains of water raced incessantly after us. On the second day there was no sun, only that grim battlefield in a twilight of rain and sleet and howling wind; and on the third day it was the same scene, only darker and still more hopeless. But through it all the sturdy old *John Duncan* had held on her way, labouring heavily but gallantly, rolling and slobbering indeed, but still shaking her grimy old hull free from the wash of those hostile seas. No man came on deck without oilskins, no man left it without being soaked, chilled to the marrow, and sore in every fibre; but this was in the seaman’s day’s work, and all was well as long as the fires could be kept going. My uncle, Captain James, was a hard man, but there was no better seaman in the Seven Seas.

It was on the third day that disaster came—the shock of a mighty sea on our port quarter, the shudder and struggle of the old boat as she strove to recover, the sound of grinding iron, and then the failure of her pulse. The propeller had jammed, and the steam steering gear had been thrown out of use. For some minutes the *John Duncan* had rolled helplessly, with giant billows climbing over her; then she had turned her head from the fight and was driving straight before the storm.

That wild flight had lasted for two days and nights, but she had come through without the loss of a man; and now the winds had gone down, and a strange sun, pale and shamefaced, had for a time looked down upon us through the clouds. Moreover, the engineers had never ceased their efforts to repair the damage, and some part had been made good. The engines were working again, though only feebly, and the damaged propeller had once more begun to churn the waters. The confident strength was gone, but the old ship was alive once more and could turn her head eastwards. Battered from stem to stern, she waddled along at something like four knots.

It was then that the officers had come to a decision as to their course of

action. The nearest inhabited land was Tristan d'Acunha, but even if the *John Duncan* could fight the wind for two hundred and fifty miles, it would be impossible to find harbourage there. The Honeycomb was not inhabited, and it was a bit out of our course; but it was a hundred miles nearer by the Captain's reckoning, and it had a sheltered harbour. So the ship's course had been set due south, and now we were nearing our destination.

We skirted the eastern coast at a distance of two miles, going very slowly; and all the way ran that gaunt wall of sheer rock and that foaming fringe of breakers. But when we had turned the south-eastern point the rock took us into its shelter, and the moan gave place to comparative quiet. So, still keeping at a respectful distance, our old ship felt her way along the great wall towards the breach which marked the entrance to Sandy Bay; and it was when we were within half a mile of our anchorage, full in view of that grim, stony gateway to rest and safety, that the *John Duncan* came to a pause.

Then our little motor launch was lowered, and the first officer, with three men, went off to explore. The coast was clear for all that anyone knew to the contrary, but Captain James was not the man to take unnecessary risks. Since so much time had been lost already, an extra hour could well be spared.

From the starboard rail we watched the progress of the boat over that half mile of grey water to the gloomy shadow of the rock. Johnny Tawell, my fellow-apprentice, had no hesitation about expressing his opinion.

"What a sickening view!" he said. "Did you ever see anything like it? 'Honeycomb,' indeed! Is there anything sweet about it? What do you say to 'The Isle of Ghosts,' or 'Dead Man's Isle'? Of course, it doesn't matter about ghosts or dead men being there. We just want to suit the look of the rotten place."

"Then they'll do," I said. "But, anyhow, I'll be precious glad to get ashore."

"Yes," agreed Johnny, in his melancholy drawl. "I never thought, when I came to sea, that I should be so glad to get off it."

"All the same, when we've been on that shore a little while we'll be jolly glad to get to sea again, I guess," was my cheerless reply; and Johnny sighed.

"It's always the same," he said. "I wanted a desert island—I've always wanted one. Now I've got it—and it's like this!"

"You wanted a coral island," I said. "Golden sand, green grass, turtles—and wild fruit growing everywhere."

"Yes," said Johnny sadly, "and some nice, kind, simple savages who would make me their king."

Then I laughed; and Johnny gave me a jaundiced look sideways as he went on:

"And this is the kind of luck I get—the shore as bad as this old tub of a

ship. If there's any luck going, it's other chaps that get it. The Captain is their uncle, and the third mate plays the part of big brother—and so on. And if there's any sort of luck to be got on this old rock, I'll bet it'll be the Little Favourite that gets it all. There won't be a streak left for anybody else."

It was difficult to talk to Johnny Tawell for five minutes without discovering the jealous vein in him, but I never troubled to quarrel with him now. Once he had provoked me to a fight, and I had licked him thoroughly to the satisfaction of everybody but myself; for when I had come to think of it, the fellow couldn't help the jaundice in his disposition any more than I could help my freckled skin and celestial nose. So from the hour of that first fight I had managed to bear with his weakness, leaving him to sulk alone when I could bear him no longer. I followed the same course now.

"Well, don't cry," I said comfortingly. "Perhaps you'll be king some day after all." And with that I moved away to continue my watch from another part of the rail. The boat had just disappeared through the great rocky gateway, and I wanted to get the first glimpse of it when it should come out again.

But while I waited I was full of thoughts, for Johnny's melancholy moan had touched a chord of memory. I had had the same dreams myself in earlier days, and had seen myself the hero of scores of pirate cruises, sea battles, and adventures on mysterious islands. In our more peaceful moments Johnny and I had exchanged confidences, and had found that common bond between us. Indeed, it was just the influence of such thoughts and dreams that had determined me to go to sea, much to the sorrow of my sister Ruth, whom I had left to fight her battle alone after she had almost worn her heart out in "bringing me up." But since that time I had learnt the truth about the sea, and knew, or thought I knew, that the days of romance were gone for ever. The reality was just as Johnny had said—grey, grim, and disheartening, like the prospect around us now. No, there was no romance; the sea had nothing to give but hard work, and hard knocks, and hard tack, even if you were the nephew of the Captain! And I sighed wearily as I stared away at that mighty rock whose shelter we were about to seek. Certainly, there was no romance about that!

Presently I was roused by someone remarking that the first officer was taking his time about his job. He had nothing to do but cast an eye around Sandy Bay and then come back, and there wasn't likely to be any house of call on that shore, anyway! Then I saw that there was a little surprise even on my uncle's bronzed and patient face, as he stood on the bridge with the second officer. Five minutes later, however, there was a general stir of relief, for the boat came slowly out from the rocky passage; and, as had been arranged, the first officer was showing a white handkerchief as a signal that all was well.

A minute later the *John Duncan* was once more under way. At her slowest

pace, with jealous care, she crept inshorewards, while the boat came speeding out to meet her. Five minutes later the first officer ran smartly up the ladder. When he reached the deck the Captain spoke to him from the bridge:

“All right, Mr. Smerdon?”

“Yes, sir, all right. Plenty of room and still water. We couldn’t want a better place. . . . But that’s not all. We are not the first callers. There’s another boat in the bay.”

Every ear was attentive. “Another boat in the bay”—hundreds of miles from anywhere!

“It’s a small American steamer, sir—the *Maud Muller* of New Orleans. It was this discovery that delayed us. But wait one minute, sir, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

He turned to give necessary instructions to his boat’s crew, and then ran up the ladder to the bridge. A moment more and the officers were talking busily, and the first shock of surprise had passed. But the whole ship was discussing the news in subdued but very natural excitement. It was the touch of the unexpected.

And I was excited, too. As if in answer to my musings of disenchantment, the sea had suddenly given me a bit of a surprise. Little could I guess how much more she was going to do before she had finished with me!

CHAPTER II

TWO STEAMERS IN SANDY BAY

The *John Duncan* lay at rest in Sandy Bay, to the right of the narrow entrance and only some thirty yards from the shore. She was big in the little bay, for it was only about three hundred yards across, but she was small indeed under the shadow of the mighty cliffs that rose a thousand feet behind her. And right across the bay lay the *Maud Muller* of New Orleans.

She was an object of interest of course, but there was nothing in her looks to excite remark. She was smaller than our old tub, but there was a neatness about her that spoke very favourably of her owners and officers. No one could have mistaken her for an ocean tramp, anyway. Half an hour after we had anchored, her Captain came over to call, bringing a friend with him; and as I was with my uncle on the afterdeck at this time I was able to make a few mental notes of the meeting.

Captain Stuart Jackson was a lithe little man of the Captain Kettle build, but much milder in air and in countenance than that famous mariner, and notably spruce and neat in his clothing. He was hearty and full of goodwill, but his keen blue eyes took proper stock of everything that came before them, and also of some things that another person might easily have missed. His companion offered a much more remarkable figure, but it was plain that he was no sailor. He was an older man, something near sixty, perhaps, and he wore a rough tweed suit with a thick, dark, shoregoing overcoat and a soft felt hat. He was big, clean-shaven, with iron-grey hair, a heavy-jawed, rather forbidding face, and sharp, peering eyes sheltered by heavy brows and gold-rimmed spectacles. But from the first that ordinary-looking landsman caught my attention. There was something about him that gave a curious impression of power.

Captain Jackson was cordial enough. "I won't exactly say I'm glad to see you, sir," he said cheerily. "It would almost seem to be like chuckling over your ill-fortune. But I do say that I shall be glad to do anything I can to help you."

The two Captains shook hands warmly. "I don't know that we shall want help," said my uncle. "We have everything we need, and my chief engineer says he can do it all in twelve hours. But I shan't hesitate to draw upon you, Captain Jackson, if I see the need; and anyway it is good to find friends in this God-forsaken spot. My first officer tells me that you have been here some time."

“Near a month,” said the other, “and mean to stay another if we see the call. But that reminds me—let me introduce Professor Delling, of the Rio University. He is the head of our party.”

Professor Delling bowed and shook hands, but he was evidently a man of silence. “We’re out on a geological survey,” went on Captain Jackson pleasantly. “The University has given the Professor six months to do some of the islands in the South Atlantic, and has chartered the *Maud Muller* and your obedient servant to take him about, under exploration licences from the Governments of Argentina and Brazil. Do you know anything of geology, Captain James?”

My uncle smiled as he shook his head.

“Nor do I,” said Captain Jackson. “But I’m sure it’s very interesting. Get the Professor to talk about it—if you can. And I need hardly say, sir, that Stuart Jackson is honoured by being employed in the Sacred Cause of Science. I guess we’ll have a big book about these islands some day, and my boat and I will be in it. Isn’t that so, Professor?”

For the first time the Professor spoke, and he spoke with a dry little smile. His voice was deep but pleasant.

“I have promised it, Captain Jackson,” he said. “I will give you all the immortality I can give. You certainly deserve it.”

They all laughed, and directly afterwards went down to my uncle’s cabin to celebrate the meeting in a little refreshment. Ten minutes later, however, the visitors departed, Captain Jackson declaring that he had no intention of delaying our repairs by any neighbourly attentions. He would feel honoured, however, if Captain James or any of his officers could find time to visit the *Maud Muller* before they left the island. And with that invitation, to which my uncle made a cordial response, the visitors went down the ladder and were rowed back to their ship. A very interesting pair they had proved, and obviously full of kindness and goodwill.

Repairs had begun on the *John Duncan*, however, before they left, and nobody had time or inclination to think further of our chance neighbours. “Give me twelve hours,” the chief engineer had said, but those hours must be crowded with work. There were other things wrong besides the engine gear, and soon the ship rang with the voice of the saw and the hammer.

While all this was going forward the Captain saw to it that a supply of fresh water was taken on board, Tawell and myself being told off to help, under the eye of the third officer. The cascade mentioned in the *Navigator* came down the face of the cliff not a hundred yards from the beach, and I had heard it through my dreams all night.

It was hardly possible to imagine a more dreary prospect. That narrow strip of beach was not common sea sand, but a minute dust mixed with dark,

smooth pebbles. At the back of this the cliffs rose in a sheer wall some fifty feet to a broad ledge, with another stretch of cliff wall above. And so it rose for something like a thousand feet to a top that stood against the sky like the teeth of a gigantic saw. Over all brooded a silence unbroken even by the cry of a sea-bird.

“All the other islands in this region are smothered with sea-fowl,” said Oliver. “Here we haven’t a single feather. The place is uncanny.”

“They wouldn’t find much to eat here,” grumbled Johnny, under his breath.

“No,” said the third officer, “and that’s curious, too. The place is as bare as a billiard-ball. I only hope the water’s all right.”

The water, however, seemed to be very good, and long before noon our task had been ended. It was just before we finished that Johnny made a suggestion.

“I say, Frank, how would you like a run ashore? It would be a change to get up those cliffs. Anyway, anything’s better than work.”

“Good,” I said. “Go and ask Smerdon.”

Tawell grinned, for the first officer was poison to him. “You ask Big Brother,” he said mockingly. “Do, now—and I’ll give you something—some day.”

I gave him something on the spot, but I spoke to Oliver all the same. And, as it turned out, Oliver had had his mind working in the same direction.

“I should like a turn myself,” he said. “I’ll see if we can be spared. But I shouldn’t let you two young rascallions go alone.”

The Captain raised no objection, but gave a word of warning. “If you go up there,” he growled, “keep a sharp eye for holes and crevices. The Honeycomb didn’t get its name without a reason. And see that you come back by sunset. If you get astray you mustn’t expect us to wait for you. We’ve lost too much time already. We leave at dawn.”

Ten minutes later, after a quick lunch in the cook’s galley, we went ashore in the water boat; and I, for one, found it good to be free, even on such a bleak and barren strand as that. It was like an unexpected half-holiday in the lost days of school, when Charlie Cornwall and I would slip off together to the beach at Leigh and hunt around for some kind of craft in which we might get out upon the water. Indeed, for a moment I could almost have fancied that the footsteps coming close behind me on that slippery beach were those of my old chum, and that if I turned suddenly I should see the brown face I knew so well. But when I did turn, it was Johnny Tawell that stood at my elbow.

“What were you grinning over?” he asked suspiciously.

“I was thinking of something.”

“What was it?”

“An old chum of mine.”

“Oh! And I suppose you were wishing him here instead of me?”

“Rather!” I said flatly; for when I thought of Charlie Cornwall it was impossible to be civil to the melancholy Johnny. But he took it in good part.

“All right,” he said, with a grin. “But as he isn’t here you’ll have to put up with me.”

Oliver’s idea was to ascend the cliff, ledge by ledge, until we reached the summit and got a view of the prospect beyond; but it was some little time before we found a track to carry us even to the first ledge. We found one at last at the extreme western end of the bay, and from the first ledge a similar track led us to the second. So we proceeded, with very little conversation, until we came to a halt for rest, some six hundred feet up. There we looked down upon a dwarfed *John Duncan* and *Maud Muller* lying in a fountain basin, with small men creeping busily about the former, and tapping here and there with tinkling hammers. Above us still rose the gaunt wall of cliff, and out beyond the rocky entrance to the bay we could see the unending dreariness of the immense Atlantic, stretching away, league after league, to the ice regions of the Pole.

So we moved on, slowly climbing higher. The mountain walls were as hard and black as iron, but I noticed at last that the ledges were caked with some substance that was neither rock nor sand.

“Why, this is guano,” I said. “There must have been millions of sea-birds here at one time. And now there isn’t one!”

“They got sick of it,” said Johnny. “But if you want to know why, ask a policeman. Look, now, here’s a new path for a change. Are we going to take it?”

That question put the guano mystery out of our minds for the time. We were now about eight hundred feet up the cliff, and this was the first break we had found in that immense barrier. It was just a narrow entrance which from the bay below would have been quite invisible; but it widened as it went inwards and upwards.

“It seems to be a way,” said Oliver, half doubtfully. “It’s not quite so steep, and it’s bound to get to the top somewhere. We’ll try it. But I wish we had got a word with that Professor person before we started. No doubt he’s explored this part and could give us a few hints. Perhaps we’ll compare notes with him afterwards.”

Accordingly we entered the cleft and began to follow its uneven course round and round, but moving gently upward all the while. Presently we were wandering about in a maze of rocky pathways running between the peaks and crags whose outline gave the island that sawlike, jagged effect which we had noticed from the sea. But there was no hope of climbing these, for in most cases they rose sheer from their base without foothold for man or beast. We could only follow the most promising tracks between, taking care that they

always tended upwards. It seemed that they must bring us presently to the base of a great cliff some quarter of a mile away over the rocks—a cliff which rose so steeply and towered so high that it seemed to say “No farther!” And we calculated that by the time we reached it we should just have to turn and get back again.

It was in that way that we arrived at disaster. We had not forgotten the Captain’s warning, and had kept a good lookout for holes and pitfalls. Had we not done this, we should never have noticed the place at all, but have passed it unhurt. As it was, a sudden fall in the ground to the right of the track caught my eye, and we turned to examine it more closely; and presently we were all standing on the brink of the Great Pit.

For a pit it seemed to be—a pit which giants might have drilled through the solid rock before mankind had come upon the scene. It was roughly oval, the edge darkened by a few coarse bushes; but we had no sooner looked at the place than we fell silent.

“My word!” said Johnny at last. “That’s the most awful hole I’ve ever seen.”

He found a large fragment of rock, and hurled it over. We stood in breathless silence; and at last there came up to us, faintly, a sound. It was a hollow, ominous reverberation, with the faint splash of water in it.

I went nearer to the edge of the well to peer downwards. I wondered whether I should see anything.

To this day I cannot tell how it happened. Perhaps I was unduly confident, or perhaps I had miscalculated my distance. Then the ground, instead of being solid rock, was probably just a thick layer of guano, and the great fragment on which I tried to stand, at the very brink of the well, was simply embedded in this, instead of being part of the immovable mountain. So when my foothold really began to move I did not realise it, refused to credit my senses, and stayed there just one second too long; and before I understood my danger, that fragment was slipping over the brink.

I gave a gasping cry and threw out my hands. Oliver instinctively moved to grip me, and could not recover his balance. Then my gasp became a brief, strangled shriek as I caught a last glimpse of Johnny Tawell’s long face, with the blue eyes bulging from their sockets in sheer terror. And he, poor fellow, could only answer my shriek with one of his own as both Oliver and I vanished from his sight.

CHAPTER III

THE BOTTOM OF THE GREAT PIT

Now and again the sensation comes back to me in my sleep, and I wake up with a start, my whole body bathed in a cold dew of dread. To me, the Great Pit has been a nightmare ever since.

I went hurtling down, with Johnny's cry echoing in my ears; and I knew that the great fragment of rock was still at my feet, falling, falling with me. It was then that the terror came, in a swift rushing wave that seemed to still my heart and blind my eyes.

All this could only have taken one brief, breathless moment, for then sensation—bodily sensation—came back with a rush. There must have been a screen of some kind of shrub growing round the sides of the pit in the crevices of the rock, stretching up weak, hopeless shoots to the glimpses of light above. These brushed me as I hurtled down, calling me back to life with a rustling of leaves and a faint rending of twigs. With desperate instinct, rather than thought, I closed my hands upon them once, twice, thrice. Once I held them, and they held me. Then I felt them give way, relinquished my hold to get another, tried, and failed: tried again desperately, hung for one brief instant, my eyes full of dust and grime, my arms almost wrenched from their sockets; then went down, down like a plummet, till the waters of silence closed over me.

Those shrubs had saved my life and my reason, and they did the same service for Oliver. We had fallen a hundred and fifty feet, but had done it, as it were, in three stages. There was a brief agony of cold and fear and suffocation, but after that I was on the surface again, still alive, dashing the water from my eyes. Then, in the clinging cold and silence and darkness, I looked up and saw light. It was the faint light at the mouth of the pit, oval-shaped, like an egg, and seemingly not much larger. At the same instant a gasping voice came out of the darkness behind me.

“Frank!”

Oh, the joy of it that I was not alone! I could have wept for the relief it gave me. Instead, I gave a little cry, and instantly Oliver was at my side, breathless, but as real and ready as ever.

“Hurt?” he asked.

“N-no,” I spluttered. “Are you?”

“Not much——”

There was a long pause, while we recovered our breath. Oliver was

touching me now, and he never left me till the danger had passed. It was then that I ceased to think, for I knew that he was thinking for both of us, and I knew, too, that his thinking could be trusted. Since I had come to know him I had trusted it often, and never in vain. He was only twenty-three, and I was over seventeen myself; but those six years had been for him full of hard fighting.

“We must get ashore,” he said at last. “I will lead and you will keep close. Good thing the water’s not very cold; but it’s much too cold to stay long in. Now, Frank.”

Without waiting for a reply, he struck out; and with a great fear of being left behind, I followed his lead. No, the water was not cold, but I had little time to wonder why, for another mystery was upon us. I knew that the pit was wider at the bottom than the top, but after a dozen long, steady strokes which sent a thousand strange, sibilant echoes from side to side of the great shaft, there was still water before me. Even when we had swum some twenty yards, and the egg-shaped fragment of light had disappeared, we had not reached the side.

If Oliver had not been there, I think I should have failed then; but he was there, striking into the darkness without a pause. Because I must keep near him, I struggled on against the chilling flood, the colder darkness, the growing terror. What else could I do?

I cannot tell how long it lasted, that ordeal of terror. Oliver said afterwards that it was ten minutes, but it seemed thousands. Once I almost shrieked as something touched me, some floating fragment of the vegetation I had torn down in my fall; but it might have been some giant devil-fish searching for me in the dark. And as my shriek was choked back, I struck out again with mad haste.

Then the voice spoke again before me. “Keep up, Frank. We’re going right.” At the same moment a current of cold air began to play upon my face. Cold air—just that, coming over the black water, out of the black nowhere. But there must be some passage here, to earth and light and life. Hurrah!

“Steady!” growled Oliver. “I touched bottom.”

A moment more and I touched it also; a minute after that and I was out of the water, prostrate upon a shelving verge of what seemed to be rough-edged stones and clinkers. Oliver had his hands upon me, feeling my face, my limbs, and at last holding my hands. He was breathing hard, like a spent man—just as I was.

“Thank God!” he said. “Thank God!” And, thus reminded, I repeated, like a child of six, the words of the Lord’s Prayer. Then for a time we simply rested, panting, not daring to move except to feel our bruised limbs and to wring the water from our hair and clothes; and when we moved at last it was by the result of Oliver’s silent thinking.

"This current of air," he said. "If it ceases we shall be lost. Can you start?"

"I'm with you," I replied promptly. "Is it stand or crawl?"

"Crawl, till we can see where we are. It's safer. You keep close to me."

Our eyes were beginning to distinguish outlines, and it seemed that we were in a cave. In front, where the breeze came from, was black darkness, to right and left rugged walls of rock, and above a rocky and uneven roof. Our first task was to crawl up the rough bank on which we had fallen, and try to take our bearings; our next to follow the course of that blessed breeze until we should find the outlet of our prison.

Very cautiously we moved upwards, until we were on almost level ground. I was glad to get away from that dark subterranean water. Then we moved forward, foot by foot, in the direction the breeze seemed to come from. And as we rose from the sheltering basin to the level ground, it blew still stronger and colder. There must be a free entrance somewhere.

The ground was very rough, and it required great care to move over it. I fancied it must be the bed of a stream—perhaps in the rainy season the subterranean pond into which we had fallen would overflow and rush away to another outlet by the road we were now taking. Somehow, somewhere, it would find its way to the sea. In this lay our hope. It was the sea we wanted, and the faces of our friends. Why, just think of it—if we were lucky, we might reach the bay and the *John Duncan* as soon as Johnny Tawell—or, perhaps, even before him!

As you see, I was beginning to think on my own account—and most of it was wrong!

We stumbled on for fifty yards, on a course that was slightly downwards. That, I thought, was right—water could not flow upwards, and we had climbed so high that we must be considerably above sea level still. It was awful to keep struggling on in the dark on such a path, but it was better than the water of the Great Pit, and we had the cool breeze for company. So we held steadily on—or unsteadily, rather—for that fifty yards; and then—then we reached a corner!

Yes, a corner. Not a sharp, right-handed corner, but a curve in the wall of rock leading round to another long cavern something like the first. But ah, it was utterly different after all. Oliver stood upright and pointed. There was a queer, strained note in his voice.

"The light!" he cried. "The light!"

Yes, the light. For that long cavern went down—sharply down—its course paved with great boulders and fragments of stone; and it was a long course, nearly a quarter of a mile long, as rugged and trying a journey as anyone might see in a lifetime. But we could see to the end; and the end of it was light—the welcome light of day! The long, long cave before us was like a great telescope, and there, at the end of it, cut sharply in a rugged circle, was the lost daylight.

When I saw it I gasped with joy. I had to sit down on a boulder and rest a while before I could begin what seemed to be the last stage of our adventurous journey. And Oliver sat with me, still holding my hand.

Is there any need to describe it—that eager, headlong rush to the light, so slow in spite of its headlong eagerness? Heavens! what a mad course it was—that panting escape from the Pit of Darkness! We tore our hands on the sharp rock-edges, stumbled and fell again and again, bruised knees and shins and ankles and thighs till we were scratched and bleeding in a score of places. In a few minutes I was in a bath of perspiration, in spite of the clinging cold of my wet clothes; but, heedless of everything, I pounded on towards the light. I had lost my reason for the time, and was in a wild panic of hope and longing. Oliver, now the follower instead of the leader, had to keep close or lose me. He kept close, steadying me now and again with a word.

Before we reached the end I was thoroughly exhausted, but my efforts were not relaxed. Again and again I brushed away from my eyes the mist of sweat and steam, angry that anything should come for an instant between me and the light. And steadily the light-circle grew larger, until I could distinguish objects without; and we saw at last that there were cliffs there—cliffs with the steep, wall-like faces which we had seen everywhere on the island.

I had no time to be disappointed—no time to consider that I had expected to find the open sea and the great waste of the Atlantic. I was on the threshold of success, too eager and exultant to think. I scrambled wildly on at a breakneck pace, and in a moment more was standing at the mouth of the cave.

Then I rubbed my eyes.

We were on the brow of a steep hill, at the top of a rude ravine which led by an easy course—an old water-course, no doubt—to the beach below. And at the first glance we saw, or seemed to see, the bay in which we had left the *John Duncan*, its water as smooth as a millpond, and with the familiar steep beach of dark-coloured dust and pebbles. And it seemed to me, in that first glance, that I saw the old *John Duncan* too, lying just as I had left her. But I rubbed my eyes, because even at the first glance some things were different.

The bay seemed larger—considerably larger. It was at least twice as far to the opposite side. But the curious part of it was that the *John Duncan* was smaller—considerably smaller; more curious still, she was utterly changed in appearance! And there was no *Maud Muller*!

It was then that I rubbed my eyes. And after that I looked again, and laughed weakly. Had a miracle happened? What else could have changed our one old black funnel with the grey bars into two dingy white ones? Then I rubbed my eyes again—and immediately saw something else.

Just below me and a little to the right, well up from the beach, was a *house*. Yes, a house. Only a small one, it is true, but still a house! It had a roof of

corrugated zinc. That was the first thing I saw; and then I saw that it was built of wood, very neatly and trimly, built with doors and windows all complete.

I felt dazed and silly. The bay and the ship and the bungalow—were they a dream? I turned to look at Oliver, and when I saw his face I saw that I must be awake—or else he was dreaming too. It is impossible to describe the astonishment of his look.

He stared at me blankly. I gave another glance at the ship, and my head began to swim. Could it be possible that I was dreaming—that the ship and the bay and the little house were not real life at all, but a bit of scenery out of dreamland? I tried to pull myself together, tried to be sane and sensible.

And in that pause something happened. The door of the house—the bungalow—just below us, opened, and a man came out.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN OF THE BUNGALOW

A man came out of the house and stood near the open door. He had not seen us—we knew that from his movements, which were slow and unconcerned; and at the moment we could not see his face, for he was looking down towards the water and the ship. He was a seaman of some kind, and wore a closely buttoned reefer coat, something after the style of a naval petty officer; but instead of the peaked cap which usually goes with the uniform, he had the round cap of the ordinary sailor.

We were not surprised to see him, for the presence of the house and the ship must mean the presence of men; but even then it struck me that there was something curious about the matter. All was so quiet and still; and here stood one solitary man in the stillness, looking out upon it all. My excitement somehow died down, and I had nothing to say. My bewilderment died also, to be replaced by another feeling still less pleasant. I was glad, yet afraid, when Oliver spoke.

“Let’s hail him!” he whispered.

I had no voice, so he did it himself; but it was a rather hoarse and feeble “Ahoy!” that floated down the hill to the solitary man below. But it reached him, and he turned to see where it came from.

There was still the same unconcern in his movements—no suggestion of haste or wonder; and when he had seen us he made no sign but simply stood and gazed. Yes, it was certainly curious and a trifle chilling. Oliver felt it too, for he said suddenly:

“Let’s go down.”

Of course! It was so obviously the thing to do that I gave a little laugh. Then we ran and slid down the slippery hill together, and over the stretch of clinkers and stones beyond; and we did not stop until we were face to face with the stranger.

As we came nearer we saw that he was an old man, sixty years of age at least. Yes, quite a veteran of a sailor, with grizzled beard, and grey hair beneath the cap, and a grey, weather-beaten face. But it was the eyes that were noteworthy, for they looked upon us entirely without surprise. Neither our sudden appearance, nor our queer and draggled condition, seemed to be anything to be wondered at. He simply stood and looked at us, just as if he waited to hear why we had hailed him. It was an extraordinary attitude, and even Oliver was taken aback.

“Hullo!” he said lamely.

The old man looked him up and down; and as he looked I felt that I could read the spirit of his glance. Surely, there was doubt, suspicion, even resentment and hostility in those faded grey eyes and that knitted brow. And when the old man spoke, his words were almost as mysterious as his manner.

“An’ how did *you* come?” he asked.

Oliver pulled himself together—indeed, he seemed to try to shake himself free from some unpleasant influence.

“We fell into a pit,” he said; “on the top of the cliffs. But we fell into water, and when we got out of it we found our way here along an old water-course.”

The old man’s eyes left us for a moment to glance at the road by which we had come. He seemed to weigh the story critically.

“I know the water,” he said slowly. “It’s the end of that underground tunnel. I’ve been there. But I never saw any pit.”

“We had to swim a good way,” said Oliver. “Quite ten minutes.”

Again the old man seemed to weigh the statement.

“You’re wet, anyway,” he said. “The thing’s a bit of a change, too. I’ve had many people here, but they’ve never come through that tunnel before. I never knew there was a way through.”

His words were as puzzling as his manner. Oliver became a little impatient.

“Our ship is the *John Duncan* of Cardiff,” he said crisply. “She is lying in Sandy Bay for repairs. What is your vessel called?”

“She is called the *Plynlimmon*,” answered the old man quite simply. “You will see her name on her bows.”

We glanced from the man to his ship. He was mysterious, and the ship was uncannily silent and still. Uncanny, too, was the whole atmosphere of the place, shut in on every side by those enormous cliffs. Oliver became irritated, and frowned.

“Well,” he said bluntly, “isn’t there anyone else about? Could we get a loan of some clothes, and have something to eat?”

The old man seemed to rouse himself to the duties of the moment and the situation. “There’s plenty of clothes on board,” he said. “You’re just about the build of our chief engineer, and this young fellow is about the same weight and height as our second engineer. Their quarters are on the lower deck, amidships—cabins ten and eleven. Go you aboard and fit yourself up with anything you want.”

That was distinctly better. “But what will they say?” cried Oliver, bewildered. “Aren’t they on board?”

The old man shook his head. “No,” he said, “they’re not on board. They’re gone on an expedition across the island. They’re all gone—that’s why it’s so quiet here. I’m left in charge. But what I’ve told you is just what the Master

would tell you if he was here. So it's all right."

Now we began to see light, and it made an enormous difference; but why couldn't the old fellow have said all that before, instead of keeping us there in suspense and bewilderment? Oliver looked at me, and I smiled back at him; and at once the face of affairs was entirely altered. The atmosphere of the place was explained away, and even the curious conduct of the old man began to seem a bit reasonable. He was a cranky old seaman, left behind, no doubt, because he was too old to go with the rest; and at first he had been presuming a little upon his office.

"You're sure they won't mind?" asked Oliver cheerfully.

And he answered simply but positively: "Quite sure." Then he pointed down to the beach to show us a tiny landing-stage built firmly of planks. And at the stage lay a small dinghy.

"You won't want me to take you," he said. "I'm a bit tired to-day, and there's no need, either. You take the dinghy. She's quite sound. And don't be afraid to pick anything you may need. It will be all right. I'll answer for that."

There was evidently nothing more to be said, and, with a murmur of thanks, Oliver led the way down to the boat. She was indeed in excellent order, and the old man stood watching as we stepped in and took our seats. Oliver took the oar to scull her over the fifty feet or so that separated the ship from the beach; but even as we started our hospitable old gentleman did a rather curious thing. He marched slowly up the beach without once looking back, and when he reached the bungalow he went inside and closed the door behind him. No, he did more than close the door—he locked it, for the distance was so little and the air was so still that I heard the key turn. Oliver heard it also and gave a queer little smile.

"Well, he's a cranky old chap, and no mistake!" he said; and then we both forgot the old fellow and turned our attention to the things before us.

These were very interesting matters. There was a handsome accommodation ladder on the ship's side, some four feet wide and beautifully carpeted. That was something to start with, and it gave a fair indication of the rest; for in the next ten minutes, feeling that the old man's attitude as well as his words had given us the right, we took a rapid survey of the *Plynlimmon* from stem to stern—of course without entering any closed doors, and even when doors were open before us, without laying a finger upon anything that could be called private. From the first, however, we saw what the accommodation ladder had suggested—namely, that the *Plynlimmon* was not and never had been a cargo-boat. She was a well-appointed steam yacht of some two thousand tons, fitted with every requisite for comfort and efficiency, every appliance and invention that could make a voyage pleasant and enjoyable. Even the crew's quarters—well, I thought of the old *John Duncan*

and smiled.

“This becomes more and more interesting,” said Oliver in a hushed voice, as we looked into a large saloon which seemed to be partly a gentleman’s study and library, partly a sitting and smoking room. “There are quite a thousand books on those shelves. I think we might have a look at them.”

We examined one or two, but they did not greatly appeal to us. The volumes were in a special binding, with a coat-of-arms on the side, but the series I got hold of was called *Transactions of the Geological Society*, while Oliver hit on several volumes of *Notes and Queries*. “Quite old ones, too,” he said. “I fancy the owner must be a student of science, to say the least of it. But here are some magazines.”

The magazines were lying in a rack, and he picked up two or three and turned them over. For a moment after that he was silent, but as I was still examining the library I did not notice the expression upon his face. He was about to say something, but checked himself abruptly; and directly afterwards he laid the magazines down and led the way into the next room.

That was evidently the Captain’s cabin. It was handsomely furnished in mahogany and velvet, and as sumptuous an abode as any man might desire. Oliver glanced quickly round, and then went over to a large writing-table which had three shelves of books behind it. Stooping over the table he examined some of the titles of the books, which were mostly works of reference. He took down several of them and opened them, still in silence; and then he took from the lowest shelf a black, leather-covered volume of foolscap size which had the single word “Log,” in gold, on the back.

I was greatly interested but a little surprised; for though his action was natural in one way, seeing that he was himself a ship’s officer, it seemed a little intrusive also. After all, a Captain’s log is the Captain’s private record. But Oliver opened the book and examined several pages; then he called me.

“Just look at this, Frank,” he said.

I looked. It was apparently the last written page of the log, and I could not see it all because his finger covered one of the entries; but the items he pointed to were certainly interesting; they formed the heading to the page.

Log of the Steam Yacht *Plynlimmon* of Cardigan.

Owner: The Right Honourable the Earl of Barmouth.

Captain: Thomas Vaynor Powell, R.N.R.

First Officer: James Williams.

Voyage:

I did not read more—indeed, the position of Oliver’s hand obscured the other details. Suddenly he closed the book and replaced it.

“Now we know a little,” he said. “The *Plynlimmon* came here for some scientific purpose, the Earl of Barmouth being the owner of that learned library next door. For the rest, I think we will interview the caretaker again—after we have got into our new clothes. Frank, my boy, we have almost forgotten the purpose of our visit. First, then, numbers ten and eleven on the lower deck; then, I suggest, a bath in those elegant enamelled baths. You can have the Earl’s, and I will take the Captain’s. I want to wash away all taste and trace of the Great Pit. What do you say?”

“I say ‘Yes,’” I replied at once. “I’m with you—or at least I’ll be next door! A bath will be just the thing.”

Accordingly we sought and found the engineers’ cabins, which were quite as hospitable to our needs as the old sailor had promised. Everything about us was in apple-pie order, and it did not take us long to find in those well-stocked lockers the very things we wanted. I selected a woollen shirt and socks, a strong pair of blue serge trousers, a knitted jersey and a reefer coat, bearing everything in triumph to the Earl’s bathroom. While I enjoyed a thorough cleansing, I heard Oliver undergoing the same process three or four yards away, and did my best to get finished first. In this I was successful, and was awaiting him in the corridor when he came out, all fresh and new, but with a gravity of countenance that gave me quite a shock.

“Why, what’s the matter?” I cried. “You’re as solemn as an owl.”

He smiled. “It doesn’t hurt,” he said. “Now I think we’ll go back for that interview. There’s a lot of things I want to know yet. And we’ll take our wet clothes with us in the hope of getting them dried.”

We descended that splendid ladder and made our way back to the beach. By this time dusk was creeping over the tremendous cliffs which surrounded that inland sea. It was so eerie and solemn, so gloomy and so majestic, that I was impressed against my will and gave a little shudder. That stillness was so great, so intense, that every slightest sound seemed to be a crime. Oliver’s tones were hushed and low as he spoke.

“That is the big cliff face,” he said, pointing. “From the distance of two miles it would be hard to see the cavern-like opening by which the *Plynlimmon* entered. You can see the entrance from this side—that great archway. I imagine that the Earl of Barmouth found it by accident, perhaps when he was examining the coast in a small boat. He found the passage navigable, and so came in. If all’s well, we’ll get out that way in the morning, before the *John Duncan* sails—it’s too late to try any adventures to-night. Besides, there’s that interview.”

He fell silent again. “Well,” I said, in the same hushed tones, as we touched the little landing-stage and tied the dinghy up. “Well, I said the other day that there were no adventures to be had nowadays by going to sea—nothing but

hard tack and hard work. But it strikes me that we've found a very remarkable adventure on this island."

"Yes," said Oliver grimly. "And it's going to turn out more remarkable still. But that's to be seen. But there's one peculiar coincidence, Frank. You remember the bound volumes you looked at in the Earl's library?"

"Yes—you mean the *Geological Magazine*?"

"Just so. The Earl was, I guess, a learned man with a special interest in geology. That's all right. But the American ship in Sandy Bay has come to this island for scientific purposes; and the learned Professor on board is also a geologist."

"That's so," I said, puzzled. "But what about it?"

"I don't quite know—in fact, I haven't the slightest idea yet. We'll just have to wait and see."

CHAPTER V

THE STORY OF RICHARD LEWIS OF BARMOUTH

The bungalow was a small one, built entirely of wood. As we discovered later, the Earl of Barmouth, on finding reasons for a prolonged stay upon the Honeycomb, had made a special voyage to Monte Video for timber and other materials, so that he might remain ashore with some comfort and convenience. Thus his little house would have shamed many a country cottage in Old England.

We had very curious sensations as we knocked at the door. It was so strange to find a civilised wooden door in such a place as this! But the first knock brought no answer; and the second, though much more decided, was equally fruitless. At last Oliver positively thumped the wood with his fist, ending up by seizing the latch and shaking it impatiently. Then we heard footsteps, the lock was turned, and once more we were face to face with the old man of the beach.

His glance was noticeably vacant, and without his cap, with his thin grey hair all awry, he looked older and feebler than when we had met him earlier. From the first Oliver was very gentle and considerate with him, as you shall see.

“Well, we’re back,” he said cheerfully. “And we’ve borrowed lots of things. We’ve seen your ship, too, and a very fine ship she is.”

The old man stood aside to let us pass, and closed the door behind us. Then, still without speaking, he led the way up a short passage which had one door on each side of it. He chose the door on the right, and we followed him into the room.

It was a room measuring about fourteen feet square, with its window looking out upon the sea and the ship. It contained a comfortable-looking bed, a small table, and several chairs, while warmth was furnished by a very neat, open-fronted coal stove, whose chimney found an outlet in the back wall of the room. At our coming the occupant had been about to light a lamp, and he completed this task before he paid any further attention to his guests. It was a good lamp, and as the light shot up he turned to look us over. Then we both noticed that he had been about to partake of a meal, for there was a dish of biscuits on the table and a plate of some kind of tinned meat; but it was very obvious that he had made preparations for only one person!

“I expect you had forgotten all about us, hadn’t you?” asked Oliver, as we threw our caps down upon the bed.

“No,” said the old man simply. “It wasn’t that. I wasn’t quite sure that you were real. I have so many visitors, but never real ones.”

“How would you tell if they were real or not?” asked Oliver, showing no surprise whatever; and the old man’s reply was of a pathetic and startling nature. For a long minute he looked at us, and then he drew slowly nearer. He laid his hands upon my sleeve, and gripped the arm beneath. He looked into my eyes and touched my cheeks. Then he turned to Oliver.

“Take my hand,” said my friend suddenly.

They clasped hands. I knew Oliver’s hand-clasp, how warm and vital it was, and now the old man realised it too. He was past the age of agitation or excitement, but he showed that he was satisfied. Going to a small cupboard, he produced a couple of plates, cups, saucers, and knives and forks, and laid them upon the table. Then, still in silence, but visibly shaken, he made coffee on the little stove.

Everything he needed was at hand, and though he moved slowly he worked with the sure touch of the sailor. Five minutes later we were seated at the queerest meal we had ever taken, and I was listening to the most remarkable conversation I had ever heard.

“What kind of people have your visitors been?” asked Oliver, in a friendly, sympathetic way. “Mostly folks you knew, I suppose?”

“Always,” said the old man, in the same simple, unemotional fashion. “Old friends and shipmates. All the men I have ever sailed with have come in from the sea, sometimes very friendly, but never real. And almost every day the Master comes along the beach from the way he went, with the Captain at his side and all the others marching behind. More than once they were so real that I have gone running out to meet them; and he has always said: ‘Well, Lewis, how are things going? Is all well?’ But when I got close enough to touch his hand, there was nobody there.”

There was something of vacant wonder in the faded grey eyes that gazed at us in the light of the lamp; and as I met that gaze I suddenly began to understand the terror and the pity of it—no, not to understand fully, but to get some glimpse of understanding. Before Oliver could speak, he went on:

“Once the *Ocean Pearl* came sailing in, just in the evening, when it was getting dark; but I knew her, for she was my first ship. I went to Australia with Captain Williams. Yes, the *Ocean Pearl* came sailing in, and dropped anchor right astern of the *Plynlimmon*; and there was Williams on the poop, as big and red as ever. ‘You there, Dick Lewis?’ he calls out. ‘We’ve come to fetch you. You’ll come on board first thing in the morning, and we’ll take you home.’ ‘No, Captain Williams,’ says I. ‘I’m in charge here, and I can’t go till the Master comes back. It wouldn’t be like you to want me to desert, and it wouldn’t be like me to do it.’ Then I heard Captain Williams laugh out till the

sound went all over the island. 'It's the same old Dick Lewis,' he said. 'He won't budge an inch!' And when I looked out in the morning the *Ocean Pearl* was gone. But of course, sir, she hadn't really been there."

There was a long pause—all the more terrible to me for the calm way in which Oliver took his food while he brought out this amazing story. Then:

"Tell us about the Master," he said kindly. "How long has he been away?"

Lewis seemed to consider, and I perceived now what Oliver had seen earlier—that his mind was no longer capable of thought without a great effort.

"Well, it may be a month," he said slowly. "Or, perhaps, a few days more. You see, the Master went first, taking the first officer with him, and the chief engineer, and the steward, and ten men besides. He would be away a week at most, he said; but he didn't come back in a week, and there was no word of him. So then Captain Powell gets anxious, and sends another lot on the track of the party, to see what had become of them; but they didn't come back either. So then Captain Powell, in ten days or so, made up another party, leaving three of us in charge of the house and the ship. And the other two with me were Charles Roper and Albert Perkins."

At this point I almost forgot my food, for I perceived that a tragedy was being unrolled before me. But Oliver saw my face and gently kicked my foot under the table; so I looked as unconcerned as I could and went on eating. But my attention now was a taut and trembling cord.

"And what happened to them?" asked Oliver. Whereupon the old man raised his head to show a sudden angry gleam in those faded eyes.

"What happened to them? Just what they deserved. In a little while they got tired of waiting and said they would go. I would not go with them, so they went without me. They took the biggest boat and plenty of provisions, and went to get out through the water-cave, where we had come in; but next day some pieces of the boat were brought back here by the tide, and Albert Perkins was brought back too. I took him out of the water and buried him back in the shingle. The rocks in the water-cave had battered his poor body to death."

"And then you were left alone?"

"Yes, sir. But I had plenty of everything on the ship, and I managed. It was very quiet, but then I was busy keeping things clean and neat for the Master when he should come. I had no time to be idle or to get rusty."

We had seen the ship, and could imagine how her care had kept this one man employed; but Oliver had not yet finished.

"You said you had been into the water-course down which we came," he said. "Have you made any other explorations? Which way did the Earl go? Have you tried to trace his party?"

"Oh yes, sir," said Richard Lewis. "The Earl went to cross the island, thinking he might find his way to the northern coast. It is terrible rough going,

for there is no road, only a jumble of rocks and boulders. But I gave two days to it—yes, that was last week—and came at last to the foot of the cliffs of the northern coast. Then there was no way, seemingly, except through a great cave, and I hadn't taken enough candles with me to try it. So I had to come back; but I'm going again later, to make sure—if the Earl doesn't come back before, which I expect he will. But this island is a wild place for caves and such like."

"So it is," said Oliver briefly.

"Yes, sir, so it is. And for my own part I like the open air and the open sea."

For a while a silence fell. Oliver and I doubtless thought of the great pit, while old Dick Lewis thought of the great cave in the northern face of the island. But there was still a little more to know.

"Why did the Earl come to the island first?" asked Oliver. "What was he specially interested in?"

"Rocks and things," said Richard Lewis.

"Geology?"

"That's it, sir. It was his hobby, and he went right round the world for it. We came here as a last call on the way home, but as soon as he'd looked round he said he must stay a while. So we stayed, and his lordship gathered many bits of rock together here. Just come and look in the next room."

By this time we had finished our meal and had pushed our plates aside. Lewis rose, took up the lamp, and led the way out across the passage to the next room.

It was similar in size to the first, but it was furnished and fitted differently. True, there was a bed in the middle here also, and a table and a couple of chairs; but the chief difference lay in the racks of wooden drawers which had been built up against the walls on every side but one. Lewis went to one of these and drew it out, to show it half filled with chippings of rock.

"There's hundreds of these," he said. "And no doubt the Master will bring back hundreds more. His lordship was a great one for having things done in order and neatly, as you see, though it was only for a little while. He would never have things lying about."

"It couldn't have been more thoroughly done if he had settled here for a couple of years," I suggested.

"No, sir. That was just his way. And I've had to keep things in just his way."

He turned to go back, but paused on the threshold.

"That's my bed, sir," he said. "I sleep in this room to look after the specimens. His lordship asked me to, and had the bed put there for me. The bed in the other room was his own, and that's the one you shall use. I'm sure

he wouldn't mind . . . and I'll take the risk."

With slow, uncertain steps he led the way back, and put down the lamp. As he did so he looked up with just that touch of wistful pride which I had noticed more than once before.

"I'm a Barmouth man myself," he said; "and I knew his lordship as a boy. My father was one of his shepherds. After he had bought the *Plynlimmon* he heard that I had been round the world, and asked me to join the crew. A good and easy place it was, too, and a kind and noble master he made. That's why I wouldn't join Albert Perkins and Charles Roper when they wanted to go. They were Bristol men, and of course it wasn't the same to them."

Oliver, I could see, was under strong emotion. But he did not glance at me. He looked around that cosy little room with its wooden walls, and for a moment he seemed to listen; but if he listened, it was only to the great silence without. The old man, however, concluded that the questions were finished.

"I always go to bed at dark, sir," he said gently, "except sometimes when I read a while in the Book. I will now clear away the things, and after that, if you please, we will read together just one little passage."

"Certainly," said Oliver. "But we will help you to clear up. Come, Frank."

Help him we certainly did, "washing up" in a little lean-to at the back of the bungalow, where the household utensils were stored. We did it by candle light, and when we came back Lewis carefully put out the candle. "Not that I'm mean, sir," he explained. "But I cannot waste. And though there is plenty of everything on the ship, one cannot tell how long the Master may be."

Oliver nodded, and then we drew round the table once more. The old man brought two books out of a cupboard.

"I am Welsh, sir," he said. "And I like to read the Welsh. It seems better to me, being my native tongue. I will read the Welsh, if you please, and perhaps you will read the English of it after. It is the Twenty-third Psalm."

So he read it in the strong, musical, and sonorous tongue of his homeland, very slowly, as if he liked the sound of it; and after he had finished, Oliver read the immortal passage in English. By that time the old man's eyes were full of tears, and even I felt a tightness of the throat as I heard, on this bleak, forgotten, and inhospitable rock, of the green pastures and still waters of the Shepherd King.

Never shall I forget the passage as I heard it that night.

Then Richard Lewis, with a great composure, took up the books and lit the candle once more. "You have the lamp, sir," he said. "Please put it out as soon as you have done with it. And I hope you will sleep well."

"We shall sleep the better for that reading," said Oliver earnestly; and then the old man, smiling, shook hands with both of us. For a few moments afterwards we heard him moving in the next room, but in a little while he

became silent. Then Oliver turned to me:

“What do you think of it, Frank?” he asked, in a low tone.

“I think loads of things, but I can’t tell you them all at once. Anyway, that old chap is a gentleman.”

“Yes; and in a way God has been kind to him, too. He has let him forget. By this time, perhaps, he has forgotten that we are here.”

“Forgotten!” I cried, in hushed astonishment.

“Yes. Remember his story of Albert Perkins and Charles Roper. Do you think that they would have dared that voyage—the cavern passage and the South Atlantic beyond—in a small boat, after only a few weeks’ waiting here? They waited for months—perhaps years. They waited until they felt that they would lose their reason if they waited longer. Then they went—and died; but Lewis thinks it all happened a few days ago. He has lost all sense of the passage of time. He simply lives for the work of the moment, the day. He remembers things, but he can’t date them. For him they are all in the immediate past—the yesterday.”

I was bewildered and shocked, as much by Oliver’s expression as by his statements. He was in dead earnest plainly enough, but as I had not yet grasped his meaning, I could not understand his gravity. So he went on to explain:

“I did not tell you on the ship, because I wanted to make sure; but you may as well know the truth now. You noticed how old some of the books were, and the magazines; but I did not show you the date of the last entry in the Captain’s logbook. It was made in September, 1902. To-day is October the fifth, 1922. So I gather that Richard Lewis has been alone on this island, with the ship and the house and a crowd of ghosts, for twenty years!”

CHAPTER VI

THE INSIDE OF A PRISON

“Awake, Frank?”

“Yes.”

“Then I think we might talk a bit. It’s better than too much thinking.”

I had been thinking for an hour—the hour of day-dawn—and so had he, but each had kept quite still so that the other might sleep on. But we were young and strong, and a few hours’ sleep had been quite sufficient to restore the energies which had borne so severe a test yesterday. Indeed, we were both impatient for action and counsel, though we had talked a good deal before sleep had come.

Now Oliver turned, so that we might speak in whispers and not disturb the old man in the next room. “Great Scott!” he said. “What a nightmare it is! When I try to think it seems to grow more and more awful. Twenty years in a place like this! Why, a loss of the sense of time would be a blessing to pray for.”

“Perhaps he prayed for it,” I said.

“Yes. And then it was just routine, day after day, with two or three guiding principles. One was work, another was faith, and another was devotion. Another was care—and I think he must have got that before he lost the sense of time. He saw, then, that he must husband his resources, and so got into the habit of economy. No doubt the ship was well provisioned, but even one old man will consume a great deal in twenty years.”

Ralph Oliver had evidently been thinking to some effect, and we discovered afterwards that he was right in his surmise. There were provisions, coal, and lights on the *Plynlimmon* to last the three of us for about six months with care; but Richard Lewis had lived almost a hermit’s life and had wasted nothing. Day by day he drew his rations from the ship’s stores with pathetic care, but the incident of the candle was a faithful index to his methods.

“But,” proceeded Ralph earnestly, “that is not the point just now. I went to sleep feeling that it would be an easy thing to get back to our ship this morning. The thing is not so easy.”

“Not?” I said.

“Well, how is it to be done? We can’t go back the way we came, and there is only one other way—the way the *Plynlimmon* came in. But there is only one boat—the little dinghy—and that, for one thing, isn’t ours. It’s Lewis’s only way of getting to his ship, and, except as a last resource, we dare not risk it in

an attempt to get through the cavern. Besides, I feel sure it would be madness. Perkins and Roper had a larger boat, and they failed. With a steam launch or electric motor it might be easy, but if there is any current through the cave the dinghy would be a mere cockle-shell.”

I was staggered—and convinced—and could find nothing to say. Oliver went on:

“Captain James will give us up for lost on Tawell’s report. How can he help it? Even if a man were lowered to the bottom of the Great Pit he wouldn’t find anything there but the water; so there could be no hope of our having survived. There would be nothing to suggest a search along the coast. As to letting them know that we are here, the only way possible to us would be by a rifle shot; but we are absolutely shut in by the cliffs on every hand, as, indeed, they are themselves at Sandy Bay. The sound would never reach them. As for climbing the cliff, why, I don’t suppose a goat could do it.”

“Not much. It’s mostly a bare wall. But what is to be done? If there is no hope, the *John Duncan* will go. Hadn’t we better go out and see?”

“I think so. But we must try not to disturb the old man.”

We did not disturb the old man. In complete silence, in the grey morning light, we dressed and slipped on our shoes. As we passed the door of the other room we listened to hear the breathing of the aged sleeper, but we did not look in to see him. The outer door was opened very quietly, and then we paused upon the threshold to survey the world in which we found ourselves. After one look, I slipped my arm through Ralph’s just for the comfort of the touch of him.

It was weird and grey, ghostly and terrible. Light was coming over the cliff from the east, but, below, the Secret Sea lay in shadow, with its ghostly grey ship and its lifeless waters, as silent as death. The very silence was appalling, for it was not broken even by a ripple against the beach. It was a dead and forgotten world on which we gazed, a dead and forgotten world into which we had been thrown by some heartless whim of fortune. I could not resist a shudder, and Oliver, feeling it, pressed my arm.

“Buck up, old chap,” he said, “we’ll make a do of it, never fear. Let’s walk along towards the sea cavern.”

So we shook off the spell of that eerie morning, and began to examine our situation and its surroundings; and though I had read some very remarkable tales of difficulties and adventures on desert islands, I soon discovered that it would puzzle any romancer to imagine such a problem as ours. I describe it here in some detail, though, of course, we did not discover everything on that first morning.

The island on which we stood was really the summit of an old and almost submerged volcano, a fact which explained the singular appearance of the

place. Sandy Bay, where the *John Duncan* had found refuge, was undoubtedly an old crater, into which the sea had flowed during some convulsion long ago, or, perhaps, through the natural action of the water and weather upon the surrounding rocks. But this submerged mountain had had two craters, both of which were now mere basins for the sea. And the second of these was the one into which the Earl of Barmouth had found a way, and in which his deserted ship had lain so long.

The entrance to Sandy Bay was at the south-western extremity of the island, and was visible from a long distance away; but the opening to the Secret Sea was at the south-eastern end, and there were some three miles of dangerous rocks between. Moreover, all that could be seen from the sea, even at close quarters, was the grim mouth of a great cavern, dark and forbidding, with a swirling tide that seemed to speak of treacherous currents and eddies. The place offered no temptation to any mariner, but the Earl had entered the cavern one day in his launch, curious to examine the formation of its tremendous walls. He had found it apparently bottomless, a great channel through which three ships might pass abreast, and, on exploring it to the end, he had reached that quiet basin where the Secret Sea was securely sheltered by its belt of frowning cliffs, so securely sheltered that even the heaviest gale without would scarcely stir its sullen waters.

Ages ago, perhaps, that crater had spouted out a sea of boiling lava, before the masses of discharged rock had yet had time to harden. This molten flood had sought an outlet, and had found a weak place in the congealing ramparts that surrounded it. Through this it had poured in a mighty stream that swept away the rocks like straws, cleaving a vast chasm through the breast of the mountain to the outer air. When the flood had gone and the mountain had grown cold, the great outlet had remained, and the masses of molten rock had hardened all around and over it into a mighty grotto, a quarter of a mile from end to end; and after many changes and many ages, the sea had flowed into its mouth and had filled the empty basin that had once bubbled with fire and steam. Doubtless, too, the great pit into which we had fallen was another of the channels through which the now extinct volcanic forces had made their way. It was the existence of these caves and shafts that had gained the rock its peculiar name.

The Secret Sea, as we saw now, was about a mile long from north to south, and some three-quarters of a mile across. The beach was of a dark volcanic sand, and behind the beach stretched a wilderness of rocks and boulders, until you came to the almost sheer face of the cliff. But here and there we could see tracks that led into and over the rocky wilderness, and it was by these ways that the Earl had made his geological expeditions. Sometimes, as Lewis told us later, they were very brief, and he would return in an hour or two with his

canvas bag well laden, spending the rest of the day in examining and selecting from the fragments he had brought. Sometimes they would last for many hours and yet be less fruitful in results.

The ship lay some distance from the entrance to the cavern, and about fifty feet from the beach above which the bungalow was built. It was marvellous that after her long idleness she should still look so spick and span, except that time had dulled the paint on her hull; but, as a matter of fact, her guardian had spent all his thought and care upon her to keep her ready for her master's return. And there she had lain year after year, with that one old man about her, one living being in the midst of desolation and death. For there was no other life anywhere, no goats among the rocks, no rabbits, scarcely a stunted shrub, hardly a blade of grass. The tide, indeed, came up, raising the surface of the Secret Sea some four feet or so silently and stealthily, with a hollow murmur from the gloom of the great cavern; but even the tide brought a new and uncomfoting mystery with it, for Lewis declared positively that not a single fish of any kind came in with the flow of the water.

But to come back to the tour of this first morning. We walked briskly down the beach to the southern end of the water till we could go no farther. The beach ended in a wilderness of rocks, beyond which rose the cliff face, absolutely unscalable. From this point, however, we could see the entrance to the great sea cavern which was the gateway to liberty, and it was for this purpose that we had come. But we saw nothing that could help us. It was simply a giant archway whose sides rose sheer from the water. Oliver's fear that the passage would be too difficult for a small boat seemed to have every justification, for there seemed to be strong currents setting into the great arch and issuing from it.

"It is a very remarkable formation," he said, as we stood there and gazed. "But it doesn't stand alone. It occurs at Fernando de Noronha, far to the north of this; but that is a well-known case, while this is not. This coast is so dangerous that most people give it a wide berth even if they happen to come to the island itself."

"Then you see no hope of our getting out?"

"Not in the dinghy. But it's curious that there are no larger boats here. The ship must have had several, and we know that Perkins and Roper took one of them. But where are the others?"

We turned to walk back, but suddenly I stopped. "We've forgotten the American ship," I cried. "She has been here some time, and is going to stay. Even when the *John Duncan* has gone, we may be able to reach her in time."

"Yes," said Oliver, "but even if we don't, the chances are that her people will reach us. I gather that that Professor is making a survey of the island from a scientific point of view. If his survey is a thorough one, he is almost certain

to find his way in here—just as the Earl of Barmouth did. It may be a week or it may be a month, but I'm pretty certain he will come. Anyway, you may be sure your uncle won't go away without coming to an understanding with him about it. He will believe that we are dead, but he'll get the Yankees to make sure."

The whole horizon seemed to brighten for me. "Heavens!" I said. "Why didn't you tell me that before?" And Oliver stopped to stare at me.

"Upon my word," he replied, "I never thought of it—or, rather, I hadn't come to it. We broke off, if you remember, to dress and come out. But you may be sure, old chap, that I wouldn't have said so much on the dark side if I hadn't meant to wind up with the bright side."

The revulsion of feeling was so great that for a time I could say nothing; so in silence he took my arm again and we resumed our way. But some of the horror had gone out of the picture now, and hope had taken its place. Twenty years, indeed! Twenty days more, at the outside, and our imprisonment would be over, and that old man's long watching would be ended too. The Secret Sea should render up its silent ship and its devoted guardian, and a mystery of twenty years should be told to all the world.

When we were within about a hundred yards of the bungalow the door opened, and old Lewis came out; but he did not see us, for he did not look in our direction. He looked first at the ship, and then he turned his eyes to the northern end of the Secret Sea and the dark and rocky wilderness beyond.

"Looking for his master!" whispered Ralph Oliver.

We did not advance until the old man turned and saw us. From his attitude I should say that he really had forgotten us, but that as we approached the memory of yesterday came back to him. Then I was glad to see his grey face light up with certainty and pleasure.

"Good morning," said Oliver heartily, as we shook hands with him. "We have taken an early walk to see the cavern. We wanted to know how we could get to the open sea again."

Richard Lewis seemed to take hold of three words of that question.

"The open sea," he murmured. "The open sea."

"Yes," said Oliver, leading him on with great patience. "What do you think about it? We ought to join our ship, you know."

But the old man shook his head. "Not that way, sir," he said. "The passage is a quarter of a mile long, and there are nasty currents. The best time is just at the full of the tide, before it turns; but even then it wouldn't be safe without a strong craft."

"You have only one boat," said my friend. "What has become of the others? I know that Perkins and Roper took one, but surely there were more?"

A shadow fell on that grey old face. "Ah," said the old man, "that is my

trouble. We had a steam launch and a very fine lifeboat. One night when I thought I had tied them up safely they broke loose. It was the tide, or the current being extra strong, I suppose, but in the morning they were gone. That has been a sore trouble to me when I think of the Master coming back and asking about them. And the Captain, too——”

“Don’t be troubled,” said Oliver kindly. “They will not blame you. But you think there is no getting out that way?”

The old man’s look was sufficient answer. “Then we must think of some other way,” said my comrade easily. “Or we must wait. Anyway, it doesn’t matter just now.”

“No, sir,” said Lewis simply. “There’s no hurry—not till the Master comes back,” and with that he led the way into the house.

What followed then was a breakfast, very simple and economical, like the supper of the night before. I would have helped to prepare it, but a look from Oliver warned me to let our host have a free hand. Nevertheless we made a sufficient meal, and when Lewis heard Oliver’s view as to the probability of an early release from our prison he even pressed us to take more food. Yet in a few minutes he had forgotten that bit of conversation altogether, and in his clearing up showed again the influence of a dominating frugality. Then Oliver spoke:

“You go to the ship every morning, of course,” he said. “But while we are here we want to relieve you of some of your work. Tell us what you wish us to do and we will go over and do it. You can stay here and rest, if you please.”

The faithful old man was a little startled at first, and it was plain that the idea did not appeal to him; but Ralph Oliver had already won his trust, and he took time to consider the offer. Looking at him then, I saw how frail he was, and for the first time realised that he must be of an advanced age. As a matter of fact, he was over seventy, and his self-appointed work was rapidly becoming too much for him. So now, having considered, he looked up with a wan smile and agreed. He would stay on shore, he said, and put the bungalow ship-shape by the time we returned. Then he told us what he wished us to do on board and came down to the stage to see us safely over.

So for the second time we mounted that glorious accommodation ladder and stood upon the white deck of the *Plynlimmon*. And as soon as we were aboard:

“Now, Frank,” said Oliver, “I’m going to do a mean thing. I’ll leave you to attend to the housework while I make investigations in the Captain’s office. I don’t believe Captain Powell left his ship without leaving a message behind, and I want to find that message. See?”

“I see. Well, I’ll do all the work on one condition. You must call me as soon as you find anything worth finding.”

“Done!”

So Oliver turned once more into the Captain’s room, while I set about the various tasks of cleaning and polishing which Lewis had laid down for us. But I had not been at work ten minutes when I heard a call.

I ran back to the cabin. There Oliver was seated at the writing-table with the log open before him. But he was not examining the records of the ship. His hand was upon a number of foolscap sheets lying loose upon the page.

“Just as I expected, old chap,” he said. “The Captain left this—in his logbook, where the first-comer might easily find it. I was in a hurry last night or I should have found it then.”

I looked over his shoulder. The paper was dated October 1st, 1902, and beneath the date was the heading, in a clear, bold hand:

“IF I DO NOT RETURN.”

CHAPTER VII

THE STATEMENT OF CAPTAIN VAYNOR POWELL

We read as follows:

“I write this statement in the greatest uncertainty and apprehension. It is impossible for me to say whether it will ever be read by any but the three poor fellows whom I am leaving in charge of the ship; but in view of the fact that it may meet other eyes, I give, as fully as possible, the circumstances which have brought us into this dilemma and my reasons for adopting my present course of action.

“If I ever return in safety it will be very soon, before the fears of the men have led them to examine my logbook. If I do not return in a month or so they will search the book and find this paper. In the terrible situation which will then be theirs, may God guide and keep them! They have good boats and an abundance of provisions at their disposal should they decide to face the open sea. If the worst comes, and I do not return, I cannot suggest that they remain upon this accursed rock a single hour after they have realised the truth.

“We first anchored in Sandy Bay four months ago, Lord Barmouth being engaged in a series of visits to the islands of the South Atlantic for scientific purposes. When we had been in the Bay a week he discovered the entrance to this basin, and decided to have the *Plynlimmon* brought in. The discovery interested him greatly, and he told me later that this second old crater offered him a fine field for geological study. A week afterwards he declared his intention of making a prolonged stay, and we made a journey to Monte Video for timber and other materials for a small bungalow ashore. At his suggestion we also laid in a great stock of provisions and coal, more than enough to last our ship and ship’s company for twelve months. He did not explain his reason, but at this point I began to see that there must be in his mind some vague idea of a longer stay than he had so far suggested. Indeed, he spoke once of a six months’ stay, and also of a return to the rock at some future time to make further investigations. Much would depend, naturally, upon the progress and results of his work.

“In his lordship’s expeditions around the shores of the basin he secured many interesting specimens, and it was quite plain that as time passed his interest became keener. Contrary to his usual habit, however, he became less communicative on the subject of his journeys, and he also became more and more preoccupied in manner. He had never been too talkative, but he was of a frank disposition, and would discuss scientific subjects until his companion

tired; but soon after the bungalow was built I began to observe the change I have referred to. He usually slept on shore, and two or three days might pass without a visit to the ship. He gave the care of the bungalow to Richard Lewis, a Barmouth man entirely devoted to himself, and Lewis, probably under his lordship's orders, discouraged visits from members of the crew. In his personal intercourse with me his lordship was certainly as friendly as ever, but his preoccupation was noticeable, and he seldom talked much of his own work on the island. Of course, I had never been keenly interested, for my knowledge of geology is small, but I had always tried to be a good listener. Now, however, his lordship did not seem to want listeners.

“After a month or so came the first suggestion of a more extended journey. He told me that he thought of exploring the place in a northerly direction, with a view to reaching the north coasts of the rock. Because the ground was so difficult, he would need several men, he thought, to carry supplies. I agreed that this would be necessary, and, on consideration, suggested eight or ten. The ground is a mere labyrinth of rocks, and it might take many hours to thread a way through them. Moreover, his lordship would require to make geological investigations on the way. After discussion, it was agreed between us that a week should be allowed for the expedition. ‘If we do not return in a week,’ said Lord Barmouth, ‘you will have to come and find us. But I believe, Powell, the Honeycomb had a very bad reputation long before it was called by its present name.’

“‘A bad reputation?’ I repeated. ‘I was not aware of it.’

“His lordship took up a small book which was lying on his table. ‘This is an old Portuguese chronicle,’ he said, ‘the record of a voyager who crossed these seas in the early part of the seventeenth century. It contains one reference which I feel certain to be a reference to this place, though it appears under another name.’

“He turned to a page which he had marked, but as I was unable to read the Portuguese he translated the passage for me. I write it here from memory, but I believe correctly in the main:

“‘The 29th day.—On this day we saw a desolate rocky island which seamen have called the Isle of Caverns, for the many great holes in it; but no man would land here for the evil name of the rock, though there was good harbourage and water. They declare that there is one cavern in which the Evil One makes his abode; and when any approach his place unawares, he opens his baleful eye upon them, and they fall and die. So we sailed on, bearing North and West.’

“‘I have no doubt that this is the Isle of Caverns,’ said Lord Barmouth,

‘and you see what a reputation it had in other days.’

“‘That was some absurd legend or superstition,’ I protested; and his lordship agreed.

“‘Of course. It is legend or superstition. Nevertheless, it may have a reasonable explanation, and if I find such a cavern you may depend upon my exploring it. So if I do not return in the week, Powell, you must come to find me, “with bell, book, and candle.” The Evil One would be an obstinate gaoler.’

“I made a brief note of this conversation in my log.

“Two days later his lordship set out, taking ten men with him, including the first officer, Mr. Williams, and the chief engineer, Mr. Whitewright. We took them by boat to the northern extremity of the water. On the same evening, however, two of the men, Albert Perkins and Charles Roper, came back. We saw them signalling from the beach, and found that Perkins had hurt his ankle before he had gone half a mile with the party. He had, therefore, been sent back in care of Roper. These men described the progress of the expedition as very slow indeed. It was making as northerly a course as it could, but the obstacles were innumerable.

“That was the last we heard of Lord Barmouth and his expedition. The week passed, and they did not return.

“My uneasiness was considerable, largely because his lordship had been so positive. I saw, of course, that he might have good reasons for his failure, but it seemed to me that there was only one thing to do; and I organised a search party to go and find him. This party must be stronger than the original one, because it must carry supplies to serve the two groups; moreover, some accident might have occurred to the expedition. I selected eleven of our best remaining men, all of whom were glad to break the monotony of their island lives by an adventure of this kind. At this juncture I could not conceive it possible that anything really serious had happened.

“For various reasons I did not take charge of this party myself, but sent my second officer, Mr. Sandham, a young man possessed of great courage but with sufficient caution to make him an entirely reliable leader for such a purpose. The party left in the best of spirits. . . . And nothing has been heard of it since!

“I waited fourteen days, keeping an unconcerned face before the crew, but with ever-increasing solicitude. We now numbered ten only—hardly sufficient to work the ship; but I shuddered when this fact occurred to me, and thrust the thought aside. Surely nothing serious could have befallen those who had left us! Deep in my heart I cursed this wretched rock and the day on which we had come to it; and still to all my secret fears and questioning there was no reply but the absolute and dreadful silence of that northern shore, with its distant skyline of inaccessible cliff.

“But I could not continue to wait and hope. The situation must be faced. After consultation with my second engineer, Mr. Hoskins, who promised to fall in with any course I should advise, I called all the crew together in my saloon. There I put the case before them as fully and frankly as I dared. The owner of the vessel and those who had gone with him had been absent a month, and the second party had been gone a fortnight. It seemed quite evident that they had got into some difficulty which prevented their return. If so, their provisions might fail and their difficulties be increased by shortage of food. The island was a desert rock, and it was impossible that any human agency could have hindered them. I proposed, if the men were willing, to make up a party to follow upon their track. What did they think of the matter?

“They thought of it as British sailors might be expected to think. There was some hesitation at first, but it ended in the general agreement that an effort should be made to find our comrades. I then stated that three men should be left with the ship, or, rather, two men in addition to Richard Lewis. He had charge of the Earl’s specimens at the bungalow, and had slept there since his lordship’s departure. At once Roper and Perkins, who had had a glimpse of the difficulties of the journey, offered to remain, and this was arranged. I then gave instructions for an early start next day.

“In this last hour I am not sure that I am acting rightly. On the one side stands the fact that I may be leading these poor fellows to death. If the others were still living they would have returned before this time; and it seems to me that the sinister influences of this island all speak of peril and disaster. True, wisdom, perhaps, would lie in an immediate departure from the place. But I cannot face home and England, I cannot meet Lord Barmouth’s family and the dependents of my lost men, without making an effort to ascertain their fate if they are lost, or to help them if they still live.

“Before these lines can be read by any stranger, my darkest fears will have been realised. I ask nothing of the reader—not for a moment would I suggest that any other living person should follow in my steps, either to set doubts at rest or in the hope of giving succour. That will be no man’s duty, for no one else will ever be faced by the terrible responsibility that weighs upon me now and compels me to do as I am about to do. But I do ask that this statement shall be forwarded to the public press, so that it may in time reach those who will be interested in it.

“My will lies among other private papers in my desk.

“Written on the first day of October, 1902.

“THOMAS VAYNOR POWELL.”

We read the statement together line by line, almost word by word. When it was finished, Ralph Oliver said nothing—he did not even raise his eyes to my

face. Slowly he folded the sheets and laid them at the end of the book before he closed the book itself and replaced it. In the great silence I could distinctly hear old Lewis's movements about the lonely bungalow.

"Well?" I said at last, huskily.

Then Oliver did look up. His look was a searching one, and I did my best to meet it. Then he proceeded to fill in a few details:

"None of them ever came back," he said. "And after a while Perkins, Roper, and Lewis found this paper. Two of them decided to escape if they could, but Lewis was not prepared to go. He still hoped—or, perhaps, he feared, or, perhaps, he did the wiser thing in deciding to stay—the wiser thing when the alternative was so terrible. So he stayed, and after a time his mind gave way, and he lived on like an automaton without knowing how long he lived. If he had known he could not have lived at all."

"But what could have happened to the explorers?" I asked hoarsely.

"We can only guess. We fell into a great pit ourselves, you know—perhaps they did the same. That some disaster befell them cannot be questioned. The old Portuguese legend, no doubt, grew out of some real peril existing on the island. The devil was a very real person to those old navigators, and they charged him with every kind of unpleasant or unfortunate thing. . . . But are you sorry that I found the paper, Frank?"

"Sorry? No, though it is very awful. Not sorry, because it does clear up many things. It clears the way to the greatest mystery of all."

"Yes, old chap, that's it. After reading it we just stand before the greatest mystery of all."

Then he rose, and we went about our remaining duties on the ship almost in silence. The great mystery was upon us like a tremendous shadow. Oppressed by it we could not display much real interest in the *Plynlimmon* or her contents, for in some subtle way they had lost value for us. Indeed, we were glad when we had done and could leave for the shore.

Old Richard Lewis had been watching for our return, and came down to the landing to meet us. As Oliver sculled us across, I looked at the old man, and it seemed to me that his frail and tragic figure was a question—just a question. Then I looked back at the ship, lying so still and so full of the pathos of loneliness and desertion, and I saw the same great question in her, too. It was all question here—and no answer.

And when I saw that, I also saw what the end of it must be. The answer would have to be found!

CHAPTER VIII

THE GIANT BUBBLE

If there had been anything else to claim our thoughts during the following days we might have ignored, or even forgotten, the Mystery, and then this story would have taken another course. But from dawn to dark, on the shores of that silent sea, there was nothing but the Mystery itself, speaking obstinately in the deserted and hopeless ship, in the grim skyline of the northern coast, in the pathetic presence of the solitary survivor of the Barmouth party. Wherever we turned, that great question stared us in the face. Nor did the darkness help us to forget it. We slept in the bed of the man who had never come back, in the room that he had built, with his furnishings all about us; and in the silence of the lonely hours we heard again and again the regular breathing of the poor, broken creature who waited so faithfully and so hopelessly for his return. And even in the night and the dark we could feel that ghostly ship without, we could picture the grim line of the northern cliffs far away.

I sometimes wondered why old Lewis had given us his master's room and bed. It was not for the sake of company, we decided, but probably so that he might know exactly where we were and what we were doing. As for us, we agreed that the old man's company was better than none, and it occupied our thoughts a little to do all we could for him. We went to the ship every day, sometimes with him and sometimes without, but we could not have stayed there at night. A lonely hut on a lonely shore may be ghostly enough in the dark, but a lonely and deserted ship is a thousand times more so.

It lasted a fortnight, that nightmare of waiting and wondering, and perfunctory work and talk, and ever-increasing depression. For the Americans did not come, and while the old man gazed northwards morning and night in his hopeless quest, we had equally little reward for our close watch of the cavern mouth. The tide crept in and flowed out again with its hollow echo and murmur from the rocky walls, but there was never a sign of a boat or sound of a human voice.

"Of course they're exploring other parts," said Ralph Oliver, with every sign of confidence. "But they must come here at last."

That was on the fifteenth day, when I was already on the verge of collapse. "Why must they?" I broke out irritably. "What's the good of blinking things? They may never come here at all!"

"I'm not blinking things," protested Oliver patiently; "I speak as I think."

"So do I, and I say there are equal chances that they'll go away without

finding us. Perhaps they're gone already."

It took him unawares, and I saw that the same thought had come to him before it had reached me. And then, in my nervous irritation, I lashed out harder still:

"Oh," I cried. "Why do you always treat me as a baby? Aren't we both in the same hole? Can't we talk freely and frankly to each other? Won't it help us if we do? You're not playing the game, you know."

Oliver flushed, but in a moment he laughed outright. That was just like him. He could always be trusted to see justice even in an argument that was half unjust.

"Go easy, Frank," he said. "We mustn't quarrel. It would not improve the situation if we got huffed with each other and ceased to speak! Please note that I'm down on my knees at once. In future I'll forget that I'm five years older, and tell you all my fears as well as my hopes as soon as they come to me."

"Then you *do* think the Yankees may not find us!" I cried, half in triumph, half in horror.

"No. I think they probably will, but of course there's a chance that they won't. That's why I'm continually trying to think of some other way."

"The little boat!" I cried.

"Well, the little boat. Three of us and the provisions, say! And the South Atlantic to face! And the nearest land hundreds of miles away! Bunkum, Frank, and you know it."

Yes, I knew it. "Then the ship itself!" I cried. "Put old Lewis on board, lock him up, get up steam, up anchor and off."

Oliver smiled. "Every naval officer has to be something of an engineer," he said. "But that isn't true of the merchant navy. We don't make one-twentieth of an engineer between the three of us, even if that much would do; and to let the *Plynlimmon* drift into that cavern without steam, my boy, would be a fine adventure. Eh?"

That was just like Oliver. When you tackled him you would always find that he had been all around the problem. But it was my turn now to stare, and then to flush, and then to laugh.

"All the same, of course," said Oliver calmly, "it may come to that yet—I mean, some desperate expedient of that sort. When the time comes, Frank, we'll do it like a shot, you may depend upon it. I'll make a pair of wings and fly before I'll stay twenty years in this piedish! But that's not yet, you know. We must, I think, give the Americans a month; and, while we're waiting, the weather's getting steadily better for any adventure we may have to take."

Oh, it was so good to find him as he was then—so steady, so resolute, so keen. It calmed me and cheered me in a marvellous way, and that grim, overwhelming Mystery seemed suddenly to shift away into the background.

He saw the change in my eyes, and then proceeded to say a little more.

“There is another question just a little nearer at hand, Frank. That question is—Can we do anything better than wait quietly for the Americans? There’s that Mystery now. It grows bigger and bigger every day, until I feel sometimes that it is going to fall upon me and crush me. I wake up in the middle of the night, and if you were not there I think I should scream—yes, scream! That’s nerves, you know, racked by uncertainty and mystery, and nothing to do but poor old Lewis’s odd jobs.”

So Ralph had felt it all, though he had borne it better than I; and I had thought him so untroubled and unconscious!

“That’s why I’m asking this question,” he went on. “In another fortnight our nerves will be all a jangle—if we’re still in our right minds. The Mystery will do for us—unless we turn the tables on it.”

Now I began to see. “What?” I almost yelled. “You’d go—we’d go—and try to clear things up?”

“Why not?”

The thing had been in my own mind from the first, as I have shown you; but it had never occurred to me that he would consent. Now the suggestion stirred me up in a wonderful way. I waited with glowing eyes for the rest.

“A week would be enough for it,” he said. “If the Americans come while we’re away they’ll certainly wait for us; and it would be satisfactory, you know, to solve this old puzzle. The Americans will probably do it when they come? True, but I don’t like the idea of leaving it to them. This is an Englishman’s job, it seems to me. See?”

I did see, and I felt exactly as he did about it.

“But the danger?” I said. “We might have no better luck than the rest——” And Oliver nodded.

“Of course, old chap. But I don’t believe in the old Portuguese story of the Devil’s Cavern. My idea is that there’s another Great Pit somewhere, and that the *Plynlimmon*’s people came on it unawares. We shouldn’t do that, anyway—after the warning we’ve had!”

No, we shouldn’t do that, anyway; and that conviction gave us an undue confidence. So we discussed the project, in all its possibilities, out there on the sea shore, and then we went in to tell old Lewis.

The old man seemed to forget us when we were out of his sight, but he always remembered us when we turned up again, and treated us with the same mechanical kindness. Over and over again he had told us fragments of his first story, forgetting that he had told us before; but all our questioning failed to get us anything different. He told us, indeed, much about the Earl and the ship’s company and the old days, but as for the last twenty years, his mind was simply a blank. The Mystery had done for him long ago what it would soon do

for us if we remained under its shadow.

Oliver told him of our project in a very guarded way. "What do you think of our going to meet the Earl?" he asked. "We've been discussing it this afternoon."

Lewis considered it calmly, and his grey old face lighted up. "That is a very kind thought, sir," he said. "I'm sure his lordship would be pleased. You might help to bring back some of his specimens. I'll warrant he's got a pretty good load by now."

"Of course, we might not easily find him," said Oliver. "It seems a very difficult way, and we might miss his party. Anyway, we should have to take provisions for a week. Can you let us have enough?"

The shadow of his unending economy checked the old man for a moment, and he paused. Then he said, with a gleam of shrewd sailor sense:

"You couldn't carry a big lot, and, anyway, you'd need the stuff, whether here or there. You're free, sir, to take just what you want, and I'm sure his lordship will say so."

"That's good," said Oliver crisply. "We'll go to the ship right away and make a selection."

So in the next two hours we were very busy indeed, selecting what we might require and making it up into portable form. Thanks to the old man's economy, our chief difficulty was one of choice. The tables on the yacht had been furnished in a very different fashion from those on the old *John Duncan*, and the method of storage had been so perfect that very little had been wasted. We had to be careful, of course, to take nothing that could be dispensed with and to omit nothing that was really necessary; and it was just here that the two heads were better than one. Several times, too, we laughed aloud as we handled choice selections with a London mark upon them—a mark still as fresh as ever. Like ourselves, they had come from London, and here we were now, fulfilling our different destinies on a desert rock a thousand miles from anywhere. Stranger still, those dainties had been prepared for us before we were born!

A couple of small revolvers and a box of cartridges—in case of accidents, as Oliver said briefly—completed our equipment; and when we had gathered everything, we proceeded to render them portable by packing them into two small Gladstone bags borrowed from the officers' quarters; but a third parcel was also taken, consisting of the blankets it would be necessary to carry with us for use at night. The winter was over now, but the nights were still chilly for sleeping in the open. With all this weight we should have enough to do to get along, but we consoled ourselves with the reflection that every day would lighten our burden. "Besides," said Oliver, "it won't be necessary to carry everything all the way. At the end of each day we will make a caché—if we

can—to serve us on our return.”

We took our baggage ashore and secured Lewis’s approval for it. It was also arranged that in the morning we should go to the head of the lake in the dinghy, which he would afterwards row back. Then we went to rest in an altogether different mood from that of the morning. Indeed, I was full of excitement and anticipation, for things were moving at last. Hurrah!

When I woke next morning it was so early that the others were still asleep. I did not disturb them, but slipped into my clothes and went out to wash. The shores of the Secret Sea were shadowed and gloomy, but to-day, for the first time, I saw a faint pale sunlight along the tops of the sawlike ridge of cliff. The last fringe of the winter had gone, in the high winds of a few days ago, and now the sun, rising into an unclouded sky, had cast his first beams over the rocky wall behind me. How the sight cheered and warmed me! I actually began to whistle as I went down to the water.

I had no intention of bathing. The place was too eerie and uncanny and dead for that, and we had never even talked about it. Now there was scarcely a ripple on the black stretch of water, no sound in the air, no stir or whisper of life. No, there would be no pleasure in bathing here. All that I meant to do was to have a good wash.

Stripped to the waist, I stooped down, bracing myself for the shock of the icy flood. But I gave an exclamation of surprise and incredulity as I dipped my fingers in. The water was not cold to-day—it was almost warm!

There was no doubt about it. The fact was as patent as it was pleasant. I had bathed many times from Leigh beach in high summer, but I had never found the water so warm as this. It was actually tepid.

I was more than surprised. The warmth of the water might be pleasant, but it was also mysterious. As I washed I pondered the matter vaguely, wondering whether it was caused by the shut-in situation of the sea. It might be so, and yet it was hardly likely. The tide would prevent the water remaining warm, even if the protection of the cliffs had a tendency to make it so. Perhaps it was only warm when the tide had gone?

While I was drying myself I saw something else that I had never noticed before. Some thirty yards out there came a slight movement in the water, and a succession of small bubbles rose and vanished. For an instant I thought of fish, but a moment later a very large bubble formed on the surface. It was quite as large as a man’s head when I saw it first, and as it drifted slowly towards me it grew to about ten times the size. Then it burst suddenly with an effect that startled me, it left such a sensation of vacancy behind it; but it left more than that, though it was nothing that one could see or hear. It was, I thought, a smell, a distinct and far from pleasant smell, that came to me from the water a few moments after the bubble had burst. I knew the smell, but could not

remember what it was; and before I could consider I heard a sound behind me, and found that Oliver had come out of the house.

“The water is almost warm,” I said. “Isn’t it queer!”

He did not seem surprised. “Hm! We’re so shut in!” he said, yawning. “And perhaps there’s a warm current about—a sort of Gulf Stream, you know.”

“From the South Pole?” I suggested, with a grin.

“Don’t be so critical, Frank. Anyway, it’s better warm than cold. Some folks are never satisfied.”

Because of that bit of chaff I forgot to say anything about the giant bubble, so easily are important things crowded out by trifles. Afterwards we busied ourselves with breakfast and other preparations, and in an hour were ready for our start; and we were so light-hearted now—poor, unseeing mortals—that it was in something of a picnic spirit that we embarked ourselves and our all in the dinghy and made for that mysterious northern shore.

Old Lewis was as silent and impassive as ever. As soon as we had gone he would undoubtedly forget us altogether until we came back, and if we did not come back at all he would resume the dead life of the last twenty years until some other interruption should occur; and before we parted from him he showed us again where his heart was. That was when he had landed us on the shelving beach and was preparing to go back to his lonely watch.

“Just one word, sir, if you please,” he said huskily. “It’s about those lost boats. When you meet his lordship I hope you’ll tell him that it was no fault of mine. They just broke adrift, they did, in the night. I would ha’ given my right hand rather than have it happen.”

Oliver reassured him. “That will be all right, never fear,” he said kindly. “We won’t forget; and I’ll guarantee that the Earl will never give you a black look for that. Good-bye, Lewis.”

The old man returned the “good-bye” and began to scull the dinghy slowly back across the water towards the white house in the distance. As we watched him go—

“Frank,” said Oliver suddenly. “Do you think he’s sorry to lose us?”

“No,” I said.

“Do you think he’s glad?”

“Not exactly—and yet——”

“And yet I could have sworn there was something like relief in his looks. Did you notice it?”

“Yes.”

“Poor old chap! It must be because we broke the even tenor of his days. He’s got into a sort of a groove—and it’s easier to keep in it.”

So we explained things to our own satisfaction, and, having done so, turned

to face the difficulties of the ravine by which the other unfortunate explorers had passed into the rocky wilderness beyond. And a curious picture we must have made as we passed into the unknown, Gladstone bags in hand, blankets strapped upon our shoulders, for all the world like a couple of stranded weekenders looking for apartments.

But I had forgotten to tell Oliver about that Giant Bubble.

CHAPTER IX

THE THREADING OF THE MAZE

When we had penetrated a hundred yards into that wilderness of rocks which lay between the Secret Sea and the northern coast of the island, we agreed to call it the Maze; and having come to an agreement on that point we were obliged to give all our remaining energy to grappling with its difficulties. It may have measured no more than four miles as the crow flies, but the time required to travel five miles depends largely upon the nature of the ground. In the Maze, as Oliver declared grimly, there was no "ground" at all, and because there was no ground on which to rest a foot, those four miles took us ten hours.

It may seem incredible, but just recall your own adventures at any seaside place where there were rocks, and where you sometimes spent an hour in clambering over them. If the rocks were anything of a problem you took a good while to cover a hundred yards; but the chances are that you walked round the biggest instead of clambering over them, and even then reflected ruefully upon your barked shins and scarred shoe-leather. If you had been asked to negotiate the same problem carrying a weighty Gladstone bag, and with a blanket strapped to your shoulders, you would have opened your eyes very wide indeed. Yet that was exactly our situation, with the added difficulty that the rocks were for the most part much more dangerous than I have seen at any seaside place.

For the first hour or so it was a wild and breathless scramble, full of perilous moments and muscular exertion, and not without an element of fun. We thought it could not last, and that we should soon come out from the rocks into a better road. Then it was borne in upon us, at great cost, that the balance of our journey was to be of the same character, and we were obliged to change our methods. There was no more butting at the job like young goats, but an attempt to pick our way, to see the end from the beginning whenever it was possible, and to save ourselves labour and effort as much as we could. After that, though we did not go faster, we went much more easily. By noon we calculated that we had walked seven miles, climbed seven, and travelled two, a record which accounted fully for our exhaustion and entitled us to a full meal of biscuits, pressed beef, and water strengthened by a little wine. There was fortunately plenty of water in the Maze, and we had had no little difficulty in keeping out of it.

"Poor Perkins had to go back because he hurt his ankle," I remarked, as we came to the close of the meal. "I don't wonder."

“And he didn’t want to try this road again,” said Oliver. “Same with Charles Roper, if you remember. They were men of sense.”

“I thought we might find some signs of the other travellers,” I suggested. “But in twenty years, with all the water that comes down in these latitudes, every sign would be washed away.”

Oliver nodded. “Still, we may see something yet,” he said. “But what a wilderness it is! In Cornwall and other places they have old legends of giants who fought each other by flinging rocks about. This select spot might have been their favourite arena.”

“I suppose it was the volcano did it?” I asked carelessly.

“No doubt. The island is really the top of an old volcano, whose craters were Sandy Bay and the Secret Sea. The rocks and boulders thrown up by the eruption seem to have settled all around here; or, perhaps, these are the fragments that remain of some great peak that used to be here. They have been worn down, of course, by thousands of years of rain and sun and storm, but there’s still a good big bagful left. In a few more thousands of years they’ll all have melted down into a very decent kind of soil for vegetables.”

“Of course the volcano is extinct,” I said.

“I should say so! Perhaps the last eruption took place ten thousand years ago. The Atlantic, you know, has a great range of volcanic islands which are really the tops of mountains. Down here they are all extinct long ago, but some of those up in the tropics are still a trifle lively.”

“The water in the Secret Sea was almost warm this morning,” I said with a start; but Oliver only smiled.

“That is not uncommon. On Tristan d’Acunha there is a lake which never freezes, though it is high above the snowline. No, old chap, there has been no active volcano in this region since the islands were first discovered, and probably not for ages before that.”

It was not until long afterwards that I discovered how wrong he was in this statement. As late as 1806 there had been an eruption of a submarine volcano in those seas, a fact so well authenticated that you may find it in our old friend the *Atlantic Navigator*. Not knowing this, it was only for the sake of argument that I pressed him further:

“All the same,” I said, “one of the men on the *John Duncan* said that he saw a glare in the sky just before we came to the island.”

“That was a rum glare, I’m afraid,” grinned Oliver. “I told you he wasn’t a total abstainer. Hold on, there!”

I threw a rock at him—a small one, of course—to punish him for his execrable pun, and then, laughing, we changed the subject. But for that pun I should have told him next about the Giant Bubble—the thing had been on the very tip of my tongue. In that way it was passed over once more, and Oliver

heard nothing about it until the knowledge was useless to him.

Journeying under those conditions we felt we had achieved something worth while when, towards evening, we found ourselves under the great wall of cliff which formed the northern coast of the island. Beyond that gigantic barrier lay the sea, but as we scanned it to right and left there seemed to be small prospect of our ever surmounting the obstacle. In most places it leapt straight from the Maze to a height of a thousand feet, and even the most promising openings did not continue more than a short distance. I must confess that my feeling was one of complete disappointment as I stood back and ranged the whole face of the cliff with my eye.

“We’ll have to sleep on it to-night,” said Oliver cheerfully, “or, rather, in front of it. Possibly the morning light will put a new complexion on things. Anyway, I think we shall be wise to bear away to the west. Things look a bit more broken there. We’ll look for a sheltered spot for our camp.”

Accordingly we bore away to the west, which certainly seemed to be the more hopeful direction, as far as the cliff was concerned; and as we had now one clear object in view, we moved with a little better spirit.

It was I that discovered the spot first, without being aware of the extent of my discovery. The track under the cliff led upwards a little, until it reached a kind of open platform quite forty feet up the cliff face. Of course the track was just a water-course, and the elevated platform was doubtless formed of fragments which, in the course of ages, had fallen from the cliff face and had been worn into smoothness by time and the weather. As I led the way up to this platform I noticed that here the face of the cliff receded considerably, and it seemed to me that the shelter thus formed might be just the place for our camp. Accordingly I pressed on to the top, leaving Oliver to follow; and when I reached the top I found to my surprise that the cliff did indeed fall back behind the platform, and to a much greater extent than I had imagined.

“A cave!” I cried. “A cave!”

For a cave it was, without doubt, but a cave whose mouth had been partly concealed by the droppings from the cliff above. Indeed, there was quite a sharp descent into its mouth from the platform on which I stood. In a moment Oliver stood beside me, and we peered together into the darkness.

“Well,” he said at last, “it’s a good spot for a camp—water and shelter and something to look forward to for the morning. It strikes me, Frank, that this may be the only way through to the sea.”

“I can’t hear anything of it,” I said, listening with all my ears.

“Not likely. It’s half a mile away, perhaps. But I wonder——”

“Yes?”

“I wonder if this is the cavern spoken of in the Captain’s statement and the old Portuguese Chronicle—the one that Lewis found too, you know.”

“The Devil’s Cavern? Oh, come now!”

“Well,” said Oliver, “why not? But anyway, old chap, we won’t disturb his Satanic Majesty till the morning, or tempt him to play off his baleful eye at our expense. In the meantime, ‘something attempted, something done has earned a night’s repose.’ ”

We had no fire to gather round as night came on, but there was no need of one. To-night there was scarcely a breath of breeze, and the air was almost sultry. I took three candles, lit them, and set them to stand on a ledge of the rocky wall at the mouth of the cave; and the flames burned upwards steadily without a quiver, except when the breath of our speech or our movements passed over them. Almost at once, however, Oliver blew out two of them.

“You are young and reckless, my son. We shall want lights for the cave—going and returning—and we don’t know how many. One will last as long as three—and I hope we’ll both be asleep before it goes out. Now for the staff of life.”

We enjoyed another moderate meal from our store, and by that time it was practically dark. Then, at the base of the wall, we cleared a place where we might stretch our weary limbs with some kind of ease, and there rolled ourselves in our blankets; and of one thing I am certain—that as we wooed the spirit of slumber we tried to think of everything but the cave at whose mouth we were lying. That cavern of the unknown was not a subject for reflection at such a time as this.

“Frank,” said Oliver once. “About old Lewis.”

“Yes?” I asked hoarsely.

“Did you notice how carefully he guarded the room in which he slept—the Earl’s specimen room? He only took us into it once.”

“That’s so,” I said. “He was a queer old chap—in some things.”

Oliver muttered something in reply, but five minutes later I knew by his breathing that sleep had come to him at last. Then I made determined efforts to follow his example, and resolutely moved my thoughts away from the island altogether, and away from all the mystery which overshadowed it. I tried to think quieter things, so that I, too, might sleep before the candle ceased to burn. I called up visions of my old home, and tried to hear the sound of the tide as it washed the great stony breakwater at Leigh. So in a little while I began to find my thoughts and my dreams hopelessly tangled; and after that I fell asleep.

The last dream must have been a reflection of one of the first, and it came somewhere in the early morning. I had gone out along the cinder-path at Leigh to wait for Charlie Cornwall. It was after dark, and as I strolled along I watched the steadily moving lights of a great liner passing down the river in the distance—lights row on row, like the windows of a castle ablaze for

festivities. But as I strolled and watched I listened also, waiting for the hail which I knew so well and would always know, even among a thousand others. And presently it came, clear and friendly:

“Frank Ahoy—y—y!”

I stirred out of my sleep. I woke regretfully. The candle was gone, and a grey daylight was stealing over the wilderness of bleak, brown rocks. I was not cold. I was quite warm, but I was a little stiff and sore. I rubbed my eyes and yawned.

“*Frank Ahoy-y-y!*”

My jaw must have dropped open in blank amazement. Was I dreaming still? That was a part of my dream—and yet it was still ringing in my ears. I sat up suddenly—and clenched my hands, and listened!

A minute passed—two minutes—three—and then my heart sprang to my throat. . . . For again it came, the same cry, but now only a faint wail, as from a long, long distance—

“*Frank Ahoy!*”

CHAPTER X

THE CAVE OF DEAD MEN

“What is it, Frank?”

Oliver had been watching me. He was wide awake and leaning on his elbow. I struggled to my feet, stupid and aghast.

“I—I heard it!” I stammered helplessly.

“What did you hear?”

That calm question had the effect of rallying my scattered wits. I pulled myself together and looked round. Could I have been dreaming after all?

“I heard—I thought I heard someone calling me,” I said.

Oliver rose to his feet. “It was the cave, no doubt,” he replied. “It is full of echoes—echoes of wind and sea, noises of falling fragments. I have seemed to hear noises several times during the night.”

I began to feel a little foolish. I had been so tremendously excited—I was so excited still. Why, even now the cry seemed to be in my ears.

“It was so real!” I said. “I could have sworn to it. It seemed to come after I was fully awake. And it was the voice of an old chum.”

“Indeed,” said Oliver. “You shall tell me about it presently, old chap. I will go down to that pool to wash while you prepare the fire. Then I’ll serve out the breakfast.”

He yawned, stretched himself, folded up his blanket, and went off to a pool of rain-water down in the track by which we had come yesterday. As he did so he surveyed the whole scene thoughtfully, from the dark cave mouth behind us to the farthest point in the rocky wilderness we had traversed. I too looked round, and then made another effort at self-control. Of course, I had not really heard Charlie’s voice—the thing was ridiculous! In my dream I had been awaiting his call, and my half-sleeping senses had accepted, instead, some faint noise from the cave. The experience was common enough, after all. In this case it had upset me to an unusual extent because of our loneliness and my long desire to see my old chum again. What a treasure he would be if he were with us now!

Afterwards I told Ralph Oliver about it as we sat at our breakfast—told him of our boy friendship, and the stony beach at Leigh, and the creek in which the fisher boats lay, and the long nights we had spent out in the estuary in one boat and another while my sister Ruth fretted at home for my safety, and Charlie’s father swore that he would skin the boy alive if he ever came back. I told him, too, how the call had come for both of us within a month,

taking him to be carpenter's mate in a great Australian clipper, and me as an apprentice on the old *John Duncan* for Brazil and the Argentine. What a shame it had seemed then that we should be separated; what a shame it seemed still! And now it was nearly two years since we had seen each other.

"Yes," said Oliver. "I know Leigh and the fisher boats. And there you played and dreamed until the tide of life swept you suddenly out into the stream. And some day it will cast you back again upon the shore, old chap, a beaten and battered wreck; or, perhaps, it will bear you safely into harbour with a big cargo."

Never before had I heard Ralph Oliver talk in just that way. Seeing my astonishment, he laughed:

"Your story did it," he said, "and this very lonely place, away from everybody. My fancies have been playing the same kind of trick with me, and I'll make open confession, too. All the time one person has been in my mind. It's a—a—well, it's a girl."

"A girl?" I cried; and Oliver actually blushed.

"Yes," he said. "A girl. I'll tell you about it. I joined the *John Duncan*, you know, at Buenos Ayres, off another steamer, the *Merlin* of London. Six months ago, just before I left London, I had to go to the offices of the owners, in Leadenhall Street, on business, and had to wait half an hour for an interview. In the little outer office there was one girl, a typist, who was good enough to give me a chair and get me a newspaper to read; and she did it so nicely, and looked so neat and sweet and charming as she went about her work, that I couldn't read the paper for watching her. And ever since that time, whenever I've been alone, that girl's face has come up before me, till I've been ready to kick myself for not getting to know something about her."

"Well, upon my word," I said. "I suppose this is what is called a romance. Could you find her again, do you think? What firm was it?"

"Pennington and Bale was the name," he said. "Of course I could find it again—trust me! But it isn't likely she'll be still there. That kind of girl gets snapped up like a shot."

"Describe her," I said huskily.

"Rather. She was slender, about my height, with brown eyes and brown hair—hair and eyes something after your colour, Frank, which may account for the care I've taken of you lately! Her voice was—er—er—soft and natural, and her smile—well, it was a smile, you know, not a grin or a giggle. She was a lady to the fingertips."

"Hm! It's all a bit vague," I said. "But perhaps there were other marks to know her by. Wasn't there a mole, or a squint, or—or——"

I dodged the empty beef-tin he threw at me, and pleaded for patience. "Hold on," I said. "Let's keep strictly to business. Was she well dressed? Any

jewellery?"

"No," said Oliver firmly. "She was none of your flashy sort. She had just one brooch—a very neat little brooch made of four small coins. They were gold, I think, or, anyway, they were gilt. Anything more tasteful, or correct, or—or enchanting it would be imposs——"

"Stop, stop," I protested. "That shall be taken as read. It was gold—the real thing. The coins were Chilian gold dollars, and Ruth wore that brooch every day of her life after my uncle gave it to her. She stuck to it like glue. I told her that she could be identified by it anywhere . . . and she has been, as you see."

Oliver's face changed.

"Yes," I said calmly. "My sister Ruth is Pennington and Bale's chief typist, and she has told me all about the little room in which she works. She hasn't told me anything about you, so far, but that's nothing to go by. She hasn't had a chance, you see! Let me say, however, that your high opinion of my only sister, young man, does credit to your judgment! She is unique in her character, her appearance, and her manner. She is very much like her brother——"

"Frank," said Oliver faintly. "Do you mean all this?"

"If we ever get back to the *John Duncan*," I said, "I'll show you her letters."

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright! I spotted the secret, somehow, as soon as you mentioned Leadenhall Street. It was in the air."

"Well," he said, under his breath, "if this doesn't beat all!"

It certainly did; but at that point we abandoned the subject and turned by mutual agreement to the business of the day. On the whole, after what he had said at the beginning it was not easy to continue without an interval for the rearrangement of our thoughts; but now and again I caught him looking at me in a curiously furtive way which showed that the matter was still in his mind. Probably he was comparing my eyes and hair with what he remembered of my sister's! Poor old chap!

Having cleared up our breakfast in this atmosphere of coincidence and romance, we tackled the question of the cave, and agreed that we must explore it in the hope of getting through to the sea. Neither of us had any clear idea why we wanted to get there, but possibly each had at the back of his mind the ridiculous notion that we might find a vessel waiting there to take us off! We did not mention that, but we did agree, in word as well as thought, that the cave must be tackled with care and circumspection. The old Portuguese legend of the Devil's Eye was rubbish, no doubt, but still. . . . And with that "but still" upon our lips, we turned to our adventure, climbing up the mound to the hardened platform, and passing down on the farther side into the great cavern.

It was a passage from the light and warmth of early day into the shadow and mystery of never-ending night. For some thirty or forty yards the daylight followed us, and I felt a real reluctance to part from it. But the ground was rough and uneven, and soon Oliver paused.

“We must use the lights,” he said, “it will be safer. But,” he added, “I wish we had torches. These are such feeble things. Yes, let us have two candles. You shall carry them, old fellow, till your arms tire, and then I’ll take my turn.”

We went on more slowly after that. The light was indeed feeble, but as it obliged us to keep close to one another there was some compensation. But in a very short time I began to wonder why we had come, and then I saw how foolish it was to waste time in this way. The next stage was to be sorry that we had ever started, and to wish that we were well out of it.

There is something romantic and mysterious about the idea of a cave. At least there always had been to me, but any fancy of that kind did not survive after the first ten minutes of the real thing. For there we were, simply creeping along in the half dark, now side by side, now in single file; now with a great rocky wall beside us, now apparently following a track worn in the centre of the cavern floor by a vanished stream. Now we were stumbling over fragments of shale and rock, now treading ankle-deep in soft, shifting sand of a coarse, gritty quality, something similar to that on the shores of Sandy Bay. And while Oliver peered curiously about, pausing now and again to examine the face of a rock, I kept my attention fixed upon my lights and the course we were taking. And so great was the stillness, so overwhelming the sense of the surrounding darkness, that at last I began to be afraid. Yes, afraid—and I am not ashamed to own it!

That was why I began to talk, to ward off the grim sense of fear and dread that had begun to track me down. For Oliver, trudging along in the shadow at my side, showed no desire to speak.

“Do you think,” I asked, “that anyone else has ever walked through this cave? Can you see any sign?”

I gave a start at the hollowness of the sound that seemed to fade away slowly in quivering echoes through miles of distant caverns.

Oliver shook his head. “It is most unlikely,” he said. “This is no man’s work. It was all formed, no doubt, by volcanic action—it is one of the vents of the dead volcano. We are wandering in the shell of a great fire-mountain.”

We went on a little farther. It was still down hill, though only slightly so; and it did not seem to me that the formation of the cave changed in any way as we went. It was a great width—when we walked in the middle we could not see the walls, and it was so high that we could not distinguish the roof. But one thing was satisfactory, and that was the air. Now and again there was a certain

heaviness, but on the whole the atmosphere was fairly pure. Air came in, no doubt, from either end, especially from the sea end. It probably came, too, through many unseen fissures and crevices, so that the atmosphere within was kept fairly fresh.

The dense darkness enveloped us for some twenty minutes. So far nothing had happened except Oliver's examination of a few rocks and a few handfuls of the gritty sand from the cavern floor—all without any result which he thought it worth while to mention. Then we had a shock, for one of us kicked something which gave a curious metallic ring—yes—the ring of metal on stone. It would not have meant much to me, but——

“Stop!” cried Oliver.

I stood stock still. “Do not move,” he said hastily, “you dropped something.”

“No,” I said, “I kicked something.”

Then he was searching the ground near us, and I stooped to give him light. There was nothing there that shone with the gleam of steel—nothing. A narrow ledge of the black sand was fringed by a wilderness of dull, ugly, blue and rusty-brown fragments of rock and rubbish. But almost at once he picked something up.

We bent over it together under the gleam of the candles. At the first glance it was nothing but a queerly shaped fragment of clinker, of the reddish rusty variety, worn to unaccustomed slenderness and shaped roughly like a cross. But as we looked the reality slowly emerged before us, and we saw the meaning in that rude semblance of a cross. It was not a cross, but it was an old knife with a cross hilt. All that was left of the blade was buried in rust, and no one could have told what metal had formed the guard or what wood had formed the shaft; but it was a knife nevertheless.

I saw the hands tremble that held it. Here, indeed, was a bit of real evidence. We were not the first explorers of the cave—someone had trod this dark way before us. We looked at each other.

“A sailor's belt knife,” I said quickly.

“Yes,” said Oliver. “Or a dagger worn by some soldier of the olden time. It may be either, and it may have lain here for centuries.”

“Centuries?” I gasped.

“Why not? Look at its condition—and remember that it is fairly dry just here. It is not like moist earth. Oh yes, this may have lain here for centuries—waiting for us.”

For a few moments more we scrutinised the find, but it told us nothing. “We will have it cleaned,” he said, “and carefully examined—some time,” and he slipped it into his pocket as we resumed our journey.

No, the knife told us nothing, but it had an important effect nevertheless. If

we had not found it we probably should not have gone much farther; but we had found something, and we had a fancy that we might find more. So we stumbled on, with a new curiosity; and it is certain that under the influence of those new feelings I lost some of the uneasiness which had dogged me before. Instead of thinking behind me, as it were, I began to think before me. What should we find next?

It was in this mood that we came to the crisis of our journey.

There had been no apparent change in our surroundings. Still the impenetrable gloom, the deep echoing vacancy, the chill atmosphere of the vast rock-house into which the sun had never shone. Apparently the course had been fairly straight, too, unless we were going in a great curve so gradual that we were not conscious of it. Naturally, I began to wonder how long it would be before we should reach the sea. Perhaps Oliver had been mistaken in his idea that we were piercing the shell of the great volcano and making for the outer face of the island; but I did not raise the question just then. It was better to wait than to talk.

Then the cave, which had descended slightly all the way, gave a rather sharper dip into a kind of hollow. It went down by three stages, or steps, each being a wide ledge of rock worn to comparative smoothness by water that had once trickled over it. At the bottom the formation was almost level for some twenty yards or so, and beyond that the cavern began to slope gradually upwards. But our light did not carry farther than that, and after one searching glance, while I halted on the first rock-step, I prepared to go on. I descended to the second step and raised my lights to get a fair view of the hollow basin into which I was descending. Then I stopped short with a start and a cry.

Oliver came up quickly and stood at my elbow.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Over there,” I said in a whisper, “I thought I saw something—a light.”

“A light?”

Over there—well, “over there” was just the darkest part of the level ground, almost under the cavern wall—a mass of gloom and shadows against which our absurd candle light played feebly; and yet——

“Yes,” I said. “Just a flash of light.”

We stood and peered into the darkness. I had received a considerable shock.

“Well,” said Oliver, “I see nothing now. Raise the lights a little higher, old chap.”

I obeyed, lifting the two candles well above my head. So I saw the thing again—a light, a strange, baleful flash from the very heart of the darkness, a flash that was as wonderfully brilliant as it was instantaneous, a gleam so brief, so transient, that I could hardly believe that I had seen it. Whatever it was, it

was not the eye of a wild beast, as I had half fancied at first.

“There!” I said. “Did you see it?”

“I saw nothing.”

“Why, it was the same again,” I said. “It was like something bright that caught the gleam of the candle—something like a piece of glass—perhaps.”

“Ah! Some metallic vein—or, perhaps, a bit of crystal. Now I understand. Let us go nearer.”

Well, it seemed now that there was nothing to fear, and even I had somewhat recovered my confidence. So we moved down to the third step, and over that to the floor of the basin, side by side. Once, as we moved, I caught that flash again, baleful, beautiful, and sudden, but only once; and then nothing happened until we were halfway to the farther wall of the cavern, where the darkest shadows lurked.

Oliver was half a step or so in front of me, going in a cautious but unafraid fashion. Suddenly he halted, and in his manner of doing so there was something that set all my senses on the alert again. He stared at the shadows before us, and it seemed to me that as he stared he began to stiffen with horror. It was seen in the very turn of his shoulders, the outline of his features. In the next instant he had stepped back abruptly, almost knocking the candle out of my left hand as he did so. And then, looking down, I saw that he had almost stepped upon a dead body!

I gave a gasp, and retreated. But instantly he was by me.

“Wait,” he said hoarsely. “Let me see.”

I did not advance, but it was not necessary. By this time we were more accustomed to those shadows and could distinguish objects almost with ease. There, almost at our feet, it lay, the body of a dead man in a faded and tarnished officer’s uniform—not a dead body, as I saw directly after, but a human skeleton—a hideous, ghastly frame of bleached bones, from which every vestige of flesh had vanished long ago. It lay at full length, face upwards, and tremendously long, because the arms were extended above the head; and in his advance my companion had actually touched the thing with his foot before he had seen it. In another instant he would have fallen over it.

A skeleton is ghastly enough at any time, but there, in the eternal darkness and silence and loneliness! I tried to pull myself together, to keep my lights steady. I tried to be calm, and to reason about the objects that lay beside the awful thing. That gleam on the outstretched hand—it must be a ring. And there were weapons, too—a rusted revolver and a sheathed knife, similar to the one we had found.

“Look!” whispered Oliver. “There are others.”

Others! Yes, there were others. I felt myself turning sick as I followed the direction of his hand. Others? Heavens, the place was full of them! There,

under the wall, there seemed to be a charnel house—a whole pile of dimly gleaming skeletons heaped in every attitude of death, some clothed and some without a shred of clothing. One sat against the wall itself, headless, the skull actually lying on its knees, where it had fallen years and years before, after the tissues had decayed and released it. Several were lying outstretched like the first, some were huddled and bent, one was on its knees as though in prayer, sustained grotesquely in that position by a boulder of rock. Some were clean white frames, so clean and white that they gave no suggestion of corruption or mortality. They were so clean and white that one could almost forget that they were dead men. They had been there for a very long time, but others were of later date. And I had no need to ask any questions when I saw somewhere the half-decipherable letters of a ship's name on a man's cap. The letters that I saw were "*Plynl*—"

Yes, here was the mystery of the disappearance of Lord Barmouth and his men. There was no need to say a word on that subject. But there were other mysteries there also, and in a moment we were both staring vacantly at one figure that was noticeable among all the others because of its peculiar position and its coverings.

"Look at that," I said; but my teeth chattered as I said it.

This man had fallen across two of the others, just as though Death had taken him suddenly as he stooped over them. But when I looked again I saw that he was not clothed in any ordinary way. What we could see was rust—red rust on feet shod with iron, red rust on grooved thigh-pieces and buckles, red rust on body armour, corselet, and breastplate, that clung to and protected the naked bones between. Red rust, too, on an iron cap that covered the bleached and ghastly skull, and, last of all, red rust on a drawn sword whose hilt was still clasped by a fleshless hand.

I had moved a little nearer, until we could see it all—fear forgotten in a terrible curiosity. But when I had seen so much, and had gathered something of its meaning, my fear returned again, and I would have retreated. Then Oliver said swiftly:

"Wait a moment. I must see."

He stepped forward. I thought at first that he meant to examine the man in armour, but, instead, he went to the farthest of the ghastly group. This one lay at full length, but in a curious attitude, with both arms resting upon a fair-sized fragment of rock. To my surprise, Oliver, paying no attention to the armoured figure, bent over this as though to touch it. I watched him anxiously.

Suddenly he stood upright and raised his hand to his head. Then he swayed, as though unable to keep his balance. And while I stared in open-mouthed astonishment he staggered and fell. Down he went upon the horrible relics of mortality, and as he fell the frames gave way and moved beneath him

with a faint, rattling sound that seemed to chill my very heart.

CHAPTER XI

THE GHOST OF CHARLIE CORNWALL

Ralph Oliver was dead!

In my first shock of dismay I had no doubt about the matter. Some deadly thing had killed him, as it had killed those others long ago. As he rolled over I stumbled back and back with a shriek of terror. My heel came against the first rocky step, and as I saved myself from falling, one of my candles went down and vanished. Then I struck the second step, staggered, and fell, and my second candle dropped also. I was down, and in black darkness, and alone.

Oh, the horror of those moments! Only once had I known anything like it, and that was when I had fallen into the Great Pit. It swept over me in one awful wave—Oliver struck dead, and some ghastly danger lurking there in the shadows, waiting for its next victim with that Eye of evil. I saw myself alone in that death-trap of a cave—utterly alone. That was why I shrieked and fell.

It was the fall that saved us all. My cry had not ceased to echo in the mocking distances of the cavern before I was up again—still afraid, indeed, but not with the same fear as before. One instant had been enough to restore some measure of reason and self-control, to give me a conviction of the truth. For when I rose I was sick and giddy, and had to lean against the wall for support; and in my nostrils there was a strong, overpowering smell, on my palate a strange, sickening taste. But my reeling brain had not lost its power to think, and I was thinking hard. That peculiar odour—where had I noticed it before? The answer came to me on the instant, and then most of my fear was gone. I had solved the mystery of the Cave!

What happened next? I have no clear recollection. It was then, and is still, a nightmare of darkness and haste and hope and fear, during which all I did was as much the result of instinct as of reason. It appears that I lit no fewer than six fresh candles, and placed them all in a row upon a ledge of the rocky wall; then I dipped two handkerchiefs into a pool of water that lay in a hollow, bound them roughly over my nose and mouth, and plunged back into the horrors from which I had escaped. And all that took less than a minute.

Then the nightmare began in earnest. I crashed through the poor, frail frames that were strewn in my way until I reached my friend. That baleful Eye flashed at me once, but I did not heed it. Taking care not to stoop too low, I gripped Oliver's collar, and with a tremendous effort dragged him clear of the horrible remains on which he lay. Then I struggled fiercely to bring him out of that shallow basin, up to the safety of the rocky steps above.

It was a task quite beyond me, of course. Oliver was taller than I, and he lay absolutely lifeless; and there is no weight quite so difficult to deal with as the weight of a lifeless human body. In a very little while all the strength given me by my rage and desperation had oozed away. I brought him to the first step, and there stumbled and fell beside him. I was up in an instant, groaning with fear and helplessness, dripping with perspiration. No, I couldn't do it—I couldn't. I must let him die!

Then came the maddest freak of my nightmare—the maddest of all. I thought I heard a sound—a step. I looked round, and was not at all surprised, apparently, to find that one of the dead men was up and moving towards me. Somehow he had gathered his scattered bones together and was coming to help me. I saw his gleaming shins and hands, his haggard face, and I seemed to comprehend that in order to do justice to the occasion and not to alarm me too much, he had put his features on again as well! Up from the shallow basin he came, and spoke in an eerie, ghostly, and familiar voice.

“This is the last word in dreams! Want a hand, old chap? Oh, I say, have you got the toothache?”

No, I was not surprised. Why be surprised at a thing that happens in a dream? Nor was I horrified, for my horror was so great already that nothing might increase it. I tore the bandage from my face.

“If you're not too late,” I said stupidly, “you may have come just in time. Help me to drag him to the top, will you? There's a lot of poisonous gas in that hollow there, and all along the ground. I want to get him clear of it.”

“Right you are. Now—one—two—three!”

I pulled as well as I could, and the ghost pulled too. In a trice we were on the top step, gasping but triumphant; and then we managed to get that helpless form right up on to a rocky table some four feet above the ground. What a wonderful difference the ghost made! And as we did this I spoke in jerks:

“I never dreamed you were among that crowd,” I said feebly. “In fact, I didn't recognise your bones a bit. Skeletons, you know, are much alike all the world over. But it was just like you to buck up when you saw I wanted a hand. I'll do as much for you some day.”

The ghost looked at me and grinned.

“Don't smile,” I said. “It's too soon for that yet. Here's a flask; get a little wine and pour it down his throat, will you? You might feel his heart, too, just to see if he's alive. I'm rather done up myself.”

The ghost obeyed—he always had obeyed, as I recollected now, even when my orders were all wrong and he knew them to be wrong.

“Not dead,” he said cheerfully. “I can feel the heart going. It's going quite strong, too!”

“His heart is always going strong,” I said stupidly. “There aren't many like

it. When he comes round I'll introduce you."

"Delighted, I'm sure! But tell me first who he is."

"He's our third officer—Ralph Oliver. But how long will they let you stay, Charlie? Is it till the clock strikes twelve?"

"No," said the ghost, "I'm out till the old clock stops."

I remember that ghostly conversation quite distinctly—every word of it. I remember, too, that at the end of it the ghost looked at me and grinned again.

"Mad as a hatter!" he said, half to himself. "I suppose all of us are. Well, I never thought it would come to this."

That was a favourite saying of Charlie Cornwall's, and it came out of his ghost's mouth with all the simple naturalness of long ago. It somehow went straight to my heart, and suddenly my eyes were full of tears.

Unable to speak, I seated myself on the rock beside Ralph Oliver, and leaned back against the wall. I reflected vaguely that the ghost was doing all the work and doing it so well that he required no help from me. I would just rest quietly until he vanished back into his bones, and then I would turn to. It was a pity Charlie was dead, but even when dead he was making himself very useful. That was just like Charlie. And then the tears began to stream down my face.

"I say," said the ghost in some concern, "is anything the matter? Whatever are you crying for? He's not dead, I tell you."

"No, but *you* are. That's why I'm crying. Can I help but cry when I see my best chum a ghost? Where are your seven senses, Charlie?"

"Up a tree, I think," said the ghost, half comically, half doubtfully; and then, after another curious look into my face, he went on rubbing Oliver's temples with wine.

I was too weak and tired even to brush away my tears. I simply sat blinking at him in a maudlin, owlsh way, wondering how long he would be permitted to stay and help us. Would he really have to go when the clock struck twelve? But there was no clock here. Then I stared about me, down there into the darkness from which the ghost had come, and where the ghost's companions still lay, all in their long sleep. I could not see the Eye now. Had it vanished altogether? Then I saw my six candles stuck on the rocky ledge, and all burning solemnly and steadily. Oh, what waste! What extravagance! What would Oliver say!

Then it seemed that the candles all went out at the same time; for I had fainted, falling with my head on Ralph Oliver's shoulder.

It was a long time before I woke again—that is, before I became fully awake. At intervals, however, I found myself partially conscious, half awake and half asleep, vaguely feeling with a stunned brain after the meaning of things that were said and done around me. Fragments of conversation came as

from a great distance. Then I was being borne along at a considerable pace over broken and rocky ground by two persons, each of whom had an arm about my waist, while my arms hung limply over their shoulders. Now and again my feet touched the ground, and I almost seemed to be walking; and now and again a pale light flashed and danced just before me as I was hurried on and on. Now and again, too, came a halt for rest, a halt full of hard breathing by my two helpers and full of lackadaisical sighs from me. Then on again with many jerks and stumbles, and the pale, dancing flame of the candle seeking in vain to light a path that ran upwards all the way.

That journey seemed to last for a thousand years.

Then, at last, came the cessation of motion, and the knowledge that I was sitting with my back against a rock. There was a taste of wine in my mouth, and there was wind—cool, fresh sea wind, and plenty of it—upon my face. Then I heard the voice of the sea, hoarse and monotonous, but very comforting and friendly; and after that I knew that the sun was shining upon me, and that I was gradually returning to life and understanding under his rays.

“Yes,” said Oliver’s voice, still far away but quickly coming nearer. “It is the gas. Carbonic acid, I believe—or something even more deadly. It is often given off where there are volcanic disturbances. Really, you know, I should have thought of that myself. This gas is so heavy that it keeps close to the surface of the ground. But in an hour, I think, he will be himself.”

“He’ll get another shock when he sees me,” said the voice of the ghost; at which I felt an inclination to a fit of childish laughter. But in the silence that followed I tried to reflect, tried to make some kind of sense out of what I had heard. By this time I had an impression that I was gradually waking up—it was just as though I lingered on the borderland between sleep and waking. This silly ghost had given a kind of promise that he would still be on hand when I was fully awake, and I tried to puzzle out whether there was anything in it. Even to my confused senses, however, it seemed plain that a ghost’s promise is not worth much, anyhow—a shadowy, unsubstantial thing, like the ghost itself, I reflected, quite reasonably; and, moreover, one could hardly expect a dream promise to be fulfilled in the daylight. Dreams go by contraries, so of course the ghost would certainly *not* be there when I woke up!

A few minutes later all the dreams were over. It was a real wind that blew into my face, a real sea whose deep voice I heard as it thundered on the rocks far below. For I was sitting at the mouth of a great cave, a hundred feet or more up the face of a precipitous cliff; and there was nothing before me but a mighty green sea that stretched to the far horizon, streaked here and there with crests of playful foam. Above, the sun rode in a sky of white and blue, and there was light and warmth and movement everywhere. Oh, this was a glorious waking after that nightmare of darkness and death! I gave a shiver as the

thought of it came back to me, and then I looked up into the very face of the sun. Glorious, indeed!

“Good morning, Frank,” said Oliver.

He was standing close beside me. He knelt down near me.

“Feel better, old man?” he asked, as he took my hand.

“Much better,” I replied. “I—I hope I haven’t worried you.”

“Worried me? You saved my life.”

“What?” I cried. “In the cave? Was that all true?”

Oliver spoke slowly. “I do not know what you remember,” he said. “But it is certainly true that we had an adventure in the cavern. I was overcome by a poisonous gas, and you succeeded in rescuing me from it. Don’t you remember that?”

“Yes,” I said; and then I remembered more. That mad freak of Charlie Cornwall’s ghost? What about that? But I did not ask. It seemed too absurd to talk about it.

“Think back a little more,” said Oliver. “Last night, or, rather, early this morning, do you remember, you had a curious dream. You thought you heard a voice calling you.”

What did he mean? I could not ask.

“I read once,” he said, “the story of an island—a very pitiful story. It was in the South Atlantic, too, like this one, but it was farther south, in the region of bleak winds and storms. Two ships were wrecked there almost at the same time, in the same storm; but not at the same spot. One was on the north side, the other on the south, with a barren and desolate stretch of rock between. Two parties of shipwrecked men were cast ashore, but while the one party was well provisioned and sheltered, the other was exposed to all the bitter weather without food or covering. There was only the width of a tiny island between them, but they did not chance to meet; and of the one party, all save one man died from exposure and privation. Yet all the time there was food and shelter and comradeship almost within a stone’s-throw. You see what may happen on an island in the South Atlantic.”

“Yes,” I said. “But——”

“Something very similar has happened here. While we were secure on the southern side of the island, a great ship was thrown on the rocks on the northern side, about five or six miles away. All lives were lost except one, and he was kept prisoner for several days on a narrow beach at the foot of an immense cliff. There he would have starved to death in time, but as a last hope he climbed the face of the cliff and found a cave. Though there seemed to be no hope there, he began to explore its darkness; and presently, to his astonishment, he saw lights and heard voices. Greater still was his astonishment when in that cavern, in the darkness, he recognised the face of a

friend!”

I took a deep, deep breath. I dared not look Oliver in the face. He rose and moved away. But almost at once someone else came, and sat down beside me, just where Oliver had been kneeling.

I did not look up to see this someone’s face, for I was afraid; but I saw his bare feet and legs, all battered and scratched and bruised, with the fragments of clothing hanging in a scurvy fashion about them; and I saw his hands, also battered and scratched, and with the fingertips all split and broken where the rocks had torn them. I knew those hands, and my heart swelled painfully.

“Well, old chap,” he said, a bit nervously, as though he still fancied he might give me an unpleasant shock, “I never thought it would come to this. Did you?”

There was no mistaking him—oh no. So at last I turned and looked up into the face which I knew so well. The features were strangely changed, peaked and haggard with starvation, yet tanned and rough with sea-salt and wind. But the tumbled hair, the slightly upturned nose, the resolute mouth—they were all there in spite of the changes, and the soul that looked out at me with that gleam of fun was the same brave soul in the same brown eyes. And I could not say anything. Indeed, what was there to say, what words were there that would not be too absurdly weak? I could only hold out both my hands in almost a shamefaced way; and with a little laugh he took them both in his, at the same time moving a little closer to me.

“No,” he said softly. “I never thought it would come to this!”

And then, after a while, he told me how it had come, told me in other words the story Oliver had already given me in outline.

In the old days at home we had revelled in the wonders of Clark Russell and Kingston, Ballantyne and Jules Verne, but never one of them all had written a more astonishing story than the one unfolded before us now. For the same great storm that had driven the *John Duncan* to the shelter of the Honeycomb had also swept out of her course for many days the ship *Effingham Towers*, bound from Sydney to New York. One morning when the dawn came, the crew found their ship about two miles to the north-west of a rocky island, with a strong gale blowing inshore and a heavy swell that boomed unceasingly against a frowning wall of cliff. For hours they strained every nerve to keep her off, and might have weathered the island safely had it not been that the wind shifted a couple of points just before noon. From that moment it was hopeless, and late in the afternoon the ship struck. It was only as a forlorn hope that some of the men lowered a boat. It pushed off in a storm of mist and spray, and was never seen again.

Then the *Effingham Towers* went to pieces.

“I do not know what really happened,” said Charlie. “Only the carpenter

and myself were on my bit of deck at the end. He had been a beast to me from the very first, and even in that last few minutes he never spoke. In my last glimpse of him I saw him staring at the cliffs through the spray, with strained, fixed eyes and a face as grey as ashes. Each of us had a lifebelt, and we were sheltering under the lee of one of the deckhouses amidships when the ship struck; all the masts went at the same time, and I suppose the shock sent me overboard. I can just remember fighting my way to the surface, only to find that there was no surface, only a world of savage waves and hissing spray and rending timbers. It was not by any skill of my own that I got ashore. I never shall know how it was done; but suddenly, when I was just breathless, my feet touched, and I struggled up to a little slope under the shelter of the cliff. There were ten yards of black, sandy beach just there, in a kind of inlet between two spurs of rock. And I lay there all night, never knowing when a big roller would come up and pick me off. But the wind had dropped and the storm was over.

“In the morning,” he went on, “I was only just alive, I think, but there was a little sun. There was that strip of beach, a mile long now, with the bulging cliff behind: there seemed to be no way out, or up, and no hope. But I was sufficiently alive to pull some wreckage up above high water, and some dead bodies with clothes on. I needed clothes, or some of them, and they didn’t. There was some food among the wreckage, and there was fresh water among the rocks, and one of the dead men gave me a petrol-lighter, so that at last I managed a fire.—Say, Frank, I never knew what a fire meant till then, and how hard it might be to get one.”

I pressed his hand. “Yes, your hands are warm,” he said. “They always were.—But I stuck it out on that bit of coast for days and days, though I never counted them, I was too mazed. How long do you think?”

“Three weeks, maybe,” I replied. “It is quite three weeks since the last kick of the Great Storm.”

“Three years, rather,” muttered Charlie. . . . “Well, old chap, it came to an end yesterday. My food was gone, and my fuel; and then it was lie down and starve to death, jump into the sea and be drowned, or climb the cliff, and attempt the impossible. So I chose the easiest bit of cliff, though even there I couldn’t see more than twenty feet up because of the way it bulged out. But I was always a bit of a climber, as you know, and at last I got over the bulge. It was easier then, for I found a sort of track, worn by the stones and other stuff, or perhaps by water that had streamed down for years from the mouth of this cave. So I came to this opening, where I ate the last two of my Australian apples—one last night, before going to sleep, and the other this morning, before starting out to explore the place.”

“And then you found us!”

“And then I found you, after travelling a little more than three hundred

yards! But, of course, when I saw the lights and saw your face I thought I was dreaming. It did not seem to be real. And you thought *you* were dreaming, too!”

“Rather,” I said grimly. “It was a nightmare, though—not a dream.”

Charlie smiled. “It seemed to be a wild continuation of a dream,” he said. “You see, I had dreamed of you in the night—or, rather, in the early morning. I had dreamed of Leigh, and thought I had gone out to meet you on the old cinder-path above the sea wall. You were to wait for me; and I began to hail you, to let you know I was coming. In my dream I yelled, ‘Frank Ahoy!’ for all I was worth, and it must have been my own voice that woke me; for when I did wake the cave seemed to be really echoing with the sound of my cry.”

“Why, man, I heard it,” I exclaimed.

“You heard it?” he said wonderingly.

I told him how I had heard it—how it was the first thing that had come to my consciousness on this day of strange chances. “Nobody but myself would have known your hail, Charlie,” I said. “I heard it right enough, through half a mile of rock. And Oliver said——”

I stopped and looked round. I might have supposed that our friend was somewhere near, resting, perhaps, and watching us. But behind me was nothing but the cave mouth.

“Why,” I cried, “Where *is* he?”

CHAPTER XII

THE DEVIL'S EYE

"He went back," said Charlie calmly.

"Went back!" I said, and scrambled to my feet. "Went back where?"

"To the other end of the cave. He decided that we should camp here to-night, because he did not care to take you that dark journey until you were quite fit. So he went back to fetch your provisions and things. No, don't get excited, old chap. He'll be quite safe now that he knows the danger. And I'm going a little way to meet him presently."

"But it's a risky thing," I said feebly.

"In a way, yes," agreed Charlie. And he added in a thoughtful way: "I don't know what kind of fellow your friend really is, because you haven't told me; but if I'm any judge, from what I've seen he's a rather good chap to follow."

Then, of course, I had to tell him the whole story—a story which filled our time for pretty well another half hour, because there were so many little points to explain afterwards.

"By George!" said Charlie at last. "This beats anything we ever dreamed of in the old days! I want to see your Secret Sea and your old Richard Lewis. And, of course, I shall see them very shortly. But come to the edge and I'll show you where the *Effingham Towers* struck."

He led me nearer to the verge, holding my arm, however, very firmly all the time. There I could see the beginning of the track up which he had climbed—a mere ghostly shadow of a track, where the only footholds were jutting fragments of rock worn almost smooth by rainstreams down the cliff face. It was a dizzy, hopeless climb. It appeared to me that it would have defied a goat, and my heart seemed to turn sick as I looked. Here was the secret of his torn shins and split fingers, and his ragged clothing. Here was something that we had certainly never dreamed of in the old days! Down below—eighty feet below—the cliff projected, as he had said, and I could see nothing of the strip of beach on which he had taken shelter; but to right and left the cliffs jutted out a little in two great shoulders, and at the bases of these there were continuations that ran out some distance, fifty yards or more. It was on the one to the right that his ship had struck, breaking her back on a great blue ledge that only showed at low tides; and the wreckage had been carried by the current round the outer edge of the spur and so out of sight. At high water the current there ran like a mill race.

“No ship ever struck in a more hopeless place,” he said. “But you had better get back, old chap. Looking down so far makes you giddy. . . . And now, if you don’t mind, I’ll go to meet your friend.”

“You’ll take care about the gas,” I said anxiously. “Hadn’t I better come with you?”

“Oliver has forbidden it most strictly. Ah, here are the candles. Good-bye. Expect me when you see a light coming. Eh?”

It was in that light-hearted fashion that he vanished into the cave. I followed him for some distance, and then stood till his will-o’-the-wisp of a candle disappeared round a curve. Then the chill of the great cavern began to creep over my spirits, and I hastened back to the open air and the sunlight. Open air and sunlight—those were the things I wanted now!

I had to wait another hour, and the sun was dropping slowly towards the sea, before they returned to set my doubts at rest. It was a pleasant hour enough, but, of course, I was haunted all the while by the thought of the gas, and the dread that perhaps something awful might have happened on the second visit to the Place of the Dead Men. Suppose they never came at all, and I had to go and find them lying lifeless among the skeletons!

Then came an echoing cry from the vast cavern, and, far in the darkness, dancing sparks of light appeared. Down I ran to meet them, and to relieve poor Charlie of his load. For it was Oliver who carried the lights, as well as some bulky object which he had wrapped in one of the blankets.

“Good,” said Oliver cheerfully. “Your chum met me exactly where I wished, Frank—at the Three Steps. From that point he has carried the burden. He will be glad of your help.”

He passed on while I took the lighter half of Charlie’s cargo. “By George!” he whispered. “Your Oliver is a glutton for work! Brought all these, he did, right across Skeleton Hollow, carrying the candle as well; and just on this side he waited until I came in sight. Got a nerve, hasn’t he!”

“Why did he wait there?”

“Couldn’t get any farther without help. And guess what he did then? Made me stand by on the top step, holding the lights, while he went down to the hollow, with his mouth and nose all bandaged up. And then he goes poking about down there among the bones, looking for the birth certificates of those dead men who first visited this cave—or, perhaps, their visiting-cards! But there weren’t any pockets, leave alone cards, and he couldn’t make anything even of the man in armour. His coat-of-arms was clean rusted out, if he ever had one.”

“Yes,” I said. “And then?”

“And then,” gasped Charlie, “he goes poking about a bit more, among the rocks this time, shifting pieces with his boot, and standing back now and again

to get a breath of air into him. At last he makes a dive, hauls out a fine, fat piece of rock, brings it across to me, and wraps it up quite tenderly in a blanket. And that's what he's carrying now."

"A rock?" I said.

"And a jolly good specimen. It weighs twenty pounds if it weighs an ounce. How many of those does he usually pick up before breakfast? And who's going to carry it home for him?"

That question, fortunately, never came up again. When we reached the cave mouth, Oliver had thrown his "specimen" down in a corner, and was lying wearily upon the blanket which had covered it. He smiled as we came up.

"I am jolly tired," he said, "and ready for food. How soon will it be ready?"

"In ten minutes," I answered promptly.

"Good. And let it be the best meal you have ever made ready! We all deserve it, I guess."

It was not the best, because we had not here the plentiful supply of utensils obtainable in the bungalow or on the *Plynlimmon*, but it was as good as was possible under the circumstances. My rock table was excellent for its purpose, and everything went off very well indeed. Half of my pleasure consisted in watching Charlie Cornwall eat. The manner was exactly as in the old days, but the quantity—well, it is positively rude even to think of it.

Then there was the joyous atmosphere of our meal, enough to make any meal a success. Just think! There was the coming of Charlie in such an extraordinary way, just at the moment we needed him most, a thing that was little less than a miracle. I began to think that it might be possible, after all, to get the *Plynlimmon* into the open sea and headed for home; and I had some hope that Oliver would soon begin to discuss the new situation and its prospects. But I found that he had something else in his mind.

"Come," he said, as soon as the meal was over. "We have more than an hour before dusk. Sit beside me here."

He had spread the blanket just at the corner where we should get the last of the sun. We sat down accordingly, and then he went over to the wall where he had laid his "specimen." Carrying it with some care, he took his place between us, with the piece of rock at his feet.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

"A rock," I suggested modestly.

"Yes. And more. Just look!"

It was just a small, rounded boulder of rock—a coarse, common-looking rock, but with a gleam in it here and there like a vein of quartz or spar. But now Oliver slowly turned it over, so that the underside got the sun; and both Charlie and I gave an exclamation as we caught a sudden vivid flash in the

light.

“The Eye!”

“Yes,” said Ralph Oliver. “This is the Eye you saw in the cave. It caught the gleam of your candle, just as it catches the sunlight now. Look closely.”

We looked. All the light came from a small piece of rough stone or quartz closely embedded in the boulder, but with its outer side exposed. This outer side had been chipped off flat and then worn smooth, so that it was like a fragment of glass. It was this fragment that caught the light on its polished surface, making that curious red flash which had startled me in the cave.

“This Eye of yours,” said Oliver, “is a bit of crystal, embedded in this piece of rock ages and ages ago in the heart of the earth. In some volcanic convulsion it was thrown out, and perhaps formed part of a stream of refuse forced through the vent of this great cavern towards the sea. Somehow it was left there, lying against the wall, caught in the lowest part of the cave; and there it lay in the dark for ten thousand years, waiting. While it waited, men made the world of to-day, fought their way up from barbarism, founded empires, acted histories, and at last began to explore distant seas and desolate islands. And to this most desolate of islands—this of ours—came a tall-pooped ship manned by men of a swarthy race and commanded by one who wore steel over his leather and carried a sword—half soldier, half sailor, a Portuguese cavalier from Biscay, or perhaps a Spanish hidalgo from Seville. These were men who had conquered all the old worlds within their reach and were now conquering the new. They had found the entrance to the Secret Sea, and, knowing no fear, had hauled their sturdy little ship through the entrance arch. They spent many days in exploring the island, and perhaps set up an emblazoned flag and claimed the desolate rock for their king. At last, one day, they came to this northern wall and to the cave we reached last night; and they resolved to explore it, hoping to reach the sea that way. They had heart for anything!

“Then this thing happened. The leading men had torches to light the path, and when they came to the hollow where the Eye waited, one of them saw the sudden vivid flash which you saw. And that flash of the crystal Eye was their doom. The first man rushed to it, and with a cry stooped to examine the marvel. A deadly gas, which comes from a crevice in the rock just there, enveloped him, and he fell as you saw him lying, with his arm stretched out across the rock. The others bent over him in wide-eyed amazement, and immediately they, too, fell, one upon the other. Last to enter the hollow was the captain of the band, and one other man with him, just in time, perhaps, to see them fall. The captain, realising some deadly peril, drew his sword and rushed forward. Perhaps, after a moment of bewilderment, he stooped to rescue one of the torches, and in the act he, too, became a victim, and lay

stretched out upon the others. The other man, the last, seeing all his comrades fall—seeing, too, that flash of evil light—turned and fled. Somehow he reached the ship and told his story; and in those superstitious days the Legend of the Devil’s Eye became a tradition of the wild Atlantic.

“The victims never moved again. In a few minutes they sighed out their lives, just as the spluttering torches did; and the tragedy was hid in the darkness for another four hundred years. Then—only twenty years ago—came another explorer, the Earl of Barmouth, who had read the Legend of the Devil’s Eye and had smiled over it. He thought it had some reasonable explanation, and resolved to sift the matter to the bottom. But, thrown off his guard by the flash of that mysterious light, he did not think of the gas, and fell a victim to it with all his party; and those who came to seek him afterwards died also. They are all in the cave, Frank, for I have counted them.”

At the moment we said nothing, and Oliver, after a brief pause, settled the boulder firmly between his knees and took from his pocket a strong sailor’s knife.

“And now,” he said, “to remove the Eye from its socket. It should not be a difficult job.”

And it was not a difficult job. A few skilful taps, a little resolute chisel work, a few flying chips of rock, a little careful leverage with the steel point, five minutes of anxious watching on our part, and he had released or cut away that portion of the rock which we called the “Eye.” It was roughly oval in shape, a dirty, rusty fragment of stone with just one section worn and polished to smoothness.

Ralph turned it over and over. “Here it is,” he said, with an expression of mingled wonder and disgust. “A mystery which has given rise to a wonderful and horrible legend, which has cost the lives of men who rank among the noble of the earth; and it is just a fragment of quartz or crystal, worn smooth on one of its sides by the contact of earth or water. That’s all! When you see what a trifling thing may give rise to such a train of mystery and tragedy you cannot wonder at what some wise men say—that we are nothing, after all, but the playthings of circumstance. Think of the *Plynlimmon* and her people, all lost through a trifle like this!”

“Throw the wretched thing into the sea,” I said in disgust.

“No, we won’t do that. When we tell our story we shall need this as corroboration. We will keep it for the present—or, at least, you shall keep it, Frank, as you have a good number of pockets and I am already heavy laden. As for poor Charlie, he has no pockets worth speaking of.”

Charlie could now afford to grin at his naked poverty, and grin he did. Reluctantly I took the bit of rock, wrapped it up in the coverings that came most handy, and slipped it into my breast pocket.

And that was the key to the mystery of the *Plynlimmon* and her lost crew, the solution to the secret of the Cave of Dead Men.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SHADOW OF EVIL

“It seems too good to be true.”

“Rather!”

“I can hardly believe it, even now.”

“Nor I.”

It was the same dialogue over and over again, and we came inevitably to the one conclusion—we would clasp each other’s hand to make sure that it was all real and true.

Yet, looking back now upon those crowded hours, I am really surprised at our coolness and self-control. Perhaps we were both just a trifle afraid to seem sentimental; besides, we had been parted for about two years, and perhaps a little strangeness had crept in between us, all unawares. . . . So it happened that we lay and talked in subdued whispers, and the utmost we did was to clasp hands in the dark, and occasionally give each other a dig in the ribs. True, we shared one blanket without difficulty or inconvenience, but we had both “grown up” very considerably since we had last seen each other.

Sleep had seemed impossible that night, and we had not even pretended that it might come. Our programme was to talk a good deal in whispers, and to think more. Ralph Oliver was twenty yards off in the shadows; like the good fellow he was, he had made his bed where no whispers could reach him above the hoarse, monotonous roar of the sea far below. But it was just because we both regarded sleep as out of the question that sleep came, in rather less, I think, than a couple of hours. Charlie went off first, almost immediately after a last exchange of whispers. He had had an exhausting time lately!

“Say, Frank, your Oliver is a brick!”

“Rather!”

Then Charlie gave a sigh of utter weariness and content. A moment later he yawned, and in the act was half asleep.

“Well,” he murmured sweetly, “I never thought it would come to this!” And with the “*this*” still upon his lips, he dropped off into slumber, his head resting upon his right arm, his left arm across my breast. I smiled inwardly at his surrender, and in five minutes had gone off myself.

That five minutes, however, was full of thoughts—a little disconnected and inconsequent, as sleep thoughts generally are. I distinctly remember apologising to the sea for my want of faith. “I thought,” I said, “that you had nothing to give but hard tack, hard work, and storms and kicks, and I had

begun to lose my belief in you. I had expected so much, you see! But now you have given me many things—and, last and best of all, my old chum. Accept my humble apologies, and believe me to be—Your Obedient Servant.” It was then that I went off to sleep, lulled by that heavy booming roar from the rocks below, so different from the almost noiseless motion of the Secret Sea. And as I went off I noticed, dreamily, that the very rock seemed to vibrate as the waves hurled themselves against it. And no wonder, I thought, for though the rock was the summit of a submerged mountain, the waves came with all the might of the vast Atlantic behind them.

It turned out afterwards that I slept for several hours. A red sea-dawn had broken when I opened my eyes, and was just tingeing the surface of a broad track of an ocean darkly blue, just over the shoulder of rock on which the *Effingham Towers* had gone to pieces. For a few moments I lay on my elbow and watched the new day struggling to its birth. I was a little chilled, for the air was somewhat raw; but when I had got to my feet, and exercised my limbs vigorously for a moment or two, the coldness passed away. Then I knew that sleep had made a new creature of me. Youth had come back!

Charlie was still sleeping soundly, and instead of disturbing him I threw over him the other half of the blanket. If I was really awake now, as I believed I was, Charlie was real enough, and no part of a nightmare. What a difference his coming would make. No desert island could be quite a desert while Charlie was on it, no position hopeless when he was present with his abounding hope and good humour.

Ralph Oliver was sleeping yet, and, taking care not to make too much noise, I set about the preparation of an early breakfast. It seemed to me that I could do this upon a generous scale, for before nightfall we should probably reach the place where I had stored a part of my original cargo, even if we failed to reach the Secret Sea itself. So I prepared a first-rate breakfast and then roused Oliver.

“The soup is ready, your Highness,” I said.

He opened his eyes and looked. Three cups of soup were steaming upon the rock table we had used yesterday, with a “second course” waiting of compressed meat and biscuit. And while he took it all in, I went to Charlie.

“Out of that, you lazy swab!” I said fiercely. “Going to snore there all day?” Whereat Charlie raised a grinning face from the folds of the blanket.

“No go,” he chuckled. “I’ve had my eyes on you for the last ten minutes. My word, isn’t it good to lie still and see other fellows working! Watching you get the breakfast was almost as good as eating it.”

“The watching will be your share if you don’t shut it,” I said. “I’m hungry enough for two. Come along.”

It was a pleasant, happy meal that we had there in the broadening morning,

watching the shadows stealing from the sea before the growth of the day. It was even pleasanter than the meal of the evening before, for then we had all been tired, while now we were rested and refreshed. Charlie was bubbling over with fun, and I could hardly manage to keep my joyous excitement under control. At last, however, I noticed that Oliver's eyes turned restlessly now and again towards the black interior of the cave; and, seeing that, I turned my thoughts in the direction he wished them to go.

"You're anxious to make a start," I said.

"Yes, Frank, I want to be back at the bungalow now. It's time to think of the next chapter. What do you say?"

"I say 'Yes.' Won't old Lewis be struck when he sees three of us strolling in? No doubt he's forgotten all about us by now, but it will all come back to him."

"More will come back to him than he saw leave him," said Charlie. "I am anxious to see his joy when he gets the first sight of me, so we'll begin to pack. Yes, thank you, I'm quite fit. It is my solemn conviction that a diet of apples for a solid week will cure any man of any disease—even housemaid's knee and old age—if it doesn't kill him. I suppose Lewis, when he sees me first, will take me for one of his dreams?"

"Yes," I put in, "but when he sees you eat you'll become a nightmare to him."

"Ah!" said Charlie. "It's the same old Frank. Let's get on with the next thing!"

So we spent the next half hour in "packing up," and I did my packing now with much more heartiness than I had used in making ready for this expedition so short a time ago. And as we worked, Charlie kept up a stream of light-hearted and affectionate chaff.

"My word," he said, "what a nice lot of things you brought. You're a twentieth-century pair of Crusoes! Gladstone bags! Stars and garters! Pity old Robinson isn't here to pick up a few hints."

"Just so!" I agreed. "But he wouldn't get any hints on holding his tongue and being properly respectful to his betters. Now, will you select the parcel you would like to carry?"

"If it's a choice between two evils," said Charlie mournfully, "give me the small one."

"Right you are. That's the heavier of the two!"

It was in the same light-hearted fashion that we said "good-bye" at last to that great seascape, lit our candles, and turned back into the cave. Then, however, our laughter gradually died down, for there was little encouragement to laughter in that House of Shadows and silence and death.

Oliver went first with his share of the baggage, and Charlie and I were

close upon his heels, walking as near each other as we could. Nor was it difficult, that first part, because it was all down hill—down into the hollow where the skeletons lay; and besides, two of us had already done the adventure twice. I was not in the least disturbed, though once Oliver thought it necessary to reassure me.

“It is just a cave,” he said, “filled with volcanic refuse. You may look for another Eye, though there is little hope of finding one.”

From that time I did occasionally cast a glance to right and left when the path was sufficiently level to allow of my doing so; but although we saw many a glint and gleam of mineral treasure in the rocky walls, there was no Crystal Eye to blaze at us with its baleful radiance.

So we came at last to Skeleton Hollow. But little was said during that breathing space, and none of us spoke of the ghastly secret of the place. I do not think we looked more than once towards the wall where the bones lay, though I should have been more content if we had been able to lay those poor relics deep under the earth. But this was out of the question. There was no depth of earth for their burial, even if we had spades to dig. They must remain where they had lain so long, their shroud the darkness, their tomb the mountain.

Then we turned to the remainder of the journey, pressing upwards towards the day. I knew the road now, and even thought I could remember some of the landmarks of our coming; and in our eagerness we travelled so well, in spite of every difficulty, that scarcely an hour had passed before we saw a gleam of light ahead.

“Ah!” said Charlie, with a sigh. “I feel like a wretched little mole!”

Then we climbed the mound of stony refuse and passed out, to throw ourselves down breathless on the site of the camp I had selected two days back; and there we rested for a long time, fatigued already, not by the distance we had come, but by the indescribable roughness of the way. Besides, the way before us, through the wilderness of rocks, was, if anything, worse.

“We took a whole day to come here from the Secret Sea,” said Ralph Oliver, “but that was because we halted so often and made so many excursions out of the most direct course. If we go back as directly as we can, we should reach the shore by nightfall.”

“And the rest,” I said, “will be plain sailing once we get out of the Maze.” For I little guessed that it was only when we left the Maze that our biggest troubles would begin.

So after a long rest and a snack we set off again to the lead of Oliver’s compass—as nearly as we could follow it; but as I have already described the difficulties of our journey, I need not enlarge upon them further. They were a surprise even to Charlie, though he had some idea of what the island was like.

“My word!” he said, before he became too weary to make any remark at all. “First time I’ve ever tried to use a road of which the easiest bits were paved with broken bottles! But isn’t it a pity that this bit of scenery can’t be shifted down to Leigh? It would make the fortune of the place.”

“Yes,” I said. “All London would go in. But I’m not going to try to get it there. I’ve had quite enough of it here.”

I soon noticed that Oliver was keeping his course rigidly straight, and that every delay made him curiously impatient. He had his compass in his hand constantly, and as the day passed his anxiety became very evident. He scarcely spoke at all except to ask whether I or Charlie felt tired, and even on those occasions he sometimes hardly noticed the answer. All his thoughts were focussed on the end of the journey; and because I perceived this I began to try—as I always did, though not really of intention—to think his thoughts as far as I could think them.

“Say, Charlie,” I said once. “You told me that the men on your ship lowered a boat, just before she struck. Are you sure that the boat was capsized?”

“Certain,” said Charlie. “I did not see it go down; but I haven’t any doubt about it. Why?”

“Because,” I said, “if that boat *did* get clear and the men landed somewhere, they might at last get into the Secret Sea and find the bungalow. Which might be awkward if they were not a nice class of men.”

“It’s not a bit likely,” said Charlie. “Make yourself easy about that. They were not a nice class of men—some of them were the roughest of a fairly rough crew. But I don’t believe they’re alive now.”

I was not at all easy, however. By this time the day was going, and still we seemed to be wandering without end in a wild amphitheatre, encircled by the same black ramparts of cliff. We had failed to touch the place where we had stored our supply of provisions, and Oliver had never even mentioned it. And as I watched his face, my forebodings grew. It was quite unreasonable, of course, but there were many unreasonable facts on this wretched island!

But suddenly the thing was over. While I was considering, Oliver had mounted a rock; and now he gave a cry:

“The sea,” he cried. “Half an hour more!”

That tidings changed everything. It even seemed to chase away the weariness of our bruised and beaten limbs. “Cheerio!” said Charlie. “It’s not so bad after all.”

Oliver had come down, and was going on before. His brief survey had shown him a track. We followed him breathlessly, and presently the wilderness seemed to open out and the path to widen. A few paces more and the Secret Sea lay before us.

It was now twilight, and the far extremity was already deep in shadow. Even the bungalow was no more than a mere suggestion of a blotch of grey-white against the gloom. But I saw at once that we had come out of the Maze scarcely fifty yards from the point at which we had entered it. The hundred yards of scattered rocks and boulders, the ten yards of black, sandy beach, lay between, but Oliver was already halfway there; and it was when he was halfway there that he slipped on a smooth rock ledge and came down heavily. He got to his feet at once, but only to gasp with pain.

"Here's a go!" he said. "I believe I've ricked my foot."

"It's jolly good luck that you didn't do it earlier," I said. "Do you think you can walk at all?"

He tried a couple of steps, but they were made with increasing pain. Then he gave in.

"No," he said. "I'm awfully sorry, but it can't be done. I'm afraid you'll have to fetch the boat for me."

"Suppose you fire a shot," suggested Charlie. "Wouldn't Lewis hear it and bring the boat?"

It seemed a happy thought at first, but in the end I had to put it aside. "Won't do," I decided regretfully. "He's already gone to bed, most likely. If he did hear, he wouldn't realise it. He'd mix it up with some of his visions and things. Because it's fairly certain that he's forgotten all about us by this time."

Oliver agreed with me. "You two had better go together," he said. "I can just wait here—and expect you. Even if it gets very dark I can guide you by showing a light or calling out."

"That's very good rubbish," I answered scornfully. "Do you think we're going to leave you here alone? That's not in the programme. Charlie, in spite of his Australian apples, is knocked up and needs a rest. I'm the one for the bungalow and the boat, and you needn't have any doubt about it. Lewis will know me, whereas he wouldn't know Charlie."

The logic of the thing was unanswerable, and they could do nothing but give me their good wishes; so we piled our baggage and blankets on the gritty beach to make a comfortable couch for them, and then I relieved myself of all the impedimenta I could leave behind. It was at this point that I made a mistake which can only be excused on the ground of my utter weariness. I took from my pocket the revolver I had carried all along and threw it down on the rug at Charlie's side. Then I set off along the shore, facing as lightly as I could the almost intolerable task of the sliding grit and the thickly strewn boulders.

Three minutes after I had started Oliver noticed my revolver and opened his mouth to call me back. But he realised instantly how tired I must be and how such a check would harass me. So he never gave that call.

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT I HEARD AND SAW AT THE BUNGALOW

I have said before that the Secret Sea measured little more than a mile at its greatest length, so the distance I had to travel around by the shore was probably less than a mile and a half. The difficulty was, however, that it was now practically dark, while the course was a painful one even in the daytime. The strip of beach was of that black, gritty sand which slid under my feet and made my forward march a real struggle at every step; yet if I left the sand the case was worse, for I should have to pick my way through a belt of jagged rocks and boulders. There was nothing for it, therefore, but the beach, and I tried to be thankful that there was no danger of losing my way.

It is difficult to say exactly why I grew more and more nervous as I trudged on, but there is no denying the fact. Possibly it was because I was alone in the falling darkness and deathlike silence, with that mysterious sea lying in the shadows close beside me. Then there was Oliver's anxiety to get back, which I had read as a sign of uneasiness, and which I remembered now with very definite discomfort. All these things together so worked upon me that before I was within call of the bungalow I found myself glancing furtively on every side; and if anything queer had appeared suddenly, I should have given a terrific yell and fled.

Nothing did appear suddenly, and the only thing that appeared at all should have given me courage. It was a light, which became visible gradually—the light of a lamp in the bungalow, shining dimly through the window. At first, indeed, it cheered me, and I wondered whether I should give a call, to let old Lewis know that I was coming. Fearing that the noise might alarm him, I refrained, and a moment afterwards was again under the influence of my nervous trepidation. It was very absurd and unreasonable, but there it was.

Then things came upon me with a rush.

The sea was now deep in shadow, but there was the long outline of the beautiful *Plynlimmon* just as I had seen her last, still and dead, but majestic in her stillness. I paused to look, but could not distinguish anything. Then my eyes turned to the tiny landing-stage, where the little dinghy always lay. She was still there, fastened as securely as Lewis always fastened her since he had lost the two larger boats. I could just distinguish her outlines. . . . Then I stopped to look again, peering anxiously through the gathering gloom. Those outlines were not the outlines of the dinghy. Surely the boat that I could see just vaguely was a much larger thing!

It was fortunate that I stopped to peer—stopped that heavy crunching of my steps in the gritty sand, and my hard, uncontrolled breathing. For when I stopped the silence fell around me like a shroud; and in a moment, faint through that overwhelming stillness, I heard voices!

The shock was tremendous. Not for a moment did I imagine that what I heard was the voice of old Richard Lewis reading his evening psalm. There were two voices—I could distinguish the tones, though I was too far away to catch words. And when those sounds reached me it was danger that I thought of first, not safety—caution and suspicion, not eagerness and gladness. My fears were upon me again in full force.

At this time I was within fifty yards of the bungalow, and slightly below it; but after I had listened a moment I recovered my wits and moved into a safer position. I went quietly up from the beach to the more level ground above, so that I could approach the bungalow from the side, or even from the back if I chose. And after that I slipped off my shoes.

At this point my growing excitement did a good thing for me. It helped me to cast off for the time my nervous fear, and even brought me to a pitch of daring which would have seemed impossible ten minutes earlier. Living enemies were understandable things, less to be feared than the darkness and silence of this ghostly island. I was resolved to explore this real danger at any cost.

There were no windows at the back of the bungalow, so I could not hope to discover anything that way; but the light I had seen came from the window of the room in which Lewis had slept, keeping guard over his master's specimens. I crept like a cat to the corner of the little building, and stood there for a moment listening. Certainly there were two voices, in low, broken conversation. The bungalow door was open, and so, doubtless, was the door of the room from which the sounds came.

Moving stealthily, I got to the door itself and looked into the passage. Yes, the door of the room was half open, as I had supposed, but of course I could not see within. To see anything at all I must use the window. I slipped on to the window, stooping to conceal myself; then, standing a little back, I slowly rose upright and peered in.

The small table which belonged to this room was usually kept under the window. It was there that Lord Barmouth had arranged and examined his specimens after each day's gathering. The bed in which Lewis slept had always stood almost exactly in the middle of the room. Now the positions had been changed. I could not see the bed at all, so concluded that it must have been pushed under the window. The table stood where the bed had been before, or even a little farther out; and at the table sat the two men whose voices I could still hear. Lewis's oil lamp was on the table between them. It

carried a reading-shade, but still threw their faces into striking relief. Before them was a bottle of wine, with a couple of glasses and other table utensils. They had been taking food, but had concluded their meal and were now talking over the remainder of their wine.

Before I realised all this, I had recognised the men—yet not for a moment, for their heads were bare now, and I had never seen them bare before. The man on the right had very little hair, and that was almost white; the other had much, and it hung to his collar and over his forehead in an iron-grey mass. The one face was keen and grey and alert, the other was dark, sombre, and powerful, with eyes deeply set beneath heavy brows and hidden behind large, thick lenses. The one man was small and quick of movement, the other was large and strong and ponderous. Yes, I knew them quite well after that first pause to adjust my impressions. The one was Captain Stuart Jackson of the *Maud Muller*, and the other was his companion, the slow-tongued Professor of Geology.

I wonder still why at this discovery I did not rush in to greet them. It would have been a natural thing to do, seeing that their coming was the one thing that we had looked forward to. What prevented me—what saved me—was nothing more, I believe, than some sudden spirit of mischief, the result, partly, of relief at what I saw. I did not give a shout and rush pell-mell into the house. After the first shock I stood still, to realise what this news would mean for all of us. Then I moved silently to the door. I would not rush in all at once; I would wait until they reached some convenient point in their talk, some point which would give me an opening for a dramatic appearance. Then I would show myself.

The plan was easy of execution. The front door was wide open, and the door of the room in which they sat was ajar. I had but to slip into the passage and wait there unseen until my chance came. Well, I did all that, without difficulty and without a sound. I moved up the passage to within a yard of the inner door. There I could hear quite distinctly what the men were saying. From their door the lamp sent a shaft of light across the boarded passage just a yard from my feet; and beyond that shaft of light the passage ran on in the darkness to the back door of the little bungalow.

I did not begin at once to hear what the speakers were saying, because my attention was caught by something else. There was something on the floor, it seemed to me, in the darkness of the passage, just beyond that shaft of light—something huddled and untidy and formless. Of course I dared not cross the doorway to see what it was, but I peered at it curiously. It seemed to be a garment of some kind—possibly a cloak or a topcoat which one of the visitors might have thrown down there for want of a better place. But I had not entertained that suggestion for a few seconds before I abandoned it under a sudden sense of consternation. My eyes were growing more accustomed to the

shadows. On the boards at the nearer side of that formless heap there was something that seemed almost white in contrast with a dark, uneven patch in which it lay. The white thing was, or seemed to be, a human hand, tightly clenched . . . and the dark patch beneath it—what was that? Was it a stain of water?

I held my breath. I began to be very much afraid. I could not think—I did not know what to think. . . . So for a space of almost a minute, and then one clear thought came. . . . A human hand? If what I saw were really a human hand, that formless heap in the shadows could not be a cloak or coat. . . . It must be a man. . . .

Then horror began to steal over me, driving out the paler emotion of fear. A man? No man would choose such a place to lie down in . . . and that formless heap was without breath or stir. If a man at all, it was a dead man. And that stain—the stain in which the clenched hand seemed to be lying. Water?

And then in the silence—the silence of my own horror—a small but intense thing in that greater silence that was everywhere—I heard one sentence from within the room. It was the first clear sentence that I had caught, and it was spoken in the hard, metallic voice of Captain Jackson:

“But I don’t like blood!”

It was like an answer to my unspoken question, and though it was an awful answer, it did me good. It turned my thoughts from that silent, huddled heap in the shadows, it checked the flood of horror that was about to overwhelm me. It was like a sudden dash of cold water to a man who is fainting—and I made an effort to regain my self-control. Instantly I was alert, watchful, cunning. The key to the mystery in the passage was within the room—if I wanted it. And I wanted it!

The Captain’s words were answered by a laugh that was little more than a grunt. The answer irritated the little man, and he spoke up still more clearly. I moved a little, so that I could just see the speakers as they sat. The Captain had his back to me, and the Professor sat sideways at the table, not looking at his companion, but downwards at the floor near him.

“No,” said Captain Jackson defiantly, “I don’t like blood. And I think, sir, that you should have avoided that bit of business. There was no real need for it.”

The Professor did not look up even now, but he did answer in words.

“Don’t be a fool,” he said deliberately. “It was not a man—it was a mere ghost—a shadow. I have simply released him from prison. Besides, what could I do? As long as he lived we could not touch the prize. He had a pistol, as you know. All that he knew was that he was here on guard—but he did know that.”

It was plain, patient, convincing reasoning, every sentence like the blow of

a hammer. Captain Jackson did not answer for a moment, and when he did answer he had shifted his ground.

“All the same, it was a pity. If anyone came to know of it, the whole business would be spoilt.”

“Yes, it was a pity,” answered the deep, deliberate voice slowly. “But no one but ourselves will ever know of it. And it is as useless to discuss the impossible as it is to regret the irrevocable.”

The Captain seemed impressed by the passionless weight of the argument. He drank from his glass, and as he raised his arm to do so I saw that his revolver lay upon the table close to his hand, under the lamp. It was only then that I remembered that my own revolver was far away. Oh, what a heedless ass I had been! And after drinking he again changed the point of attack.

“I own that you’re never at a loss for an answer,” he said grudgingly. “And there’s always a big reason in what you say. . . . But one has to take accidents into account, you know . . . for accidents will happen.”

“Not in this case,” said the Professor. “Everything is arranged. And it is Fate. What else could have brought me to my goal to-day, when the secret is about to be lost for ever? No, we shall not fail now. It is arranged.”

“Yes, of course, as far as it can be. And I’m bound to say that as an arranger you take a lot of beating. But there’s that passage out through the cavern. I don’t like it a bit. And it would be a queer end if we landed with our cargo at the bottom of the sea. Yet that’s just the sort of accident that does happen, you know.”

Then the Professor raised his head and gave his companion a long, deliberate look through those thick lenses of his. “I leave the cavern to you,” he said. “It is your business. But I have no fear of that. We shall reach the ship.”

There was a pause. “And after that?” asked the Captain in a lower tone.

“And after that, home, to examine the prize—as I have already said. And, further, as I have already said, Jackson, a reward for you that will make you rich for life—if our prize does not prove a disappointment.”

Captain Jackson was again silenced—but only for a moment. And now I gathered—partly from his tone of voice, partly from the studied patience of his companion—that he was a little under the influence of the wine he had taken.

“And if it doesn’t prove a disappointment?” he asked persistently. “What then? It will be a big prize, won’t it? And where will it go? Will you hand it over to the dagoes who own this bit of rock, or will you hunt up the heirs of the poor fellow who first found the secret out, and share with them? Is it any use asking such a question as that?”

Once again that steady, piercing glance, though it was accompanied this time by a grim smile. And the Professor replied without a sign of emotion—

“It is not much use, Jackson, unless I choose to answer. My advice would be against questions. In your place I should earn my reward and resolve to enjoy it afterwards—without troubling about other people’s business; and the rest of this affair is other people’s business.”

Captain Jackson gave a slight laugh. He was not annoyed—indeed, it was easy to see that he was presuming upon the patience of his powerful confederate, feeling, perhaps, that he was in a position of advantage. And now he went a little further, as a small man will do when he feels that he may.

“That’s straight talk,” he said, “and I like it. Yes, I like it. All the same, you won’t mind my making a guess. You’re not going to report this matter to the Brazilians, nor to Uncle Sam, either. If you’ve got no other plans, laid long ago, I’ll swallow my ship, funnels and all; and I guess there’s a war-chest somewhere in Europe that will be all the heavier for your visit to this old rock. Mind, I’m not inquisitive—not a bit of it. But tell me now, am I on the right track?”

For a moment the Professor seemed to consider, his great head bowed, his shoulders humped, his arm resting idly on the table. Then, slowly, he rose, until his powerful form towered over table and Captain like some great, sinister shadow. And this time, when he spoke, I noticed a change in his accent. Before, he had spoken the most perfect plain English—the English of an educated man. But now there was a new note in his speech and in his manner. The speech had a foreign accent, the manner had a new touch of unscrupulous, pitiless power.

“If you’re on that track, Captain Jackson,” he said, “it will be well for you to get off it. You may meet something on the line—something that will go over you before you know what is happening. That something, sir, has little mercy for things that stand in the way. Let me beg of you, Jackson, to take your reward and be silent. *You must not stand in the way!*”

Captain Jackson came to his senses. In his grumbling reply he showed a subdued temper, to say the least of it.

“Oh, all right,” he said. “No offence meant. After all, it’s your affair, not mine. But are we going to stay here all night with that ghost, as you call it, or that ghost of a ghost, lying in the passage there?”

“Why not? It doesn’t trouble me,” said Delling. “But if you don’t like it, throw it into the water.”

“No, sir, not I. I tell you I don’t like blood. I shall be much obliged if you will do it yourself. It ought to be done.”

The Professor gave a grunt of contempt as he turned. In the stir of his movement I stealthily retreated from my post and reached the door of the bungalow. A moment later I was peering from behind a great boulder that stood back in the shadows ten yards away.

From that point of vantage I saw, a minute afterwards, a tall, powerful figure issue from the doorway, heavily laden with some shapeless burden which it was impossible to distinguish but impossible to mistake. Immediately I heard a dull, sullen splash from the little landing stage. Then the man returned, went into the bungalow, and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER XV

THE END OF THE "PLYNLIMMON"

Ralph Oliver and Charlie had grown a little anxious about me. I had been gone nearly two hours, though we had calculated that I could reach the bungalow and return in the boat in about half that time. Expecting me in the boat, they gave all their attention to the sea, and after a long, long silence they thought they heard some sound from the other end of the stretch, of water. Undoubtedly, what they did hear was the splash of poor Richard Lewis's burial.

Their wait after that was tense with expectation and confidence. They felt sure that I was on the way; and so I was, but not at all as they supposed; and it was nearly an hour before I stumbled upon them at last along the beach, incoherent, breathless, exhausted—almost dead, indeed, from fatigue, but almost mad from rage and fear. Perhaps you can imagine their amazement when I gasped out my wild story.

"The bungalow—robbers—murderers! They've killed poor Lewis—and thrown him into the sea!"

They thought me crazy at first—partly because I looked it; and it was only when Oliver got a grip of me and shook me that I began to see the need of self-control and a rational story. So I waited until I had recovered my breath, a process which Charlie assisted by a small dose from a spirit flask; and then, kneeling there on the blankets in the dark, I told my tale again at much greater length but with no lessening of its sensationalism.

I could see their faces, grey in the darkness, but it was difficult to see their expressions. Nevertheless, their attitude told me enough, it was so tense, so strained. When the story was told there was a flood of questions, which I answered as well as I could; then they settled down to it and accepted it, and in a way discussed it, but only in a way. And it was easy to see that while Ralph Oliver was shocked and distressed by the fate that had befallen poor old Lewis, he had other emotions which we did not share. He did not wax indignant and talk of an immediate and thorough vengeance. His thoughts went further and deeper than that.

"It's useless to talk of an attack," he said at last, in his definite way. "For one thing, I'm no good for a forced march with this foot of mine; and for another thing, it wouldn't be war."

"We have two revolvers," I protested feebly.

"So have they, Frank, if not more; and they know better how to use them.

Why, if you went anywhere near they could pot you through the windows. And they would, too.”

“But poor old Lewis?”

“Yes, poor old Lewis. It is a wicked murder, and it shall be paid for if there is a God in heaven. But we mustn’t throw other lives after his. We must play a longer game than that. Those men are master players, unless I’m mistaken!”

Then Charlie broke in: “Especially the Professor,” he said suddenly.

Ralph nodded. Then I became a little impressed, and ceased to clamour. We were in touch with big things. It was plain in our leader’s face.

“What shall we do, then?” I asked dubiously.

“We must get back from the beach,” said Ralph, “otherwise they will see us when light comes—and if they once see us they must destroy us. . . . One murder, you see, makes others necessary. . . . We must find a shelter among the rocks behind, and in the morning see what happens. Then we shall know what to do for the best.”

It was plain, sound sense, every word—no heroics, but plain, sound sense; but though it was plain, sound sense and no heroics, it was also a declaration of war by a man who would not be easily beaten. When I saw this I gave in, as I always did, to the wiser and cooler mind.

So we moved at once, in a nightmare kind of way and with considerable difficulty, to a safer place, just a little way back among the rocks through which we had come. We dared not show a light, of course, and practically had to feel our way to a sheltered corner between two great boulders, where we could again spread our blankets in some kind of comfort. Once settled, we had a little medical work to do, for Ralph’s foot was painful, and it was necessary to prevent it from becoming more so. We did this, under his direction, by making and applying a succession of cold water compresses, these being strips of cloth soaked in a pool of rain-water and bound tightly around the foot. It was only by this means, he assured us afterwards, that he was saved from becoming a helpless cripple for days.

This task kept us employed, and perhaps that was just as well since it was so difficult to sleep. But we were interested as well as employed, for while we worked and waited we also talked, and Ralph showed us where his thoughts were moving.

“They will go in the morning,” he said. “Most likely they are only waiting for the tide. They wouldn’t venture the cavern in the dark, anyway. The boat you saw, Frank, must have been their little steam launch. They had one on their ship, if you remember.”

“Yes,” I said. “I saw it.”

“And when they are gone we can go to the bungalow at our leisure. It isn’t at all likely that they’ll come back—from what you heard them say. They’ve

got what they wanted, and they'll be anxious to get away."

"But what was it that they wanted?" I cried eagerly. "What was the prize—the discovery—that Delling was talking about?"

Ralph was silent a moment. "Well," he said at last, very deliberately, "I have an idea about that, but I don't want to mention it until I get more evidence. They didn't seem quite certain themselves, if you remember—they talked about the possibility of being disappointed. But when I've had a chance of looking round the bungalow again I'll be able to tell you for certain."

There was an idea in my mind, too—and perhaps something more definite than an idea; but seeing that he put it in that way, I decided to keep the matter to myself for the present. Only Charlie carried it a step farther.

"It must be something good, in their opinion," he said, "or they would not do a murder for it."

Ralph assented. "Yes. But at the same time you must remember that a man like Delling may not think of a human life in the same way as we do. Men of science have their own standards, which would often shock other people. But I'm not at all sure that he is what Jackson said he was. He doesn't quite fit into the picture of a Professor at Rio University. From what you heard, Frank, I should say that our Professor is a different bird altogether. But the disguise was useful enough."

"But he got into danger when he killed poor old Lewis," I said. "If it were ever discovered he could be arrested and punished, whatever he is. Where would his plans be then?"

"Yes," agreed Oliver. "And yet he felt very safe—when he did it. The only witness was the Captain—they did not dream of anyone else being near—and the Captain, you may be sure, is ready to swear anything. They may claim that it was an accident, or, at the worst, that a shot was fired in self-defence. Lewis, you know, had a revolver, and would have died to defend his master's property. Undoubtedly he did die in that way. For the prosecution, Frank, there would be only your report of a conversation overheard. See?"

I saw and understood. The case was not so clear as I had supposed. Presently, however, I touched upon another remark in that overheard conversation.

"About the discovery," I said. "What do you think he meant by saying that in another week it would have been too late—too late for ever?"

"Ah! that I cannot say. I have been thinking it over, but can't get a clue. Perhaps it will turn up later."

So we talked and reasoned, going round and round the subject again and again until we could no longer hold out against the claims of nature. Charlie was the first to fall asleep, and when we saw his head drop on to the blanket we ceased to talk so that he might sleep undisturbed. Then Ralph, his foot a

little easier now, also began to nod, and I smiled to see him succumb so soon. I did not intend to give way at all if I could help it . . . but it would not matter if I did. I should be certain to wake early enough in the morning.

That, of course, was the beginning of the end for me, and in about five minutes, probably, I was as safe within the land of Nod as the other two. Just as I was over the borders I seemed to hear something, as I remembered next morning, but I did not hear it with sufficient certainty to be roused by it. It was some sound from the Secret Sea, some loud lapping of the water on the gritty beach; but it was not a disturbing sound, and no doubt my drowsy mind succeeded in fitting it neatly into the mosaic of slumberland. Anyway, I heard that noise without really hearing it and without being disturbed. Then I slept long and soundly.

When I woke at last it was because something had touched me—that something being Ralph Oliver’s hand. Afterwards he said that he had difficulty in rousing me, but it seemed to me that I was broad awake at the first touch. And I discovered that the day was broad awake, too. Ralph, lying flat on his stomach, was peering out between the boulders, watching something on the other side.

“Don’t make a noise,” he said. “And don’t show a finger on any account. You must see without being seen.”

I was fully alert now. Smiling a little to see that Charlie was still asleep, I threw myself down and crawled to the other end of the great boulder which had sheltered us. There, in a moment or two, I found a convenient peeping place which gave me a full view of the Secret Sea right away to the mouth of the great cavern which was its only outlet.

It lay evil and murky in the grey morning, but I was accustomed to that appearance, and did not give it a thought. Naturally, all my eyes were for the living things in that still picture, and until they had gone I had no attention to give to anything else. And these were the things I saw: first, the bungalow on the beach, with a thin column of smoke rising from it; next, a boat putting off from the little landing-stage and making straight for the mouth of the cavern. There were two men in the boat, one big and the other small, and they had no need of either sail or oars. In the water near them floated several objects which I could not make out, and which they did not seem to notice at all. They had their faces to the cavern, and never once looked back. Indeed, in two minutes from my first look the boat had vanished into the cavern mouth, riding smoothly and surely on the face of the full tide.

Then there was only the bungalow with its thickening column of smoke, and the grim, shadowed sea, with those indistinctly visible floating objects. Only——

Then I saw that there was something wrong with the picture, something

unfamiliar. I stared, blinked, stared again. What was missing from it? And with a rush and a shock the truth came home to me just two seconds before Ralph Oliver told it in four hoarse, astonished words:

“*The Plynlimmon is gone!*”

Yes. That was the thing that was wrong with the picture. The beautiful ship had vanished. It was almost incredible—indeed, it was quite incredible at first—but we could not long doubt our own eyes. The *Plynlimmon* was no longer at her moorings in the Secret Sea. She had utterly vanished.

“They must have taken her out,” I cried, wildly and foolishly. At that cry Charlie woke and sat up. But we did not heed him, for at the same moment Oliver turned a pale face to answer me.

“Impossible,” he said. “She has been sunk. They’ve scuttled her!”

He was beside me now, and all three of us were gazing out together. Ralph, however, was fast settling down to a clear view of this new feature of the case.

“She was there last night,” he went on. “We all saw her. But we did not see her closely enough to notice that she was going down. The Captain would know how to do the trick, and she filled gradually and sank in the night.”

“I heard something,” I broke in. “Some indistinct noise first, and then the lapping of quite big waves, it seemed to be. But I was already half asleep then.”

“That noise was the sinking of the *Plynlimmon!*”

Charlie and I gazed at each other blankly. But things were moving rapidly with us now, and there was little time for stupefaction. Suddenly Ralph gave a cry:

“They’ve fired the bungalow, too!”

It did not take a moment to realise it. That thickening column of smoke was not the sign of an ordinary fire in old Lewis’s cooking stove. Indeed, it did not rise from the chimney at all, as we saw now. It issued from the windows of the little house, and hung around the corners of the building uncertainly before it gathered into a column above. Ralph gave a groan.

“And I can’t run,” he said. “Look here, you’ll have to do it yourselves. Take the revolvers and start. If those villains come back, shoot them on sight—but try to save the bungalow. Smother the fire with the rugs and things. Get the tins of oil out of the way, anyhow, and save all the provisions you can move. They may be life and death to us. Be careful—but do your level best. I’ll follow as fast as I can.”

We did not need a second order, nor did we pause to say good-bye. But as we darted off we heard him mutter once more:

“The devils!”

CHAPTER XVI

OUR SOLEMN LEAGUE AND COVENANT

“I’ll give you ten yards,” gasped Charlie, “and beat you by twenty.”

We ran a hundred yards before I returned an answer. Then it was something rude, whereat Charlie gave his inevitable grin and increased his lead.

He was rather more than twenty yards ahead when we reached the bungalow, but neither of us mentioned the fact. I had done the journey twice on the previous night, but the need for haste was greater now. I might almost say that we never paused to take breath, but nerved ourselves to keep pounding on till the goal was reached; and when we reached it there was no time for anything but work.

The bungalow was not in a blaze—that we saw long before we reached it. Smoke was coming quite thickly through the farther window, that of the room in which the men had sat last night over their wine, and there was also a thin stream issuing from the window of the other room and from the open door; but there was no fire visible. When I came up Charlie was already inside the passage, trying to distinguish things in a room which was full of smoke. He had just succeeded in coming to a conclusion, and I think we both saw at the same instant that curling, licking flame which was the real danger. It was struggling among a heap of something on the floor—something which we afterwards discovered to be torn-up papers and books and bedclothes liberally spattered with oil.

We dealt with that flame, smothering it tinder the rug from the next room and giving it our undivided attention till it was done for. Then we scattered the smouldering papers, threw the oiled bedclothes outside, and gradually cleared the place of smoke. After that we had time to take breath.

“Another ten minutes,” said Charlie, “and it would have been too late. It was just taking hold. They made the mistake of lighting their fire with too much paper.”

“They didn’t know we were going to interfere,” I answered grimly. “It would have been a very good fire if we hadn’t turned up. . . . Hullo—look at that!”

“That” was something which neither of us had noticed before, because it was exactly under the little table. It was a very curious something, being neither more nor less than a hole in the boarding of the floor—a very neat, square hole, cut in two of the boards and previously concealed by a rug.

“It looks like a hole,” said Charlie solemnly. “Very much like a hole. See, there’s the piece of board that fits it.”

The board was standing against the wall of the room. I went over and moved the table to look down. But if I had entertained for a moment—as I had—some unnameable fear, it was quite unnecessary. The hole was simply empty.

“Old Lewis’s bed used to stand there,” I said. “And there was the rug as well. I expect the bed was put there purposely. It always seemed to me queer to have the bed stuck there, right in the middle of the room.”

“H’m,” said Charlie dryly. “That was what the robbers thought, no doubt. So they began to investigate, and old Lewis proved a bit of a nuisance—and died! But what on earth could have been hidden there?”

What, indeed? I could not tell for certain, and my hazy ideas might prove absurdly wide of the mark.

“We’d better go and meet Oliver,” I said evasively. “He’ll want help. And when he comes he’ll find the key to all this in less than no time.”

So we went to meet Oliver, whom we found toiling along the beach half a mile off; and by the time we had told him all about the fire he was almost on the threshold of the bungalow itself. Once inside, he took a chair and surveyed the scene with mingled approval, dismay, and bewilderment.

“My word!” he said. “They really did mean to make an end of things. They killed the man, scuttled the ship, and tried to destroy the records by burning the house. That’s what I call thorough.”

It was the bitterness of the tone that caught my attention—a bitterness quite unlike Ralph Oliver; but as soon as he had spoken I noticed his look, and it was a grey, drawn look that has haunted me ever since—with its helpless anger and despair and fierce indignation terribly mingled.

“It would have been,” said Charlie, “if you hadn’t sent us along so smartly. But we’ve done them down this time.”

Ralph gave a crooked little smile. “Anyhow,” he said, “we can see what they have left for us. They have tried to burn a lot of books. . . . I think I’ll tidy up a bit, Frank, while you get breakfast out. What do you say?”

Charlie and I said “Yes” with unanimity, and I led my chum out to the kitchen to show him round and to commandeer his help. It was a much more interesting task than collecting the scorched fragments of a number of books. Indeed, we were quite pleasantly employed in the kitchen, despite the tragic shadow that came now and again to haunt us, and we thought no more about Oliver till we were ready to call him.

I went to fetch him, and found him sitting in the chair at the little table. Before him were the torn sheets of some kind of manuscript book, but he had finished his work upon them and was staring intently through the window. And

his face still wore that drawn look which I had noticed before.

“Breakfast is served, sir,” I said, with mock humility.

“Thanks, my lad. It is welcome news.”

He limped across to the other room, leaning on my shoulder. It seemed to me that our leader had suddenly become old and worn, and for a moment even Charlie’s high spirits were a little damped. But then Oliver pulled himself together and made an effort to take his old place.

“I fairly hugged myself,” said Charlie, “when I saw this little house. I could almost have fancied myself in Benfleet, old chap, where they have some little shanties just like this. And the very thought of home warmed my heart till it burned.”

That one word, home, set all my fancies racing. Instantly I was hot on ways and means, only to come to a dead stop with a startled question:

“Why, where’s the dinghy?”

Ralph, however, had done this bit of thinking before me. “It’s gone,” he said. “Probably sunk.”

“Sunk!” I stared at him. “But we’re quite helpless without it,” I protested. “We can’t get out of the hole at all.”

“No,” said Ralph calmly. “We can’t—at present.”

It was not the calmness of despair, though it sounded a bit like it. Indeed, he was already recovering after the shock he had suffered in a splendid silence. “Not that way, I mean,” he said. “We’ll have to discuss another way, that’s all. . . . A little more meat, please, Frank. This is the business of the moment.”

So that shock passed into acceptance, as so many others had done, and we proceeded with our breakfast. But as we proceeded I reflected that Ralph must have gone into the question of breakfasts, too, during his half hour in the other room. Knowing Lewis’s methods he probably knew pretty well how many breakfasts we should find in the old man’s stock of provisions. For the ship and all her stores had disappeared.

At the end of the meal he made certain by a quick but thorough survey of the larder. Then he told us all his mind, taking us into his confidence in that quiet, businesslike, but heartening way that was so entirely characteristic of him. Really, there was no sensationalism in his telling of one of the most sensational stories ever told by man.

“The position is just this,” he said. “We are possessors of provisions to last us a couple of weeks—with care. After that—inevitable starvation if we stay here. Before, our hope was in the *Maud Muller*, but now that hope has vanished. Having discovered the Secret Sea and its secret, the robbers will go as soon as they can. There is no hope that way.

“As to the secret itself,” he went on, seeing that we had nothing to propose, “it has been here, and it has been stolen. Without a doubt, there was some kind

of treasure on this hideous rock, and twenty years ago the Earl of Barmouth discovered it and secured it. He hid it in that hole in the floor—and then he lost his life in the way you know of. Later, another searcher gets on the track and reaches the same goal. To him all the Earl's precautions and all poor Lewis's simple devices would be so much child's play. After reading Captain Powell's statement in the logbook, he probably knew what he should look for, and found it—the hole in the floor. In that hole he found the Earl's private journal, which I have just been reading, as well as the spoil. Having secured the spoil, he destroyed the journal, as he thought, covered all his traces, and made off; and even if he had known of our existence he could not have secured himself more effectually against pursuit than he has done."

Charlie and I stared mutely at each other. Then I put a question:

"But what was the treasure—and what was it worth?"

"What it really was," said Ralph slowly, "is nowhere stated in so many words. The thing is not mentioned once. But I have discovered what its value was—in the Earl's estimation. He believed that he had found a treasure worth at least two hundred million pounds!"

There was a dead silence.

"And that," added Oliver, "naturally explains some of the remarks which Frank overheard last night. I am inclined to say that Delling was put on the track of this treasure by some Continental syndicate or perhaps a Government. They had got hold of some old story about a treasure island, and thought it worthy of investigation; and a few years of a man's life would be nothing to them. They will be justified by the result—if he ever reaches home."

The thing was almost too stupendous for discussion. Two hundred millions! I had a sudden vision of fleets of great battleships, of squadron after squadron of cavalry, column after column of infantry, long, lumbering trains of guns and ammunition waggons. Two hundred millions——

"And the money belongs to England," I cried. "It was an Englishman that found it first."

"I am afraid it would be a case of disputed ownership," said Oliver. "This rock belongs nominally to Brazil, though she has never used it. But neither Brazil nor England would be strong enough to recover the prize if it once reached Europe. That's very certain. If you wait a minute or two, however, I will read you what the Earl himself thought on that question."

He left us at the table, but in a few moments returned with some of the papers he had been examining. "That they did not more effectually destroy the Earl's papers," he said, "is an amazing thing in a way, but it is easily explained after all. They felt so secure—they never dreamed that anyone else would be here to put out that fire. It would have been so easy to put a match to these few sheets at any rate, and so make it an absolute certainty that no one would ever

read them. I suppose that even the most clever and careful rogue makes a slip sometimes. When a man *feels* certain he doesn't *make* certain. However, here they are, for our benefit; and the sheet I am going to read is the last of all. In a way it is the Earl's last will and testament, and it shows him to have been not only the very fine British nobleman poor old Lewis described, but also a wise, far-sighted man of affairs. At least that is my opinion, though there are many very eminent people who would not give two pins for Lord Barmouth's view of things."

The sheet he referred to had been torn into four pieces, and he arranged them carefully before he began to read, with one more word of introduction. "This," he said, "is almost all that I can read of the Earl's journal, for he recorded his discoveries in a cipher of his own—probably in case one of the crew might get a glimpse of the book; but he wrote this in plain English, in view of the bare possibility that some accident might happen to him on that fateful expedition of his. Listen:

"My view of the value of this treasure may be an exaggerated one, but I do not think it is. I am sufficient of a geologist, and have also had sufficient experience, to be fairly sure of my ground. Therefore, as a man can never be certain of the future, I write here my wishes as to the disposal of the treasure should it fall into the hands of my heirs.

"The island belongs to the United States of Brazil, and the Government of that country would certainly have ground for a claim upon treasure of this kind. Whatever division may be made, however, I take it that a large proportion would be regarded as finder's property; and I wish to state as clearly as possible that I do not wish my estate to benefit by it. God has blessed us with wealth enough for all our needs. Rather would I wish my heirs to turn this treasure, whether great or small, to national uses.

"My views on a certain matter are well known in political circles, and have often been the subject of ridicule by those whose generosity of heart leads them to believe and hope the best. I do not blame them—indeed, I envy them, for my own convictions have been a cloud over me for a long time. For I do believe with all my heart that modern civilisation stands in very great danger. The world is drifting towards a catastrophe whose magnitude cannot be measured. . . . I believe in Britain, and I believe that she will survive the struggle, to lead the nations to a new world order in which war shall have no place. But her need will be great and urgent, and in that day of need a treasure such as this may actually mean the saving of

Britain and the world. My desire is that it should be set aside as the nucleus of a great Fund to which all men of goodwill in every land should be asked to contribute for the benefit of all.

“I am aware, of course, that great care and judgment will have to be used in the handling of the treasure, otherwise the market will be flooded and the whole become valueless. I can safely leave that matter to the experts.

“I write and sign this with the prayer that my fears may never be realised.’”

“That was the Earl of Barmouth,” said Oliver. “The man whom poor old Lewis worshipped. What do you think of him?”

“Lewis was right,” I said. “He was a brick.”

“He was that,” agreed Charlie. “But he was something of a prophet, too. He saw the Great War coming.”

Oliver gathered up the papers and folded them carefully together. “These may be important later,” he said, “because I have made up my mind. I’m going to escape from this prison, or die in the attempt; and if I escape I’ll spend every ounce of my strength if necessary—and I believe it will be necessary—to recover the treasure and bring those ruffians to justice.”

The drawn, worn look was gone now, the voice had the old ring of strength and courage, the blue eyes were resolute. The words, the look, stirred me.

“And we’re with you,” I cried.

“Aye,” said Charlie grimly, “through fire and water.”

We shook hands all round. In a way it was a Solemn League and Covenant, though none of us could have said exactly what he felt. Then Oliver rose.

“And now,” he said, “for the means. An hour ago it seemed almost hopeless, but now I have a better idea of it. Come.”

Full of eagerness, we followed as he led us out of the little bungalow and around to the back. There, a little way from the building, was a wide, flat pile covered with a tarpaulin. I knew well what it was, but Charlie hadn’t noticed it before. Now he examined it with wondering eyes.

“Why, it’s a small timber yard,” he said.

“Yes,” replied Oliver. “It is the remains of the timber which the Earl brought from Monte Video to build this place. It has lain there for twenty years, and, being well protected, is almost as good as ever. Indeed, it is better, for it is well seasoned. Now, what are we to do with it?”

“Build a boat!” I cried in thoughtless haste.

“No,” said Oliver. “That would take weeks. We have nothing but hours and days to give.”

“A raft!” shouted Charlie.

“A raft,” said Oliver. “That’s it. And I can tell you now what its name shall be.”

We waited for it.

“We’ll call it the *Good Hope*,” he said.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BUILDING OF THE "GOOD HOPE"

Hope. What a difference it made to us that morning! Not for a moment could we forget what had occurred, not for a moment lose the consciousness of the tragedy that rested beside us and the black cruelty that had brought it about. There was the peril, too, that was inseparable from our new plan, and there were the doubts and difficulties that hung over it. But we were young, and once we saw a way we refused to listen to suggestions of difficulty; and as for peril, was the open sea any more perilous to us than this unfortunate rock? For the rest, I began to entertain a vague idea that we were now on the way to avenge the wrong that had been done. We were enjoying some sort of reaction from despair.

We saw it all as soon as Ralph had spoken. Indeed, we could scarcely keep Charlie from beginning at once, before the conference was over. For it was just here that his training became a thing of first-rate importance.

"Everything is clear," he said eagerly; "and I've always had ideas of my own about a raft. There isn't any very stout stuff here, such as I'd have liked for the main framework, but we can easily make it do by nailing two or three lengths together. We'll have a mast and sail, and a neat rail all round, and, if necessary, a bit of an outrigger fixing, to keep her steady."

"Rather," I said. "You might have a set of bookshelves, too, in one corner, and a grand piano in another, and a wireless station in another. I can't see why we shouldn't have all the modern improvements!" And with that I escaped into the bungalow, only to pause at the door to call him in to his domestic duties. There were several little things to do before we could start on the big enterprise. There generally are. And while we did them, Ralph Oliver carried out in perfect quiet a little task which he saw to be necessary. He rescued from the sea three good-sized cork fenders which had floated loose from the *Plynlimmon* when she went down and had been bobbing idly in the vicinity ever since. He tied them up to the landing-stage for use later on; and very useful they proved, as you shall see.

When breakfast was over there was no reason for delay, so we began the big task almost at once. Indeed, Ralph seemed anxious to make haste, and no one wanted to stop him.

"There was once a man," said Charlie, all on fire with eagerness, "who built a boat all by himself on a desert island (wasn't it Robinson Crusoe?). It was a big boat—and when it was finished it was so heavy that he couldn't drag

it down to the water. We're going to build our craft on the landing-stage down there—that is, the foundations of it. The rest will be built on the water itself. Eh, Mr. Oliver?"

This was passed by common consent, and he sat down for ten minutes with a paper and a pencil. The result was a sketch which we examined with the deepest interest.

"Why!" I cried, "that's a sort of catamaran."

"Yes, old chap. We want a craft that will sail a bit, and we've got the tools, the timber, and the time. You just wait and see—that's all!"

Oliver simply smiled and let him go ahead. Then came the preliminaries, in which we worked together—the hauling of poor old Lewis's cherished tools and the material down to the little landing-stage. It was mostly light stuff, as Charlie had said, but we added to it the platform of the small verandah in front of the bungalow, built of heavier timber and more than sufficient in itself to float a couple of men. Then work began in earnest, and soon the cliffs echoed with the buzz of saws. So even on that first morning the building of the ship made rapid progress, and it seemed to me that the skies of our prospect brightened visibly with every moment that passed.

I have often thought that I should like to write a poem on this subject. Somehow prose seems far too plain and clumsy to give the real spirit of the thing. The story needs music, as it were—music composed of the busy hum of the saw, the neat tap of the hammer—but music that would include also the brisk movements of my old chum, now so clearly in his element, the light of his eyes, the confidence of his smile, and the clear ring of his voice. The poem would have a glorious swing in it, like the marching of a regiment or the motion of a great ship under canvas in a romping sea; it would have the note of hope and youth and triumph. Of course I shall never write it, for the rhymes will not present themselves, but I find them singing in my heart whenever I think of that first busy morning. I hear the hammer still, and the hum of the saw, and the voice of my friend, and they are full of the music that cannot be translated into words; and through it all goes Ralph Oliver, much more quiet and subdued, but thinking hard all the time, and now and again finding, and leading that buoyant spirit to, the best means and the quickest way. Yes, Ralph's quiet headship of our party was really a beautiful thing in those busy hours of shipbuilding.

To me, being neither a captain born nor a carpenter made, fell the simple duty of obedience on the job, varied by domestic duties at the bungalow in connection with the meals for all the workers. So at certain stated times I would down tools quietly and slip away, Charlie not discovering my departure until one of his remarks had failed to get an answer. Then he would pause and look up to find me grinning at him from the window of the bungalow;

whereupon, of course, he would shake his head with some fiercely scornful remark about "slackers" or "Weary Willies." It was all in the day's work, and it was very good.

Charlie's idea of a raft, or, rather, a catamaran, as slightly modified and improved under suggestion from Ralph Oliver's experience, took the form of a platform built upon two great beams. It was almost of the shape of a sleigh, the beams acting as the runners, and each being formed of the longest timbers we had, some sixteen feet in length. There was nothing strong enough of itself, however, to serve his purpose, so he made his runners of four lengths nailed firmly together, edge to edge, nailing up each end and joint to secure watertight perfection as nearly as he possibly could. To one end of each of these hollow beams Charlie fixed a cutwater by nailing on two pieces of board in the form of a Λ . Otherwise, of course, our prospect of sailing two hundred miles in any kind of sea would have been small indeed.

It was my allotted duty to complete the construction of these runners by going over them again very carefully, closing every crevice by means of which the water might enter, and filling the joints with a thick mixture of oil and paint. Three strong double boards, also sixteen feet long, were then clamped down upon the "runners," one at each end and one in the middle, and these formed the first platform for the flooring of the raft. But there were two of these platforms, so that our deck should swim well clear of the surface of the sea.

It was not nearly as easy as it sounds. For one thing, it was difficult to make the runners waterproof, an important consideration upon which the buoyancy and, therefore, the comfort of our craft would to some extent depend. Then these, when made, were amazingly unwieldy, and gave better promise of stability than they did of convenience or of sailing capacity. There were numerous other hindrances and disappointments of a minor character, chiefly in connection with the lack of suitable tools and appliances, which put a considerable tax upon our patience and confidence, so that altogether our shipbuilding was anything but a walk-over; and when the second night fell, it fell upon three anxious workmen whose energies were totally exhausted and who ached in every limb. Yes—but that second night also showed two great "runners" crowned with the three double boards which were to support our deck. Our ship was afloat—the worst was over!

"Oh, well," sighed Charlie. "It is not so bad after all. One more day ought to finish it easily. The rest of the work can now be done 'on board.'"

"Yes," agreed Ralph Oliver cordially. "And the rest of the work is altogether the lighter part. You've made splendid progress, old chap. I really don't know what we should have done without you."

"We have made splendid progress," corrected my chum, delighted at the

praise, but blushing furiously. "When shall we get to sea, Captain, at this rate?"

"As soon as ever we can," said Ralph, quietly but emphatically.

There was something in his tone that caught my attention, and I noticed now that that anxious look was again upon his brows. I thought I knew the reason.

"You're thinking of the food supply?" I asked.

"Only partly. It's just possible that other matters may prove more urgent. To-night, let us work on as long as we can, and when we've stopped we can talk things right through. I feel that there's really no time for talking just now."

When Oliver looked at things in that serious fashion there was only one thing to do, and we did it. Though we were all dead tired, we simply pushed forward the work. We had still plenty of candles in the stores, and we were able to continue working, with difficulty, under artificial light outside. For my part, too, I did all that I could within, collecting the stores that we should take with us and packing them up in the most convenient style, and also doing my best to sew together, strongly if not scientifically, a couple of our best blankets, in order to make a sail. For we were bound to have a sail, or we could not hope to cover the two hundred odd miles which lay between us and the track of vessels crossing the South Atlantic. And while I did this I groaned many times at the thought of the sunken *Plynlimmon* and her well-filled store-rooms.

I was still busy with this job when I heard Ralph calling, and went out to see what he wanted. It was now about ten o'clock, and a very dark evening. The day had been close and heavy, with an entire absence of yesterday's sunshine. The moon had not yet risen, and even the brilliant southern stars were blotted out by some veil of mist that had come between. But when I went down to the beach I saw at once that something unusual had happened, some change that was not merely a change of weather. First, I saw a faint reflection of some kind of light upon the surface of the Secret Sea, some faint, pale, and ghostly light, not unlike a misty moonlight. In the next moment I discovered that this effect was not on the water alone, but everywhere else as well. It lay right along the beach and rested on the face of the opposite cliffs; and it was visible on the faces of my friends as they stood waiting for me. They were gazing skywards, at something that had attracted their attention.

"Look!" said Charlie in a low tone.

I turned to look where he was looking; and there, beyond and above the rocky wall, the sky had a strange glare, now faint, now full, brightening and fading like the glow from a distant furnace.

"There's a ship on fire," said Charlie, "over there beyond the island; and that's the reflection of the flames. Perhaps it's the *Maud Muller*."

For an instant I thought it might be possible. Then I struck the truth, even without looking into Ralph Oliver's eyes; but it was he that put the truth into words.

"It's not a ship. If that's a fire, it's the fire of a volcano. Over there, on the other side of the island, this old volcano is opening a new crater."

"What!" said Charlie. "Do you really mean it?"

"Very much."

"But have you heard anything—or felt anything?" I asked.

"Yes," replied Ralph, without hesitation. "While I was listening just now I seemed to hear a noise like a cannon shot, a long, long way off; and it actually made the earth tremble. That was what made me look up first; and as soon as I looked up I saw the light. But it must have come quite suddenly. I am positive it wasn't there ten minutes ago."

I recalled the thought which had come to me yesterday morning at the mouth of the Cave of Dead Men. I had noticed certain tremors of the earth, and had put them down to the force with which the Atlantic waves dashed themselves against the rocks. What if they had been due to quite another cause? And Ralph Oliver went on:

"So," he said, "this explains much—the warmth of the water in the Secret Sea, Frank, and the bubbles you saw, and the queer story of the lookout man on the *John Duncan*. How blind I was! Plainly, there is a revival of the subterranean disturbances—probably an outbreak of lava and gases in this old crater, and a new crater opening elsewhere. The gas in the cavern, too—that was another sign. And now we know what Delling meant when he said that in another week it would have been too late to get the treasure from the island. He knew that this was coming."

I cried aghast, "Have we so little time as that?"

"Who can be positive? It may be that nothing will really happen after all. But I think it would be wiser to go by the Professor's time-table, and get away as soon as we possibly can. We'll take a good meal and an hour's rest, and then we'll get to work again."

There was nothing to say to that. During the last few minutes the situation had again changed for the worse, and a new terror had been added to the list. There was just a faint quiver even in Charlie's voice as he made his inevitable joke.

"Well, I never thought it would come to this. Say, old man, it seems that the island is getting too hot to hold us."

"Too hot," I said. "Yes, that's the right word for it. You said you'd go through fire and water, Charlie, and it looks as if you will."

Away against the sky, beyond the cliffs and beyond Sandy Bay, that strange light still glowed, now rising to a glare, now sinking almost to

extinction. Down on the beach the candles guttered and flared, for the wind seemed to be rising a little; and as they blew before it they threw their vague and feeble illumination on the unfinished sections of the ship that was to be. We stood and looked round, and my eyes fell upon a long white board that lay almost at our feet; at least, it had been white a little while ago, when I had gone in, and what attracted my attention now was the fact that it had changed its colour. It was many shades darker.

“Why, look at that,” I said, drawing my finger across it, and leaving a clear white mark. “You must have been kicking up a dust, you two.”

“That dust didn’t come up,” said Charlie. “It came down. Don’t you know what it is?” And, stooping down, he wrote on the board in quick, unlovely letters:

“NOTICE TO QUIT.”

“That’s the dust that buried Pompeii and Herculaneum,” he added grimly.

So we toiled all that night with hardly a pause, partly by the light of our lamp and candles, partly by that weird and awful glare from above. So we saved the third day, for quite early in the morning the *Good Hope* was finished.

CHAPTER XVIII

WE PUT OUT TO SEA

Certainly we had done well, for when it was nearly noon we stood at the edge of the water with our backs to the bungalow and our faces to the great venture we were bound to make. For we had no choice.

“There’s nothing more,” said Ralph simply. “So it’s ‘All aboard!’ and may God help us!”

An echoing report in the distance seemed to give emphasis to his prayer—a hollow, muffled report that was followed by a distinct vibration of the earth. The Secret Sea was at full tide, turgid and sullen, and with strange colours in it—reds and browns and even greens, that marked the upheaval of nameless chemical and metallic deposits from its unplumbed depths. Now and again a slimy bubble would rise to the surface, to swell and burst with a silence that was ominous and ghostly. And on the Secret Sea, closely tied to the little landing-stage, rode our ship, the *Good Hope*, fully laden and ready for her voyage. Her makeshift masts, formed of strips of board nailed and lashed together, swayed softly as she rocked to the lazy motion of the water.

“During the last hour,” said Charlie, “we’ve had a fall of quite a quarter of an inch of black dust. By the evening we should probably all be buried.”

“Yes,” agreed Oliver. “But the wind which brings the ashes this way is also the wind we want to help us across the water to the cavern—yes, and through the cavern, too. So we know what is meant by the proverb, ‘It’s an ill wind that blows nobody good!’ Now, clap on all sail.”

It was done. As he cut the lashings that held us to the stage we hauled up the sail—that amazing sail made of two blankets roughly sewn together, and hoisted to its place by light ropes passed through holes bored in the top of the masts. It was for all the world like pulling up a clothes-line with the week’s wash, and I have yet to see masts more like clothes-props than those poor masts of ours. But I fastened the cords in the places prepared for them, and the sail suddenly bellied out as a gust of ash-laden wind came over the cliffs. We pushed off vigorously—and our *Good Hope* began to move.

Yes, she moved, cumbrously thrusting her twin cutwaters against the slimy bubbles of the Secret Sea, and heading straight for the other side until Oliver got to work with the pole which he had fixed up as a rudder. Then, slowly, reluctantly, she changed her course, and I ran to the bows with another pole. The grim test of our ingenuity and our seamanship was at hand.

“There’s a bit of a draught through the bottle neck,” said Charlie suddenly;

and at the same instant I became aware of the fact. Wind and tide were now going through the cavern together with a hollow, booming noise that had something very ominous about it. The ship, too, was making some speed, but her pace was due more to the currents of wind and water than to the skill of the shipwright. I let go one corner of our blanket sail. It flew free like a banner, and the pace became a little more steady.

“Good!” said Ralph Oliver; and then we passed into the gloom of the great sea cave, our hearts in our mouths. Let our ship be swept against the rocky wall too often and no more need be said, despite the presence of the three fine fenders which we had lashed to her sides. It had taken many full hours to build her, but if we had evil fortune it would not take as many minutes to wrench every timber apart and to drown her crew in that bottomless sea.

We take no credit to ourselves that the issues were not so disastrous. No, not even though Ralph’s sweat ran down his face from the labour of keeping her in the centre of the stream, and we two grew sick and dizzy through running across our bows to meet and avert the possible shock. All our efforts would probably have been as straws if the shock had really come, if our craft had fairly slipped out of the main flood and had drifted or been forced to the wall. I give some credit to the ship herself, which was on her best behaviour and steadily refused to be drawn far aside; but in my heart I own the Providence who had led us out of the Great Pit and the Cave of Dead Men, and had still a little work for us to do.

What other power could have kept us so well in the main stream of the turning tide, to glide through the darkness and the hollow murmur of the cave like a strange ghost ship speeding out of shadowland to the light of day? The darkness fell around us, but we had scarcely felt it before there was already a gleam of light ahead; the waters swirled and foamed and gurgled, but they only bore us along high and dry; and suddenly a vision opened out before us—a picture framed in an oval frame of jagged rocks—a picture of a wide belt of troubled water, streaked with foam where the current from the cave met the swell of the Atlantic; and beyond that a seascape deeply blue under a sky of blue and grey.

“Hurrah!” gasped Charlie hoarsely; and in another minute it was “Hurrah!” indeed. Our ship sped out of the shadows into daylight—props, fenders, blankets and all—a wonderful craft making a wonderful escape. She rocked and tossed on the broken water like a cork, but bravely, comically, still kept her head to the open sea; and we saw with amazement and joy that she had come through her first test without a single sea being shipped. Indeed, there was scarcely a splash of water on her deck.

“Pull that sail taut, Frank,” cried Ralph.

I threw down my pole—there was no more call for it—and sprang to the

flying cord. With some difficulty I gripped it and got it at last around the stay which backed the mast. The sail came unwillingly to its place, and at once the stormy tossing ceased. The wind that still blew steadily from the north-west took us and held us, and we rode out into the Atlantic as soberly and steadily as a frigate under full sail.

“Thank God for all that!” said Ralph fervently; and he relaxed his labours to mop his face. “Oh, boys, what a time we’re having!”

“Yes,” I said, “and I’ll pay a tribute to you builders—your craft behaves remarkably well. I couldn’t have done better myself.”

Charlie took off his cap and bowed. “You do me proud,” he said. “I feel that I have lived for this great moment! But what puzzles me is this. If we could get through so well, why not the boat that tried it twenty years ago, with the two men in it?”

“They got into a current and struck the wall. We did not.”

“Besides,” added Charlie, “this raft, I suppose, is a good deal heavier than the boat could have been, and better able to resist the lighter currents. Then we got into the main stream at first go-off and were able to keep in it. . . . But look at the island.”

By this time we had crossed the belt of broken water and were swinging out on the swell of the ocean itself, going steadily if a little cumbrously, and every moment drawing away from the place of our imprisonment. The great cave entrance was already being lost in a wall of inaccessible cliff, and over the whole island hung a cloud of smoke or vapour, white and fleecy at the outer edges, but thick and grey towards the centre. This was the veil which had made our day so strangely dull, and it seemed to grow denser hour by hour. For though it was always dissolving at the outer edges, its volume was continually fed by the gases which rose from the new crater far over among the rocks beyond Sandy Bay. And this vapour, as a whole, was so heavy and dense that it resisted the force of the breeze that was blowing from the north-west and filling our makeshift sail. The breeze had the effect of spreading the vapour over the whole island, but it could not disperse it altogether.

“There’s generally a cloud over the island,” said Ralph; “the *Navigator* said so. And now we know what the cloud is. It is really the volume of steam and gases from the crater; and some of these gases are poisonous, which is the reason why there is no living thing on the island—not even a healthy blade of grass.”

“In my opinion the precious volcano is working up to a grand old climax,” said Charlie. “I’m jolly glad we got away so soon. What a fix we’d have been in if the roof of that cavern had closed down before we could start out.”

“It can easily happen,” I replied grimly. “I mean the collapse. I’ll be surprised if it doesn’t. But look here, if this wind holds we’ll have to keep

going south. For my part, I'd much rather have gone north. There would have been a better chance for us."

"In one way, yes," said Oliver. "We should have been working towards civilisation. But we've a very good chance if we can get on the Cape-to-Monte Video track. There's a big trade done on that line now. Anyway, we can't help ourselves."

"What speed are we doing?"

"About four knots, I should say. But that's the absolute utmost."

I worked it out in my mind. Two hundred miles at four knots an hour. I saw by Charlie's eye that he was doing the same sum, and that he had reached the same result. We did not trouble to discuss it just then, for I saw that both of them were weary to fainting point. They had done most of the heavy manual labour.

"There are some things so plain that even a mole can see them," I said saptly. "One of these is the fact that you two are dead beat. So I warn you both that you must fall asleep without delay, while I watch. Nothing is needed now but one hand on the rudder; but we don't know what will be needed later. So, please, hop it at once into slumberland."

They did make a mild protest, but they were not moles, and the plain sense of my argument brooked no denial. So at length they laid themselves down as comfortably as possible on our much occupied deck, and set themselves to woo slumber with all goodwill; and, indeed, slumber came at the first signal, so that in ten minutes both of them had left the problems of the day far behind; and I, spreading a cushion under me, sat down as easily as I might with the rudder pole under my chest. It was not necessary to manipulate it, only to keep it steady, so that our course might be maintained as long as the wind held. Once the wind dropped we might all go to sleep together.

I looked back. We were now some four or five miles from the Rock, and I saw that the cloud above it was steadily growing larger. From some part of the north-western quarter there was a continuous ascent of vapour, not in one steady stream, but in a series of rapid puffs as it were, each effort sending a great globular mass to enlarge the cloud above. Instead of rising higher, the cloud had spread out like a great fleecy blanket, more than covering the whole extent of the Honeycomb. This blanket of cloud was of irregular shape, owing to the effect of the wind, but there was something very terrible in the way in which it brooded over the island. It was like a shadow of doom, a cloud from which a destroying lightning might break at any moment. I was glad that we were away—and sorry that we had got no farther.

Then I looked ahead, peering under our home-made sail to the farthest horizon; and I began to do that little sum again with variations. The wind was still fairly strong, and if it kept steady we should be in the track of vessels in

three or four days. But what if it dropped? The days might then prove to be weeks! And if our voyage were extended by so much, what of our prospects of survival, with only a limited supply of provisions?

But that problem was beyond me, so I left it. Then my mind traversed the whole range of this mystery, from the day of my coming to the Honeycomb to that moment in which I had made my thrilling discovery at the bungalow.

I wondered what would be the end of it all. Would the criminals get clear with their prize? Had they got clear already? Even if we survived, could we hope to defeat them yet and recover what was lost—two boys, and one who was little more than a boy, against a couple of the most cunning ruffians in the wide world?

Well!——

CHAPTER XIX

THE WALL OF WATER

Just before sunset the wind dropped. By that time the Honeycomb had been merged into the mists in the north, and we were left a solitary speck in an illimitable sea. It was a quiet sea, strangely quiet, with the very faintest swell. It was almost as still as the Secret Sea behind its rocky barriers.

“And that’s one thing I don’t like about it,” said Ralph Oliver. “In the natural order of things we should expect a hurricane after a dead calm like this; and though it mayn’t be a hurricane that’s coming, we’d better keep careful watch.”

“Yes,” I said listlessly.

The day had not brought us anything in the way of labour; indeed, life on the raft was restful enough to have pleased the laziest. We had simply plodded steadily on under our blanket sail, sleeping a little, talking a little, and thinking a little. Though the sun was now gone, it did not seem likely to be chilly. The air was close and heavy, rather, as if a thunderstorm were brewing; but the skies were clear.

Charlie looked all round and sighed. There was nothing else to do. Then he stretched himself out on his rug to sleep, and I sat down, following Oliver’s example by resting my back as comfortably as I might against one of our provision boxes; now and again he and I searched the horizon for a light, now and again began to count the stars that sprinkled the heavens; and presently the moon rose in a surpassing glory from her bed beyond the ocean, and mounted silently into the quiet sky. The stars paled before her magnificence, and the whole world of water was filled with mellow light. The raft rocked lazily on a golden sea; and such was the wonder and beauty and stillness of it that we found ourselves almost afraid to stir, and even hushed our breathing. A spirit of the unreal and the fantastic seemed to fall upon us, as though we were in the midst of a beautiful dream which might vanish at a whisper. We were alone with nature in all her majesty of vastness, in all her beauty of moon and stars; and she had laid her spell upon us.

After a while, however, the spell of beauty became oppressive, a spell that had something of fear and awe in it. Because we both felt it, we began to talk in low tones, so that in human sound and contact we might forget the brooding majesty of that moonlit world.

“It is very beautiful,” I said. “But still there is tragedy in it. I can’t help thinking of poor old Lewis and his awful end.”

"I have thought of him all the time, Frank. Perhaps that was why he came to me in my sleep. I dreamed of him—a very vivid dream."

"Tell me."

"It is easy to tell, because it has given me such a change of thought about him. Before, I saw only the cruelty and pity of it, and hardened myself to punish the men who committed the crime. But in my dream old Richard Lewis came to me—I think it was here on the raft—and do you know, Frank, his face was full of joy. It was beaming. And he spoke with such happiness and relief in his quavering old voice!—I can never think of him in the same way again. What do you think he told me? 'I bear no malice, sir,' he said, 'not a bit of it. For those men, they let me out of prison, so that I could come and find the Master. And I've found him, and it's all right about the lost boats. No, I don't bear no malice—not a bit of it.' "

"Was that all?" I asked.

"Yes. I woke on that last word."

For a while we sat in silence. Then—

"But their guilt is just the same," I argued.

"I suppose so. It was only a dream, you know, and yet it does show the other side of things."

It certainly did. Old Lewis had been released from his long vigil in a very terrible way; yet he had died as he would have wished to die, in defence of his trust. He could never have moved among men again, for his memory had gone; and I began to see that the dread thing that had happened to him was a merciful thing after all.

Silence fell again, and for a long time. It became deeper, indeed, for presently Ralph Oliver nodded drowsily and his head sank upon his arm. They were both asleep now—and I was alone.

Before Ralph had dropped off, however, I had ceased to think of old Lewis, and had turned my thoughts to something else; some movement had reminded me of a burden that I carried, and presently I decided to examine it. From my breast pocket I took a small bundle, carefully wrapped in brown paper and fastened with string. I unrolled the paper, and then moved aside a wrapping of cloth that lay within. A moment more and the Devil's Eye lay in my palm in the moonlight.

I had had very little opportunity of examining it hitherto, for we had been extremely busy since I had received it into my charge. Now I realised, with a kind of childish impatience and resentment, that it had many times been somewhat in the way, and that if Oliver had not so definitely given it into my care I should probably have thrown it aside as a nuisance. I looked at it again, curiously, doubtfully. I turned the wretched thing over, with a feeling that it was stained and horrible and uncanny—marked with the blood of men. And

suddenly, as I turned it, the moonlight caught the fragment that was worn smooth, and I saw that flash again, the flash I had seen in the Cave of Dead Men when my light had caught it.

I was startled. The whole of that scene in the cave came back upon me in a vivid rush of memory and sensation. I was afraid—afraid of this uncanny bit of rock-glass which had caused the death of so many good men. I lifted my arm, under an impulse of fear and repulsion; in another instant the thing would have been hurled into the sea.

But Charlie gave a murmur, and moved in his sleep; and, brought back to reason and sanity by that touch of life, I hastily rolled up the stone again and replaced it. When Oliver woke I would pass it on to him and let him care for it, if he thought it worth while. He believed that there might be some value in it as evidence, so probably he would keep it; but certainly I did not want the luckless thing.

It was Charlie's movement, perhaps, that saved all of us; for as soon as I was myself again I remembered that I was on watch. The thought roused me to a sudden alertness, and almost instantly I heard something. Yes, I heard something—and I started hurriedly to my feet with a wild hope in my heart. A ship?

The moonlight was more brilliant than ever, the great golden orb riding high above us, and I looked along the splendid pathway of light that stretched away from us into the north. I looked—and looked again. Surely, I could see something! Was it a white sail that glittered and flashed in the golden distance? I shaded my eyes with my hand—and stared.

Another moment and I started to my feet to get a better view, gripping the nearer mast to steady myself. A sail? No, it could not be a sail—it was not a gleam of white canvas in the moonlight—it was more like the flicker of light on a blade of steel. It was certainly moving, it was coming nearer; and I suddenly realised that this was something more than a flicker of light. In the track of the moon it was just that—a mysterious gleam, a flicker full of changeful shapes; but to right and left of this was a dark shadow like a cloud, that seemed to stretch to the dim horizon on either hand. And the thing that was a strange flicker of light under the moon, and a dark shadow elsewhere, was coming towards us, silently but swiftly.

“Charlie! Ralph!”

I spoke in a sharp, urgent tone, and touched them with my foot at the same time. Not for an instant could I take my eyes from that strange appearance to the north. Ralph sighed and stirred. Charlie yawned sleepily.

“Jump up, quick!”

Ralph sat up first and then got upon his knees. Then he stood beside me, all alert in an instant.

“Look!”

How swiftly it came! And now I believed that that ominous silence had changed to a still more ominous sound—a deep, low murmur, as of many waters far away. I saw that gleam again, and knew it for what it was—the gleam of the moonlight upon a towering ridge of sea that was sweeping down upon us with incredible speed. And I gave a cry:

“It’s a wave! Hold fast for your life. Down! Down!”

Charlie was on his knees by this time, but at that cry he gave a gasp and dropped like a log at the foot of the mast. At the same instant the raft gave a slight jerk as a small swell lifted it—the herald of the monster which followed close behind. Ralph and I threw ourselves down and secured ourselves as best we might by means of each other, the second slender mast, and the provision boxes.

How well it was that we had screwed everything so firmly to the raft! Then we braced ourselves and waited.

“Are you all right?”

“Right, old man. Keep your heart up!”

“Hold for your lives!” cried Ralph.

The raft seemed to tremble like a thing of living nerves. Instantly the brilliant moon was blotted out by a great overhanging shadow that swept down and hovered over us for a moment with a hoarse, multitudinous roar. Then up, up, up we shot, the raft standing at such a fearful angle that our ridiculous blanket sail dipped its edge into the water. Then she righted and balanced herself for one terrible moment on the crest of the great wave, hovered there like a feather in the air, and then with a giddy twist plunged downwards into the gulf behind. Her timbers groaned and strained, the frail masts bent like canes. For a few moments we were tossed like a ball from one crest to another, the broken water drenching us to the skin and striking our frame with blows like thunder. Then—then the raft was safe, tossing idly and lightly on a troubled sea, streaming with water, indeed, but without serious hurt to goods or limbs. And I, resting on my elbow, was gazing out after a dark line of shadow that rolled on and on to the south, grim, tremendous, irresistible.

But it was gone, that overwhelming nightmare, and it had spared us! Trembling all over, I got to my knees, and when I look back upon that moment I cannot be surprised that I was hysterical.

“It was a great wave,” I stammered helplessly. “But it is gone, and we are still here!”

There was a long silence. Then:

“My word!” said Charlie. “Is that kind of thing very common in these parts?”

Ralph Oliver was the only one who could answer that question. “No,” he

said. "It was caused, most likely, by a submarine earthquake—or, perhaps, by something that has happened at the island. Yes—that's it. There has been an earthquake at the Honeycomb, and the whole place has gone down into the sea."

We all know now that his guess was a good one, for on that night of mystery the old volcano, after a final effort, had subsided into the sea. But you can still trace its position on the official charts under the name of "The Honeycomb Shoal."

"Well," said Charlie, who was rapidly recovering his self-possession and his spirits. "If it happens again in this district I hope it won't be till I've left; and if it happens before I leave, I hope the wave won't break. I like the sea well enough, but I want to be on top of it, not underneath, with a million tons of water above. Eh, old man?"

"Rather!" I said. "But, isn't there a bit of a breeze coming up?"

And, indeed, there was—not a bit of a breeze only, but a steady, hopeful current that was like the breath of life after the long, dead calm. The giant wave seemed to have swept over the spirit of the night with the effect of a transformation, and to have released all nature from the strange spell under which it had been lying. The moon looked upon a sea that was alive with movement, and the raft rocked to the play of water that had music in its voice. It seemed possible suddenly to do something—and to go somewhere.

"It'll be south by east still," said Oliver, who apparently had the same thought. "But more east, for the wind has gone round a bit. It isn't quite what we want, but it's better than nothing. We'll clap on all sail."

It did not take five minutes to do it, and presently our sturdy little craft began to plough her solemn course towards the track of vessels and the far-off coast of Africa—which, with good luck, we might make in a month or so! Then we mopped up the deck and made everything ship-shape again; after which Ralph Oliver took command.

"Now, Frank," he said, "it's your watch below. Please turn in at once and curl up; and if another of those playful little rollers *does* come, I only hope I'll be as ready for it as you were. Charlie and I will have a turn now. Good-night and pleasant dreams!"

Charlie sighed. "Well," he said, "I never thought it would come to this." And then, still whistling softly, he applied himself to his rudder pole.

So presently I slept, and I was so thoroughly exhausted now that I slumbered soundly till the moon had dipped in the western sea and the stars had paled at the approach of dawn; and it was a familiar whisper in my ear that roused me at last!

"Frank, ahoy!"

I stretched myself and woke. My hand came in contact with my chum's

hand, which gave me a meaning pressure.

“Wake up, old man. Look at this!”

At once I was on the alert. “Another wave?” I muttered fearfully, striving to clear the last mist from my mind. And then I was following the line of Charlie’s outstretched finger. Ralph was standing at his side.

And so it was in the dawn that we saw the end of the great tragedy in which we had taken part. At first not one of us realised what it was—that strange, low shadow that lay inert in the sea, with the light waves playfully climbing its smooth sides and lightly falling back again. Ralph had supposed it to be a dead whale, but before he roused me some inkling of the truth had come to him. That inert body was many times larger than any living creature of the sea, and there was some terribly familiar suggestion in its shadowy outline. It was not moving of itself, but was lying and drifting imperceptibly not more than three hundred yards away. Under our light sail we were slowly drawing past it.

We stood and stared, terror mingling with our keen curiosity. The light slowly grew, and those suggestive outlines loomed larger to our gaze, and plainer. Ralph’s conviction found its first utterance in my hoarse whisper:

“It’s a ship!”

“Yes,” he replied. “A steamer.”

We had no doubts after that. The thing we saw was a steamer of considerable size which had actually turned turtle, and was now drifting, half submerged. So much I saw, but it was Ralph who saw the rest.

“It is about the size of the *Maud Muller*,” he said.

Yes, it was undoubtedly about the size of Captain Jackson’s boat. We stared at it again, and then stared into one another’s eyes.

“Perhaps we left the island before them, after all,” said Ralph huskily. “We cannot tell. They had to get up steam, of course, and perhaps Delling miscalculated . . . or perhaps the Captain turned crusty and refused to take his advice. So they were near the island when the end came; and the great wave took the steamer and just turned it over and left it floating. Frank, that thing there is not a wreck. It is a tomb.”

It was the whole story, as fully told as any man shall ever tell it. So we stood and gazed at the iron tomb until our little craft had left it well behind. But far on into the day we saw it still, a low, sinister shadow far away on the water; and when I tried to sleep I dreamed of the thing, and of the people who were dead within those iron walls; and I woke with a shriek, for I had dreamed that I was in the iron tomb myself.

For two days after that I was very ill, and the fate of the *Maud Muller* lay upon me like an incubus. More than once I went into a delirium, wringing the hearts of my companions by my cries of horror and fear. One thing that I said

again and again had to do with Captain Jackson and his brother villain. “God has a pretty wide sleeve,” I said, “and you can never know what may be in it. He had this iron tomb up His sleeve for you, you devils!” And at that end I laughed the laugh of the insane.

But on the fourth day our troubles, though not our travels, came to a sudden close, when my companions were on the verge of despair, not for themselves but for me. In the early morning a great grey ship crept up to us and rested there while kind and eager hands took us on board. It was a large steamer, the *Pernambuco*, bound for Rio Grande do Sul and Rio de Janeiro.

CHAPTER XX

AN EXPERT ON THE EYE

Rio at that time of year was too hot for me, for I was still very weak, and it was necessary that I should have as much fresh air as possible. But on board the *Pernambuco*—the steamer which had received us—there were friends who could help as well as advise us, and when we landed Ralph knew exactly what to do. Armed with a very cordial letter of introduction, he led us out to the beautiful hill suburb of Petropolis, to the private residence of the head of an American Mission. Here we received a warm welcome and every kindness that Christian charity could think of.

In three days I began to take a real interest in life, and in six I began to be impatient if anyone inquired how I felt. I spent most of the time in the garden, and it was here that Charlie always found me when he came back at midday from his trip to the city; for Ralph and he went every morning, Ralph ostensibly on business and Charlie to hunt for items of news with which he might enliven my afternoon. Ralph, I understood, was trying to arrange for our passage home, and at first I was not strong enough to trouble about details. It was so safe to leave everything to him.

On this particular day, however—our tenth day at Petropolis—things began to happen. Charlie did not come back till the middle of the afternoon, and at the very first glance I saw that he had news. When Charlie has anything to say his face always tells it first, quite against his will.

“Is it very important?” I asked listlessly, looking over from my hammock. For he had sunk, hot and weary, into the easy-chair which our hostess, Mrs. Mellish, had left five minutes before.

“Is *what* very important?” he asked innocently.

“Why, your news, of course. Out with it, old chap, before it breaks out of itself.”

“You’re certainly very much better,” he grumbled. “But you’re not a bit grateful.”

“I am, but I manage to hide it. What is your story? Come!”

Then Charlie began to think of his story, and forgot my chaff. He sat up in his chair with his freckled face all aglow.

“Ralph,” he said, “is coming on by the next train. He had to wait for somebody whom he is going to bring out here to see you. I was to have waited, too, but on second thoughts he sent me along first to break things gently and to pave the way. I’m a sort of forerunner, don’t you see?”

“There’s not much running about it,” I sighed. “When are you going to start?”

“When you’re civil, I ought to say,” retorted Charlie. “But that would be a cruel time to wait—and you an invalid, too! But here you are, then. Our passage home is arranged. We’re to go by the Royal Mail Steamer *Avon*, in exactly six days from now, if your lordship can arrange to be ready.”

“H’m!” I said. “I’ll think about it. But are we to work our passages?”

“You look like it,” grinned Charlie. “No, my son, we’re to go as passengers. First saloon, with all extras, if you please. What do you think of that?”

I selected a fine grape from a plate at my side and hit him fairly on the forehead with it. “There you go!” he said. “Too good to be true, isn’t it? But it is true, all the same. Through the British Consul, Ralph has got into touch by cable with the widow of the Earl of Barmouth, in London. So her ladyship has cabled out the sum of two hundred pounds, and we three destitute waifs are to be decently fitted up and go home like kings!”

“To tell her the story,” I added.

“Precisely. That will be our first duty. But that’s not all my news, though perhaps it’s the best of it. First, then, the Professor. There is no Chair of Geology at Rio University—we went to inquire in person—and the name of Delling is not known there. And that’s that.

“With Captain Jackson it’s different,” he went on. “He is known—at New Orleans and all along the American coast, north, central, and south—an expert at gun-running, rum-running, and anything that needs a ready wit, a ready lie, and nimble heels—a very shady edition of the famous Captain Kettle. His poetically disguised and innocent-looking *Maud Muller* is a bit of a joke in every port and every Customs Office. Delling may have been the agent of a Continental Government, as Ralph suggested at first—perhaps Moscow. Or he may have belonged to a syndicate of crooks picking up a suitable instrument to explore any chances that might be hidden in an old legend. Or—and this is more likely, Ralph thinks—he may have been a real geologist but a crank, and perhaps a bit mad by ordinary standards. Having a little money he resolved to spend it on testing his theory; and Captain Jackson, making sure of the man’s money first, goes into partnership with him on the chance of getting a big prize as well.”

“Yes. And you’re talking exactly like a ha’penny book,” I said.

“It’s Ralph’s talk, not mine,” retorted Charlie. “I’m giving you his very words. But, anyway, those rascals are gone, and I don’t suppose we’ll ever hear the whole truth about them, because at the Consulate to-day they were talking about the end of the *Maud Muller*. Guess what has happened to her.”

“Salvaged?”

“Not much. After that big wave, you see, there were several waterlogged wrecks drifting about in the South Atlantic, though luckily the Honeycomb was so far out of the beaten track that the damage done was comparatively small. Anyway, gunboats went out from Monte Video and Rio to examine and destroy anything that might be dangerous to navigation. One of these gunboats found the *Maud Muller*. And her commander sank the poor old hulk with one shot from a four-inch gun.”

“And all that was in her?”

“No doubt. He knew nothing about Delling’s secret. So there goes the last of the mystery of the Honeycomb and the Barmouth Treasure—whatever it may have been.”

I sighed, but the supposed treasure had never touched me very closely, and I could not feel very keenly about it. The Earl’s talk of hundreds of millions was too far removed from my sphere of thought, though the tragedy of old Lewis had gone to my heart right enough.

“So the good man’s dream and the bad man’s plot went down together,” said Charlie solemnly. “Leaving this post-war world to be saved without the help of a fabulous treasure from the shores of the Secret Sea. It will have to be done, as always, by the goodwill of good men working together for a great purpose.”

I stared. He grinned. “I gave that in the best style of the Ha’penny Book,” he explained. “But it’s just what Ralph said at the end. Good, sound sense, too—much too good for present company. Next question, please.”

“I suppose Ralph has cabled home?”

“The British Consul did that as soon as we arrived. You needn’t fret yourself—they know, by this time, that you’re quite safe. Also me.”

So he said, and so he was clearly entitled to think; but there’s many a slip ’twixt the cup and the lip, and we learnt later how the Consul’s well-meant effort had miscarried. Somehow his brief message had been muddled at the other end, and the news published in the English papers was that three of the crew of the ship *Effingham Towers* had been rescued from a raft and taken to a South American port. Charlie’s relatives had read that note with vivid interest and relief, but my poor sister had seen nothing in it to call for her attention; and we had had no chance of writing, for we were going ourselves by this first mail steamer.

“Well, that’s all right,” I said in my ignorance. “But is there any other news?”

“Some folks are never satisfied,” said Charlie, selecting an orange from my dish. “But if you want more news, my friend, you’ll have to get it from headquarters. And I hope that headquarters will treat you as you deserve.”

So we went on in talk and chaff until Ralph made his appearance, having

come, evidently, by the next train. Instead of coming down the garden, however, he turned into the house with the companion he had brought with him, an alert-looking, keen-faced man of definitely English type and of early middle age.

“That’s the gent he waited for,” said Charlie. “At least, I suppose so.”

“Another doctor?” I growled impatiently.

“A specialist, I expect. You’re a very interesting case, you know. And we want you fit to sail in a week.”

“Well, I won’t see him, that’s flat. I told Ralph that I would not speak another single word to another single doctor, and I won’t. So you can go and be examined yourself if you like.”

Charlie only grinned. Then Ralph Oliver came out of the house to join us, looking as cool and collected as ever, in spite of the heat of his journey; and with every step of his approach my defiance oozed out more and more, until when he reached us I was as meek as a lamb.

“Well, Frank, how goes it?” he asked cheerily. “Has Charlie told you all the news?”

“I’ve dragged some out of him,” I said grudgingly, with a malevolent glance at my chum. “But you must be pretty glad to get things settled.”

Ralph smiled. “Well,” he said, “we had to scoot round a bit, I must confess. That Barmouth business meant a good deal of searching and waiting. However, that’s all settled now, and there’s only one important thing left. That will be settled within an hour, if you’re agreeable.”

I sighed again. “I told you I wouldn’t see any more doctors,” I said feebly. “I’m quite all right now, and they’ll only make me worse. But since you’ve brought the chap, I suppose I’d better see him. What kind of specialist is this?—nerves, teeth, eyes, or the minor functions of the great toe?”

“In this case it’s an oculist,” said Ralph, after a little consideration. “That Eye of yours certainly needed looking into.”

“Why, it was only a little inflammation,” I protested. “Everybody gets that some time or other.” But even as I spoke I rolled out of my hammock and prepared to obey. There was nothing else to do when Ralph Oliver was in command. And still smiling indulgently at my tantrums (as I supposed) they led me into the house.

The stranger was in our sitting-room, seated at the table. Ralph gave me a chair and introduced him as “Mr. Balmer.” Mr. Balmer bowed and looked at me searchingly.

“This is Frank Brown, Mr. Balmer,” said Ralph, “the owner of the Eye.”

Mr. Balmer bowed again and smiled. It was a curious way of speaking, but I could not take special notice of it then. What a fuss to make about a trifling inflammation! Ralph was a regular old grandmother where I was concerned.

Then Ralph turned to me.

“Mr. Balmer has a very interesting thing to tell you,” he said. “May he start now?”

I said, more surprised than ever, that he certainly might. Then Mr. Balmer began, with an air of confidential importance, which was an additional puzzle.

“I am glad to meet you, Mr. Brown, and to congratulate you upon your extraordinary escape. It is a most astonishing story. But my duty to-night is to give you a report, as a matter of business. I have examined the Eye—indeed, I have done much more than that—and it is now my privilege to tell you the result of the examination.”

I was more than puzzled now. I was bewildered. Was this specialist so clever that he could examine my poor eye at a distance of three yards in about two minutes, and then report upon it? A marvel! But just as I was falling into a state of speechless bewilderment I heard a sound behind me which suddenly set me upon my guard. It was a stifled chuckle from the depths of Charlie’s throat. I glanced at him to find him purple from suppressed mirth. There was evidently a big joke somewhere.

So, with an effort at self-control, I settled down to wait; and Mr. Balmer, who was quite unaware of the existence of a joke in this affair, went on to make things clear. He took from his pocket a small box covered in leather, and laid it upon the table.

“Perhaps it will be best,” he said, “to show you the result of my labours first. Then talk will be much easier.”

He opened the case by a spring, and the lid flew back to show something that lay within upon a bed of purple velvet. Something? Well, it was nothing less than a great diamond, larger than a pullet’s egg and of surpassing beauty. At first, indeed, it seemed nothing more than an irregularly shaped lump of glassy stone, white by contrast with the purple of its bed; but the room was full of light from the windows, and as I watched that piece of glass it seemed to gather this light to itself, to send it forth again in a thousand rays of wonderfully vivid colour. It almost seemed as though the thing began to *live* as I sat gazing at it, began to sparkle and gleam more and more and more until it positively blazed and glowed. In a moment it appeared to be the focus of all the light in the room. Then Mr. Balmer took it up, and as he turned it in his hand the light seemed to stream from it in showers.

“A diamond!” I gasped, in deeper bewilderment than ever; and then Ralph explained:

“It’s your Devil’s Eye, Frank, from the Cave of Dead Men. It has been cut, that’s all. And Mr. Balmer, who is an expert in these matters, has come to tell you all about it.”

Then I began to see. I gave Charlie one glance that entirely failed to sober

him, and then I turned again to the table. That glowing crystal the dull stone which we had rescued from the Cave and which I had almost thrown into the sea on the night of the Wall of Water! The thing had almost passed from my mind. I had never even troubled to ask what had become of it . . . and now I stared fascinated into that wonderful nest of indescribable beauty.

Mr. Balmer smiled. "It is an enviable task, though a responsible one," he said. "The members of my firm, I may say, are very proud to think that they should have been selected to examine and cut this stone. At the first examination we judged it to be a diamond of the purest water, and of great value. It stood all our tests well, and then, with Mr. Oliver's consent, of course, we put it into the hands of our lapidary. The result, as you see it here, has justified all our expectations, and more. You have here not only a diamond of great value, but one of a peculiar beauty which enhances its interest considerably. Let me show you."

He took the stone again and turned it over before me. And suddenly from one of its many facets shot a strange, baleful, ruby light, like a flash from some intense fire hidden in the heart of the stone. It startled me for an instant, and then I remembered that strange flash which I had first seen in the cave when my light had caught the crystal, and again on the *Good Hope* on the night of the great wave.

"You see," said Mr. Balmer, "the stone has a peculiarity which is curious and interesting and beautiful, and therefore of some value. It has some rare secret of colour which gives it an almost startling beauty. We have seen nothing quite like it, though we know most of the famous stones."

Then Mr. Balmer went on with increasing certitude, almost, indeed, with enthusiasm. He was not of an enthusiastic type, but he had some of the pride of the expert, and here was a task which was quite to his taste.

"Now," he said, "we have here one of the great diamonds of the world. Nothing so splendid has ever been found in the diamond mines of Brazil, famous though they are. This stone weighs a hundred and forty-two carats—more than the famous Tiffany Yellow Diamond, and as much as the more famous Regent or Pitt Diamond, whose story is known to all the world. It excels in size and beauty the largest stone found in Brazil—the Star of the South."

I felt myself lost in crowding sensations. "The Star of the South?" I stammered. "Why, that was sold for——"

"Yes," interrupted Mr. Balmer; "and because we place a higher value upon this stone, we offer you ten thousand pounds more for it. And we hope, Mr. Brown, that you will find yourself able to accept this offer. We do not say that you may not be able to obtain a somewhat larger price elsewhere; but, like us, you would have to find a purchaser, and a stone of this value cannot be sold on

the street corner.”

Mr. Balmer brushed a little dust from his sleeve with his handkerchief. I tried to look unconcerned, and for a few moments did not even glance at my chums; but I knew that Ralph was watching me sympathetically and that Charlie had ceased to chuckle. At last, however, I looked up.

“What do you say, Ralph?” I asked, as coolly as possible.

“I say that it’s entirely in your hands, old fellow,” he replied at once. “But I may also say that Mr. Balmer’s offer is, to my mind, a reasonable one. He is the English member of the firm of Brent and Balmer, the foremost diamond experts and merchants in Brazil. If you don’t wish to keep the stone you certainly have here a decent opportunity of selling it.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t wish to keep it. I could not look at it without thinking of that cave scene.” And I shuddered once more as the picture rose before me. Then I considered for a few moments before I turned to the visitor.

“Mr. Balmer,” I said, “we are willing to accept your offer.”

Mr. Balmer rose, reached across the table, and shook hands with me. Then he took out his pocket-book and produced a closed envelope.

“I am anxious to seal the transaction, Mr. Brown,” he said briskly. “Before noon to-morrow I shall be here to pay you the whole sum, and to receive the jewel. This envelope contains a cheque for one-tenth of the price, as a deposit. Can I do anything more?”

“No,” I said stupidly. For he had fairly rushed all my defences. There were evidently some hustlers in the business world of Rio!

“Then I will take my leave and return to town. Good evening to you, gentlemen.”

And with that Mr. Balmer, after a cordial handshake all round, took his leave, Ralph Oliver politely showing him to the garden gate. He went with evident triumph, and he did not triumph without good reason, for he had indeed secured for his firm one of the remarkable gems of the world. The Devil’s Eye gleams now in the diadem of an Indian Prince who bought it six months later for a greatly increased price.

Ralph came back and sat down; and then we looked at one another and at the gem upon the table. At last I closed the leather case and hid the marvellous stone. It seemed dangerous to have it exposed in that way.

“And now,” I said slowly, “I think you had better explain.”

“To the best of my power,” said Ralph. “Yet much of my explanation is only supposition. . . . The Honeycomb Rock, Frank, may have been that Isle of Diamonds which, according to an old sea story, lay somewhere in the Atlantic. It may have been—we cannot say that it was: but the Earl of Barmouth thought it worth an examination, and he certainly did find there what he believed to be a great treasure. Then Delling, too, had some faith in the old sea story. You

will remember that he did not declare himself quite sure of the value of the treasure, but perhaps he only said that to deceive Captain Jackson. What is certain is that he committed a murder in order to get the thing into his own hands. . . . But the best evidence we have, of course, is this stone of yours. We know that there was one diamond on the Honeycomb. It is only reasonable to conclude that there were others; but the proof is lost for ever, so the thing doesn't repay an argument."

"No," I said. "We can drop that question now. But about this stone? Did you know all about it from the beginning?"

Ralph laughed. "Oh no," he said. "I am not so clever as that. Who could have seen a gem in that dirty fragment of rock? I did think it worth keeping, as a curio and as evidence, but that was about all. When we found the Earl's papers, and knew more, I simply thought it rather more worth keeping: for, you see, I had never seen uncut diamonds, and could not guess how worthless they might look. And because I was anxious not to put any false hopes into your own minds, I never even told you what Lord Barmouth's treasure really consisted of."

"Man," I said solemnly, "there is such a thing as being too cautious. I was within an ace of throwing the Devil's Eye into the sea."

"I know. You tried to do it when you were ill, so I thought it best to take entire charge of it. So when we got here the British Consul put me into touch with Brent and Balmer: and there you are."

Then I looked at them both. "Of course," I said, "it seems hardly necessary to say it, and yet I must say it right away—of course it's share and share alike in this case. We divide equally. I discovered the stone and you secured it: yet if it hadn't been for Charlie I don't believe we should ever have got out of the Cave alive: so the claim is about equal anyway."

Ralph gave one shake of the head, but he did not argue. We knew each other so well that argument was useless and unnecessary. The thing must be as I had said, because any other arrangement was unthinkable. But then Charlie broke in plaintively:

"But what is the point of it all?" he asked. "What is the thing worth, anyway? And who is the Star of the South? Is she an actress or a steamboat?"

I handed him the unopened envelope. "Open it," I said briefly; for it was my turn to chuckle now.

He opened the envelope and unfolded the paper he found within. When he had looked at it his eyes grew round.

"Well?" I asked, enjoying his sensations as much as he had enjoyed my bewilderment earlier.

"It seems to be a cheque," he stammered, "for six thousand pounds."

"The Star of the South was sold for fifty thousand," I explained placidly,

“and the Devil’s Eye is worth ten thousand more. This cheque represents ten per cent. of sixty thousand pounds. Your education, sir, has been shockingly neglected, I can see; but, perhaps, with a great effort, you will be able to divide that sum by three. Try!”

He tried. Then the servant knocked and we went in to tea. Tea, on such a day as this!

And then the beautiful tropic evening, full of happy talk, and full of long silences, and dreams, and unspoken plans. And, after that, because they sent me to bed early, I lay alone for a time with my own dreams, which I indulged without stint, for there was a great foundation for them. Then my door opened softly and Charlie looked in like an anxious ghost.

“Awake, old chap?” he whispered.

“Yes,” I said.

So he came and sat on the edge of my hammock—for the hammock is almost the only bed they have in Brazil. But he did not talk much. There were just a few spasmodic remarks to give an indication of the drift of his thoughts, and then he summed up with a great sigh and his favourite exclamation:

“Well, I never thought it would come to this!”

CHAPTER XXI

BALANCING UP

We came home, as Ralph had arranged, by the Royal Mail Steamship *Avon*, taking just sixteen days to journey from the tropic heat of Rio to the inhospitable cold of England's winter-time. But as the days grew colder our hearts grew steadily warmer, and it was with delight that we greeted the murk and mists of the English coast. For us, all the murky grey world was a realm of joy and sunshine, for had we not come unscathed through as wild a series of adventures as ever three young Britons had experienced? And we were coming home—home to friends and relatives who had once, most likely, given us up for lost.

When we reached Southampton, Ralph sent a telegram to the Countess of Barmouth, and when we came to London by noon we found her motor-car awaiting us. It carried us at once to her house in Grosvenor Square, to tell our story to one who had waited to hear it all those years since the *Plynlimmon* and all on board had been "lost without trace" in the South Atlantic.

Lady Barmouth was a gentle, sad-faced old lady now, with some of the marks of tragedy still to be read in her eyes. But it was a tragedy which had been healed by a deep peace, for, as we learnt afterwards, she had won a great name, in her later years, by her Christian charity. With her was her son, the present Lord Barmouth, a young naval officer, who heard our story with vivid interest and with some envy. It was a story after his own heart.

It was a moving interview. Ralph Oliver was our story-teller, Lord Barmouth sitting at his mother's side and putting in now and again a word of question or explanation. Charlie and I, from the background, noted the faces of the others, but as the story drew near its climax we could not watch that sad, lined face any longer. It seemed a sacrilege to do so. It was there, too, that Oliver's voice quivered and broke, for it seemed that some solemn shadow had fallen upon the room and everyone in it. It was the shadow of the awful tragedy of the Cave of Dead Men.

It was a great relief when the last chapters had been told, and the documents read which Ralph had rescued and brought with him. Then we breathed freely once more, but we also kept our eyes carefully away from the face which was now stained with tears. Yet when Lady Barmouth spoke, gratitude was mingled with her regret—yes, and sympathy too.

"It is a wonderful history," she said. "You young men have passed through terrible experiences, and you have shown great courage and ability. Yes, you

have nobly deserved the treasure which is now yours. May it help you to happiness! As for me, I am very much in your debt, not only for your story, which has given me a great peace, but also for the way in which you pitied and helped poor Richard Lewis.”

She pressed her hand to her heart as she recalled that sombre picture. Then she went on:

“What a faithful and loyal soul! His people want for nothing—I have seen to that, of course. But what a love and loyalty! It is surely the most beautiful thing on earth!”

We could not understand at first. But she went on to make her meaning clearer:

“Lord Barmouth,” she said softly, “always dreamed of that treasure island in the Atlantic. He unearthed many old records and traditions . . . and, of course, he was right—quite right, from his point of view. He found the island and the treasure. Yet all the while there was a greater treasure at his side. He recognised it, too—he was not the man to make a mistake: and I hope you young men will never, never mistake the values of things, and give the first place to that which should come last. . . . But there, you must forgive an old woman her tendency to preach. You have given her a great and solemn text, you know.”

Then she rose, and the interview was over; but I was still pondering over her remarks when the last farewells had been said, and when we stood on the pavement in Grosvenor Square. But I did not get her whole meaning just then. It was to come later.

The remainder of that day’s programme was of a lighter character. After we had worked off some of our superfluous energy in a gorgeous lunch and in buying presents, Ralph left us to find his way to a mother waiting for him in a little village in Berkshire. When he had seen her he was to come down to join us both at Leigh-on-Sea, and to meet again the lady whose brooch of Chilian gold dollars had so impressed itself upon his memory. And I knew that he would not lose much time in clearing things up in Berkshire. Then I saw Charlie off at Fenchurch Street by the three-eighteen, after binding him to come round to Ruth’s lodgings in the evening—when I had brought her home.

I spent the rest of the afternoon in the City, some portion of it in a public reading-room. It occurred to me to search the press for some reference to Honeycomb Island and our marvellous escape, but it was my turn to marvel when I found what I wanted. There was no word whatever about the old *John Duncan*, but only that fatuous mistake about “three survivors of the ship *Effingham Towers*,” names, Brown, Cornwall, and Oliver, having been landed in Brazil. Well, what a stir there would be in the press when the true story came out! But Ruth must believe me dead! What would her face be like when I

came to her side in the street and touched her elbow! What a time it would be when she realised the truth! What *would* she say? Then the programme became a bit hazy, but one or two facts emerged clearly from the golden uncertainty.

Ruth should no longer be a typist in the City, going up by the seven-forty in the morning and coming down by the six-twenty-six at night, pallid and drawn and almost too tired to smile. Oh, no, not a bit of it! Messrs. Bale and Pennington, shipowners, of Leadenhall Street, should advertise for another typist, and Ruth should be mistress of the house I would take for us two at Westcliff. . . . And then, remembering what a trial I had often been to her, I found my heart a little sore. Now that I was rich I would make it all up to her. Good old Ruth!

At five I turned my steps towards Leadenhall Street, and chose a position in a doorway nearly opposite the offices of Messrs. Bale and Pennington. I took good care, of course, not to make myself conspicuous. Ruth would be free at six, and I could wait in patience till she made an appearance. Then my little programme would come into operation.

During that hour I watched without impatience the flow of traffic in that busy thoroughfare of the City, and the stream of clerks that kept issuing from dark doorways and narrow passages with their faces set for home. What a hive they were in those gloomy buildings and behind those dirty windows, month after month, year after year! And what a world they were missing, a world where high winds blew freely and where frothy billows rode like giants over half a world of green water. I thought of that night on the raft, that golden night when the Wall of Water had come upon us; and I thought of that rosy dawn out of which the *Pernambuco* had emerged to save us. With all this a longing came upon me to show that other world to these slaves of desk and pen, to send a fierce, rollicking breeze from the South Atlantic raging through the narrow streets and courts with a voice like thunder.

Then I roused myself from my dreams, for the clocks struck six. A great motor-bus rolled up and stopped just before me, blotting out for a while the door of Messrs. Bale's offices. It jerked itself away again, and the road was clear; and at that instant Ruth came out of her office door and was walking away.

But I had changed my plan now. I would not go behind her and touch her on the shoulder. The very sight of that face had filled me with sympathy—and common sense too. To greet her in that way would give her a great shock, and I must find some other means.

I followed her on to Billiter Street at a short distance, and so through to Fenchurch. There the six-twenty-six was already at the platform, and Ruth took her seat in a third-class carriage. I, of course, had to take another compartment, thus abandoning the second part of my programme also. And as

the train rushed down into Essex I recalled what I had seen of her as I followed. She wore a black coat and hat that seemed almost new. No, I must not startle her by a sudden appearance. How thoughtless I had been in my plans!

So it was in a penitent mood that I got out of the train at Leigh and followed her in the dusk up the dreary platform to the gate. It was still too soon to go to her—I must wait a little longer. At last, however, she gave me my opportunity, for she turned off along the cliff and sat down to rest upon one of the public seats. Then I knew what I could do. I could go home first and see how things really stood.

So, after one long look at the forlorn figure, up the hill I went to the gate of Mrs. Thorpe's little cottage, to find the same fern-pot in the front window still, the same curtains neatly draped around it. I did not knock—I simply opened the door and walked in, with the intention of going straight through to the kitchen. I could hear young voices through the closed door, and would probably find all the family there. But on the way I passed the little front room which Mrs. Thorpe let to visitors during the summer, but which Ruth used during the winter for the overtime work she sometimes brought home from the City. The door was open and a small fire was burning brightly in the grate, but the lamp had not yet been lit.

I went in and closed the door. In one corner stood the old screen I knew so well, covered with pictures from the *Graphic*. I laid upon the table, in the dim light from the fire, several small parcels which bulked out my pockets, displaying the contents as well as I could. Then I took the chair behind the screen to wait and think.

It was a wait of half an hour. In that room, with the familiar old pictures blinking at me in the uncertain firelight, I recalled all that Ruth had been to me since we had been left together—the restless boy, and the girl of eighteen who had had the task of caring for him. I thought of my endless rebellions, and of the many times when she had found herself forced to give way before my stubborn spirit—to give way with a fine patience that never allowed an angry word to fall from her lips. That was not weakness—there was no weakness in the girl who had taught herself shorthand, typewriting, and French, and had won and held single-handed a useful place in the City. It was not weakness but patience and love that had marked her ways throughout, and had held me longer than anything else could have done. Her gentle protest, "Oh, Frank!" had been at last more effective than any scolding, and her look had had the power to fill me with shame, compunction, or penitence, as the case might be. But at the last I had broken away to follow my own dream of fortune, taking eagerly the chance offered by our Welsh uncle. I had broken away, without a word of love or gratitude, leaving her to fight her fight alone.

No, it was not a pleasant record, and I grew hot and angry as I called it up. From my pocket I took a slip of card, and in the firelight wrote these words upon it: "To the best sister a fellow ever had." Then I laid it upon the table among the presents, and returned to my place.

I was only just in time. Immediately afterwards steps sounded without, the door opened, and Ruth came into the darkened room. She came straight over to the hearth, and sat down in the corner chair with a great sigh. Then a silence fell, broken only by the noises of the fire . . . but in a while I heard another sound. My sister was crying.

It was very hard to keep quiet in my hiding-place. She had rested on the cliffs, looking out at the great ships that passed down the river, and thinking, no doubt, of that grey day when the old *John Duncan* had passed down with a new 'prentice on board. Then she had come to the fireside to dream again. . . . I wished I could kick myself for listening.

But after a while the crying ceased. Ruth rose, and slowly took off her coat and hat. Then she moved to the door, intending to take them out to the little hat rack in the hall. But as she passed the table, something caught her eye there—something that glittered in the firelight. There was a pause—a deep silence. An instant later she had lit the gas and was gazing at the amazing booty I had laid out for her—the gold watch-bracelet, the belt with the golden clasps, the ring, the necklace and pendant, the gloves—all the finery on which I had expended over fifty pounds that morning in the City. Last, but not least, she found my card and read it as in a dream.

"To the best sister a fellow ever had."

I heard her breathing heavily. I heard a broken, strangled "Oh!" . . . I don't quite know what happened afterwards, but when things began to shape themselves again I found Ruth's arms around my neck, clasped so tightly that I could not jerk out even a word. Still, there was no need!

But she looked up at last through her tears, looked up to see if I were really there or not. Then she looked at the treasures just once—only to turn from them instantly as if they did not matter at all. And what a treasure of understanding there was in her glance!

"Oh, you silly boy," she said, between her sobs. "It was only *you* I wanted!"

We spent the whole evening over my story, Charlie Cornwall coming up from his house to form one of the party. Mrs. Thorpe, too, was there, and her elder children, wide-eyed and eager; and as I went through that strange and wonderful record on to its happy ending, Ruth's jewels gleamed and sparkled upon the humble table of the tiny room. And now and again, as their gleam caught my eye, it seemed to me that they spoke of another world which had

somehow got mingled with this plain, everyday world of Leigh-on-Sea, and the daily train, and the City. And that was the world that lies beyond the horizon, in the secret places of the farthest seas, not so easily discoverable as in the olden days, perhaps, but still open to those who have the heart to seek it.

But it was not only there, it was here in our very home circle; and I saw it most clearly, I think, when Ruth learned that Ralph Oliver, whom I praised so long and so earnestly, was someone whom she had met. I told her as cautiously as I could, and pretended that I did not notice her start and flush when I reminded her of the smart young Third Officer who had once sat for half an hour in her little den in Leadenhall Street. But I saw the look, nevertheless, and smiled over it in secret. Certainly we were going to see things by-and-by!

“Say, old man,” said Charlie suddenly. “I think Lady Barmouth was right this morning.”

I looked my question, and he went on: “We’ve had some queer experiences, and we’ve seen strange things. We’ve been after treasure, too, and we’ve handled it—lots of it. But these things aren’t nearly as important as we used to think and as the story-books seemed to say. The really important things are quite different ones.”

Quietly I slipped one arm through his and the other through Ruth’s. They turned to look into my face at the same time. And I gave the name to his conclusion in a whisper that only those two could catch:

“Yes,” I said, “quite different ones, and generally to be found at home. They come first, after all—and they always shall with me!”

“And me!” said Charlie.

“And now supper’s ready,” said Mrs. Thorpe.

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Spelling and punctuation have been changed silently to achieve consistency.

[The end of *In the Secret Sea* by William Edward Cule]