



# THE SECRET OF LOTOS ISLAND

**MICHAEL POOLE**

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*Finding the ship's figure-head in the treasure-chamber*

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THE SECRET  
OF  
LOTOS ISLAND

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MICHAEL POOLE



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# CHAPTER I

## TIM GAMBIER FINDS A CHUM

“**R**EADING again?” Andrew Gambier snarled, and, even as his nephew made an effort to put the paper away, the elderly man had snatched it from him.

“There’s no harm——” Tim Gambier began to excuse himself, but his uncle quickly silenced him.

“None of that!” Andrew Gambier’s hand was raised in a moment, and, before Tim could dodge it, the open palm had caught him a stinging blow across the cheek.

“Now get into the yard!” Andrew Gambier cried, then stopped for an instant as he realised that Tim had clenched his fists and into his eyes had come a look which his uncle had never seen before.

Just for that brief moment it seemed that Tim Gambier was going to spring and strike back.

Then, as though with a tremendous effort, he stood rigid as a statue, and Andrew Gambier could hear the deep yet sharp breathing of the lad as he kept control of himself.

“You’d better go and chop that wood,” old Gambler said, but he spoke weakly, and turned almost at once and left the room. For the first time in his life Andrew Gambier realised that the boy had a will and a temper of his own, just as his father before him.

But to Tim Gambier the moment when his uncle struck him was a turning-point in his life. Ever since he could remember, the queer shop of Andrew Gambier, marine store and general dealer, had been Tim’s home, and since leaving school, nearly two years ago, he had been the handyman. Only at night, when he was allowed to go to his small bedroom, did Tim enter into a world of his own.

Here he read strange tales of adventure and dreamed dreams of the great deeds he himself would accomplish one day. But so far he had made no

attempt to convert his dreams into realities. It was that blow from Andrew Gambier which brought the change. The vague ideas of his dreams fell from him and he faced hard facts.

“I’m going away!” he decided, quite clearly and definitely. “I’m going to-day. I’ve finished with this place.”

He went from the sitting-room and up to his bedroom. In some way he felt just a little excited, and had the feeling that he had grown much older in the past half-hour.

Actually he was not yet sixteen, but he was big and sturdily built. During the past few years he had walked many miles on his uncle’s errands and had lifted heavy loads, so that his muscles were hard and firm.

As he hunted round the room for his own few treasures, his mind worked rapidly. He was not dreaming now but planning every detail.

“I’ll go to the cave first of all,” he decided. “Better stay there till it’s dark and then get down to Daresbury sidings. I’m not taking any risks.”

Presently he stole quietly from the house. Half an hour or so from the mean street in which Andrew Gambier’s shop stood, Tim came to the Cranmere Woods.

Most of the country around Daresbury was flat enough, but the woods were a jumble of ravines and crevices and queer twisting paths which led through the bramble and bracken. Tim followed the broadest of the paths, but presently turned and plunged into the thick undergrowth which separated the pathway from a wall of rock.

A few moments later he was clambering up the side of the rock till he reached a narrow ledge. From here he crawled no more than a few feet—then disappeared completely!

It was quite by chance Tim had discovered this retreat. From below, even in winter when the foliage was less, no one would guess that a crevice in the rock led to a much larger opening which formed quite a splendid cave.

Here, on those rare summer afternoons when he could escape from the shop, Tim came and read the books he brought with him. He had made it a comfortable retreat, covering the floor with dry bracken, and fitting the walls with useful gadgets made from oddments picked up at the shop.

This afternoon he was not anxious to read. Instead, he took down the haversack which was hanging there and began to pack it with his few belongings.



“I’ll get to Liverpool some way or another,” he told himself. “Then I’ll have to trust to luck to get a ship. I’m going abroad! That’s settled. But I’ll have to—— What was that?”

He stopped suddenly and listened. Once or twice he had heard strange sounds this afternoon. The woods were very quiet and still to-day, but now and again the silence had been broken by a shrill, long-drawn-out whistle, and once Tim fancied he heard a sharp cry. Then he told himself that it was nothing, or at most some animal fighting for its life.

But now, from somewhere below him, came a rustling noise as though some big animal were struggling through the undergrowth. And then Tim fancied he could hear sharp gasps which scarcely sounded like an animal.

Tim had crept from the cave and was leaning right over the ledge when he heard the gasps. Suddenly the bracken immediately below him was pushed apart, and a human figure appeared.

Even in the first few moments Tim recognised that the intruder was not much more than a boy. He was kneeling among the grass and bracken, and seemed to be badly out of breath, to judge by the way he was panting.

Yet he was evidently expecting some one else to appear, and was afraid of being discovered. As Tim watched him he saw him lean forward and peer through the bushes. Then he started back, as through the woods there echoed that long, shrill whistle.

As Tim watched him he caught sight of something else. Down the side of the intruder’s face was a red, ugly patch, and it was only too plain that the boy, whoever he was, had been badly hurt.

For the time, at all events, Tim forgot his own plans. Here was some one who needed help, and wanted it quickly.

The quickest way down from his present position was the simplest. Tim merely lowered himself over the ledge and dropped almost by the side of the injured boy. Instantly the latter was on his feet, and Tim had a quick vision of him backing away, but with his arms raised ready to strike the moment Tim drew nearer.

“It’s all right!” Tim jerked the words out. “I thought you wanted help. Can I do anything?”

The other lad’s arms came down, and he regarded Tim keenly. Now that Tim saw him clearly, he realised that the newcomer was only a boy not much older than himself.

Yet there was something about him which made him different from any other boy Tim had ever met. Perhaps it was the thick mop of black hair, all rough and tousled, or it may have been his dress, which was unusual. There was a thick Norfolk jacket, which had a big, jagged tear near the left shoulder. The shirt the boy wore was of white silk, but it was badly marked with dark red stains. It was open at the front, and slightly torn in one or two places. He had on light brown riding-breeches and light puttees.

“Where do you come from? Have you only just seen me?” The new boy asked the questions challengingly.

“Of course I’ve only just seen you,” Tim assured him. “I was up there, and I thought you must have been hurt with something.”

The lad laughed and held out his hand. Tim guessed, rather than knew for a certainty, that this was a sign that they were going to be friends, and the injured boy himself put the idea into words.

“That’s all right!” he laughed. “You’re on my side right away! We’re going to be friends—and I’m wanting a real chum very badly just now. Listen!”

Again came that long, shrill whistle. When Tim had heard it before he had merely thought it queer. Now, for some reason which he could scarcely explain, it seemed to hold a menacing note.

Almost before it had died away, the answer was given. A shorter, sharper whistle sounded from somewhere not nearly so far away from the two boys.

“Is there any chance of hiding round here?” Tim’s new friend asked quickly. “They’re after me. They won’t let me get away next time. There’s three or four of them. Quick! They’ll settle both of us if they get us now. You lead!”

“Get up here!” Tim asked no further questions. “Cling on to that ledge which juts out. Now! Lever yourself up! I’m following!”

Within sixty seconds the two were inside the cave, which was Tim’s retreat. It was still lighted with two candles, and in their glow Tim noticed a quick spasm of pain cross his new chum’s face, but a moment later he was smiling cheerfully enough as he looked round.

“Jove! But this is pretty decent,” he said. “We’d better not talk too loudly. My name is Maynard—Dick Maynard. What’s yours?”

“Tim Gambier. I’ve been living in Daresbury. Do you live anywhere about here?”

“No.” Dick Maynard was wiping his face with a handkerchief which was already badly marked. “But I started out to get to Daresbury—oh, months ago, so it seems! I’ve come from the other side of the world, and I thought I’d got clear of that brute, Grettrex. He must have come by a faster boat, and they were waiting for me when I landed. They nearly had me to-day! Next time—they’ll kill me for sure!”

He said it quite calmly, but Tim knew that he spoke the simple truth. Maynard was listening intently now, and suddenly raised a warning hand. Together the two crept very cautiously from the cave and lay full length on the ledge. Through the trees Tim could just discern the head of a man. As he stood there he whistled, a curious, wailing call, which was evidently a signal to some one.

Almost immediately another man emerged from the steep, tree-covered slope which ran down from the pathway. This second man, so far as Tim could judge, was younger than the first. The older man was bearded and was evidently tall and well built. The newcomer was shorter and much more lightly built. His face was small and thin, but very swarthy, so that at first Tim thought he was a Hindoo.

“You’ve missed him?” The older man rapped out the sentence as soon as the second appeared. “Where’s Rignold? We’ve got to get Maynard before it’s dark. He’s not reaching Delamere’s house alive!”

Tim dared to turn his head towards Dick Maynard while they lay listening to the men’s talk. There was a queer little smile on his new friend’s face, and he seemed to be amused at what he heard. But neither of them spoke till the two men had gone, presumably to find their companion, whose name was Rignold.

“Well, Tim?” Maynard turned and was still smiling a little. “What do you think of the game now? That big chap was Grettrex, by the way, and he’s the chief cause of all the trouble. But how do you stand? Have you got to get back home, or is there any chance of your standing by me and giving a hand? You’ll run risks—but I’m needing a chum pretty badly.”

“I’ll do anything you want,” Tim asserted swiftly. “It doesn’t matter about home or anything. I was going away to-day, whatever happened. I’ll stick to you—if you’ll have me.”

“Good man!” Maynard said. “Let’s get inside your cubby-hole and we’ll talk it over.”

They crept back to the little cave again. Even as they went, Tim heard the

little gasp of pain Maynard gave. It was obvious that he had been pretty badly hurt, and now and again had a sharp reminder of the fact.

“It’s my ankle chiefly,” Maynard said, as they sat down, and began to get his puttees and a boot off. In the pale light Tim could see that the ankle was already swollen.

“You can’t walk far with that,” Tim warned him. “You won’t be able to get your boot on anyway! If I could help you to the doctor’s——”

“I’m going to stay here for a while, Tim,” Maynard said. “It will be safer, especially now I’ve got a chum to lend me a hand. I’d better tell you something about myself. But promise me, Tim—if anything does happen, either to you or me, you’ll never tell any one except one man what I have told you?”

“I promise,” Tim answered swiftly. “Honour bright!”

“Good!” Dick nodded. “Do you know where Mr. John Delamere lives? His address is the White House, Malperton, near Daresbury.”

“I know it very well,” Tim told him. “He’s a professor or something of the sort, isn’t he? Mr. Delamere, I mean. They say he’s a very clever man and has travelled all over the world.”

“That’s right,” Dick agreed. “He’s a big chum of my father’s, and it was John Delamere who discovered all about Lotos Island and its treasure. It’s a big secret, of course, and Mr. Delamere would have gone back to Lotos Island himself, but the doctors said he had to settle down for a time. So it was decided that my father should go alone, and I was very keen to go with him. But on our boat we had this chap, Grettrex, and he got to know quite a lot. That’s what led to all this present trouble.”

“Where is this place—Lotos Island?” Tim asked. “I mean—I’ve forgotten a lot of geography I learned at school.”

“You never heard of Lotos Island anyway!” Maynard laughed. “It isn’t in any geography book, because it was lost almost as soon as it was discovered. It’s away in the South Seas, and my father is a prisoner there now. I managed to get away, but unless I can get something from Mr. Delamere, or persuade him to come back with me, they will kill my father. I’ll tell you something of what happened, but it would take too long to tell you the full story now.”

Sitting there in the queer little cave, Dick Maynard told a story which to Tim seemed to surpass every tale of adventure he had ever read. He heard of how the *Good Hope*, setting sail in the year 1862 from Melbourne, with a great

cargo of gold on board, had utterly disappeared. Queer stories had arisen about the *Good Hope*, but no one had ever learned the full truth till John Delamere, on one of his voyages of exploration in the Southern Seas, had discovered in strange fashion the descendant of one of the men who had sailed on the *Good Hope*.

He had discovered, too, something even more wonderful. This was the secret of the mystery of the island of Lotos, where this man ruled as king. Delamere had promised to return, but, unable to do so, had sent Robert Maynard and his son. From past experience Delamere had no intention of making his discovery public until he could prove every detail and had even established certain rights.

Neither he nor Maynard had foreseen certain complications which might arise when Maynard went to Lotos. Nor had it been realised that something of the wonderful secret had leaked out, and that others were now scheming to gain whatever wealth and advantages Lotos Island held for them.

“They want me out of the way and then persuade Delamere that they have been sent by my father,” Maynard said. “That’s the main idea at present. But you’ve got to get to John Delamere’s and give him this. Don’t give it to anybody else but Mr. Delamere himself.”

From a pocket which was fitted in the leather belt he was wearing, Dick took out a leather pouch.

“There’s a letter in that,” he explained, as he handed it to Tim. “Your job is straightforward enough at present. Get to Mr. Delamere and hand him the letter. Tell him all about your meeting with me and how I’m fixed for the time being. Then act as he advises. He’ll be in charge of the job from the moment he gets that letter!”

“Right! I’ll do that,” Tim said. “But what about you?”

“Don’t worry about me until you’re quite sure it’s safe to return here,” Dick told him. “I’ve got a certain amount of food on me, and I can carry on for a day or two at all events. Any water in that bottle?”

“It’s not very fresh,” Tim said doubtfully. “I was going to fill it later. But you can boil it on that little stove. There’s cocoa and sugar here, too.”

They made their arrangements swiftly, and once again Dick Maynard gripped Tim’s hand.

“Good luck, chum!” he said. “We’ll pull through all right.”

Tim nodded, then crept from the cave. Outside he listened intently for a

few moments, then, very quietly and cautiously, dropped to the ground. He did not attempt to hurry through the woods once he was well away from the cave. Already some new instinct had come to life, and he had become cool and calculating.

The distance to the edge of the wood was not more than three hundred yards. A short field-path would then take him to the high road, and the White House, where John Delamere lived, was little more than half a mile farther on.

He reached the edge of the wood safely enough, and had actually gone half a dozen yards or so along the field-path when a figure appeared. The man was walking alongside Tim almost before he realised it.

In the half-light of evening it was difficult to make certain whether the man was one of the two who had discussed Dick Maynard just below the cave, but as soon as he heard the man's voice Tim knew him to be the second of the two men.

"Well, my lad," he began, as he fell into step. "Just come through the woods, haven't you? Seen any one as you came through?"

"In Cranmere Woods?" Tim laughed as though the question amused him. "You don't see anybody on days like this, sir. But it's a short cut for me."

"You've come straight through?" the stranger asked.

"No," Tim said. "I came by the path, and that's a twisty affair—nothing straight about that!"

Still the stranger kept up his questions, which Tim answered half cheekily, till they came to the stile which led to the main road. He would have jumped over this quickly, but some one else came from the other side and barred the way for a time.

"Nothing doing!" the man who was with Tim reported. "This youngster's seen nothing, and he's come right through the woods."

"Where are you going?" The big, bearded man, whom Maynard had called Grettex, had jumped over the stile and gripped Tim by the shoulder. "You've come through the woods and you've seen nobody? Not been stopped and asked to deliver a message? Quick! Tell me!"

The temper which had been on the man an hour or two ago seemed to have reached breaking-point, so that even an ordinary errand-boy became an enemy on whom he could vent his rage.

"Let me go!" Tim wrenched himself free for a moment, but the man

grabbed him again and rapped out a command to the other.

“Hold on to him, Klingmann!” he cried. “I’ll choke the truth out of him! Search him! See if he’s got any message! We’re not letting any chance go by. Now——”

Into Tim’s mind flashed the thought that the time had passed for argument. Just for an instant he seemed to collapse beneath the heavy hand that gripped him. Then, instead of going straight down, he lurched forward, throwing the whole weight of his body against the man’s legs.

For a moment there was a risk that the man would fall on top of him, but Tim had anticipated the danger. He half sprawled, half twisted across the damp grass, even while his opponent was falling heavily to the ground just behind him.

With a quick twist Tim was on his feet again and made a dash for the stile. Klingmann was jumping forward in the same instant, and he was grabbing Tim just as his hand touched the rail.



## CHAPTER II

### A NIGHT OF ADVENTURE

**T**HE instant Tim felt the man's hand upon him, he swung round and struck out. Even though it probably did not harm the man, the force was just sufficient to make him relax his grip for a time.

Again Tim dodged quickly and realised that the bigger man was now scrambling to his feet. The stile as a way of escape was out of the question now, and, just eluding the grasp of Klingmann again, Tim turned and dashed along the field by the side of the hedge.

He could hear the men give a call. "Rignold! Rignold! Quick!" Then he grasped the fact that three of them were in full pursuit.

But this field was known to Tim as well as the by-paths in Cranmere Woods. Almost to the end of the hedge he ran, then turned swiftly at a place where the hedge was much thinner and two strands of wire had been stretched across. Knowing the wire, Tim knew just how to negotiate it. He neither made a big jump nor attempted to climb, but simply flung himself at it, and, with a kind of somersault, just tumbled and scrambled over.

He was racing full speed down the broad road before the two men quite grasped the fact that he had disappeared through the hedge. By the time they had negotiated the wire Tim had a clear seventy yards' start on them.

After that he must have left them farther and farther behind. When he turned up the drive which led to the White House there was no sign of his pursuers.

Yet Tim raced up the drive and pressed the bell-push at the side of the door instantly. It seemed to him that he waited a full five minutes for an answer, but actually the servant came quickly in response to furious ringing.

"I've an important message for Mr. Delamere," Tim told the man-servant. "Can I come inside, please—right away. I'll explain everything then."

Almost before he had finished he had stepped forward to enter the hall. The man-servant showed not the slightest trace of excitement, and even

stepped to one side to allow him to enter. Without another word Tim came right in, and the door was closed behind him.

“You come with me,” the man-servant said. “If you’ve got a yarn to pitch the Captain—he’ll hear it!”

Of all the strange experiences in this queer day, these next few minutes probably impressed Tim the most. The elderly man-servant, perfectly dressed and very erect, had a hard-bitten, wrinkled, and tanned face which seemed in curious contrast to the glossy whiteness of his massive shirt front. Yet he seemed in keeping with the broad hall, dimly lighted now, which was filled with mementoes of an explorer’s life. A great fish was mounted on a pedestal, and near this was a huge bear, upright and terrifying. On the walls were strange spears and guns, while the floor was covered with rugs which had grinning heads and big, polished claws.

So much Tim’s eyes took in as he followed his guide, and he began to wonder whether he were still awake or dreaming.

The man knocked at the door, then, opening it, motioned Tim to enter. It was not a large room but seemed wonderfully comfortable, and in front of the fireplace stood a well-built, thick-set man, with a clean-shaven face and a broad, gently smiling mouth. Tim had never seen Mr. John Delamere, but he had heard of him, and guessed that he was now facing him.

“Pardon, sir,” the servant began, almost as though he were going to say a recitation. “This youngster comes flying up to the door—saw him myself, sir—and you’d hear him ring the bell? He’s a bit excited, and he says it’s an important message he’s got. His name—spike my guns! What is your name, young fellow?”

“Tim Gambier, sir,” Tim’s eyes were fixed on Delamere.

“And what’s all the excitement about, Tim?” Delamere asked, and still seemed to be quietly amused about everything.

Tim pulled himself together then, and, quite clearly and without fumbling, told of his meeting with Dick Maynard, of the letter he had asked him to bring, and of his escape from the men in the field.

“Young Dick Maynard here?” The smile had gone from Delamere’s face as he took the leather pouch from Tim’s hand. “No! Don’t go, Joe! I may need you!”

The last command was to his servant, and the latter nodded his head as though to tell Tim that everything would be all right now. Mr. Delamere had

taken a thick envelope from the leather pouch, and having torn the letter open, was now reading it intently, holding it near the one light that was burning in the room, as though anxious to see every detail.

It took him five minutes to read the letter right through, and when at last he looked up, a change had come over his face. It was no longer gently amused, but was rather the face of a fighter who is up against a hard task.

“You were wanting excitement, Joe, this afternoon,” he said to his servant. “It’s come, my lad! Doctor or no doctor, we’re going to weigh anchor again, and it looks as though there might be a bit of gun-play for you, Bratt! Good job you keep your pistols clean. But what about you, young Gambier? Where’s your home? What are you doing?”

A whole string of questions Tim had to answer swiftly, but in the end Delamere knew everything there was to know.

“Very good, Tim!” he said at last. “We’ll sign you on as one of the crew. You’ll come to Lotos with us. Let’s test you now! Draw me a plan showing exactly where Dick Maynard is at this moment.”

Paper and pencil were produced, and Tim indicated the precise spot where his cave lay in Cranmere Woods.

“Good boy!” Delamere examined the sheet carefully, and then showed it to Joe Bratt, who studied it with equal care while his master went on talking. “Then you’ll stay here, Tim. We’ll arrange all details later, and if there’s any fuss I’ll settle with this uncle of yours. We’ve got to get to Dick now and bring him back here—get him patched up as quickly as possible! And we’ve got to shake off those blackguards who are hanging round. Dick will be able to tell me more about them. We’ll have the doctor along, too, just to run over the lot of us. You listen to me now, Joe!”

He was making arrangements and laying plans already. Once Tim ventured to point out that Dick Maynard had urged him to use every care not to betray his hiding-place too soon, as the three men were pretty desperate characters.

Delamere smiled and Bratt nodded sharply.

“Don’t interrupt the Captain!” Bratt said. “Ye’re but a boy, though I doubt not but what ye’ve got a man’s heart. But the Captain will run no risks.”

“That’s all right, Tim!” Delamere himself said. “Don’t you worry! Joe and I will fix everything up about young Dick. I think your best plan will be to have a good supper and then away to bed. Take him along, Joe, and look after him. I’ll see you again shortly.”

A few minutes later Tim was in another room and presently eating an excellent cold meal. That, and the calm confidence of Bratt, had an inspiring effect upon the boy. It had been a wonderful day, after all, and ahead of him lay great adventures. Even Bratt insisted that nothing could go wrong now that “the Captain” had taken the task in hand.

“It’s a lucky lad you are that the Captain’s taken a fancy to you,” Bratt assured him. “And now you’d better come along with me, and I’ll show you where you’ll get a good night’s rest.”

Tim went with him to a pleasant bedroom, and Bratt moved quietly about the room, but presently, with a cheery good-night, Joe left him. Actually, Tim was not particularly tired yet, and he was more than anxious to know how Dick Maynard fared. For a time he was content to sit in an armchair, pondering over all that had happened and the prospects for the future.

It must have been three-quarters of an hour later when Tim rose, with a vague idea in his mind that he had heard some sound just outside the window. He crossed over, but some instinct advised caution, and he dropped to a kneeling position before moving the curtain so that he could peer through the pane farthest from the one window which had been left open.

But he could see nothing at first in the grounds outside, though he peered intently. It was doubtless because of his concentration that he failed to hear the sound from the side window at his back. When he did turn, attracted by a faint rustle, he was just in time to see the figure of a man slipping quietly into the room.

Instantly Tim was on his feet and backing away from the fellow, with an idea of getting to the door of the room and escaping that way.

“Help!” He gave one sudden shout as he tried to jump back, but the man had made a bigger leap, and Tim went down before the sudden onslaught.

The man seemed possessed of demoniacal strength. Tim could feel the grip on his throat slowly tightening, until it seemed that his windpipe would be squeezed to pulp.

“I’ll kill you if you make another sound!” the man hissed in his ear. “Listen to what I say! You’ve got to decide quickly! Get to the door, Klingmann!”

Another man had suddenly made his appearance in the room, and he crossed over to the door, opened it cautiously, and listened for a time. The pressure on Tim’s throat was slowly relaxed.

“You will lead us to where young Maynard is hiding!” his captor

whispered in his ear. "Don't try any tricks! You'll go out the moment you do."

It was evident that the one call for help which Tim had managed to make had not been heard. The real reason came to him as his mind began to work again. Mr. Delamere and Bratt had doubtless gone out to find Dick. There were, as Tim had gathered, two maid-servants in the house, but probably they had gone to bed some time ago, and were already asleep.

"You'll lead us to where Maynard is!" the man whose name Tim assumed to be Rignold told him again. "It's your only chance!"

Tim had made up his mind already. He would agree to their command and lead them to Cranmere Woods—but not to the part where Dick Maynard had sheltered. Once he got them into the densest part—well, Tim calculated that as he knew every inch of the woods and the men probably didn't know them at all, there wouldn't be much difficulty in making his escape while he was pretending to be searching for Maynard.

He played his part well. Within a few minutes he had obeyed the command to climb down the thick creeper which covered this part of the house. One man went before him, and another kept behind him as guard.

The moment he reached the ground he was gripped by the first man, and, a second or two later, the other man was by his side.

"Better make sure of him!" whispered Rignold. "Bind his wrists!"

Tim's hands were forced behind his back, and a stout piece of cord twisted about his wrists. This upset Tim's prospects to some extent, since it was obviously going to be a good deal more difficult to get away with this handicap than if he were free. Rignold had taken charge of the loose end of the cord, quite close to Tim, and he commanded the youngster to keep in step with him.

They marched him along quite close to the hedge once they were away from the house, and they questioned him closely as to what had happened this afternoon, and what message he had taken to John Delamere. It was useless for Tim to deny that he had seen Maynard, but he stuck to it that all he had done was to deliver a message. He was staying the night at Delamere's house because he was afraid to go home.

"Delamere's gone out to find the youngster," Rignold said. "He doesn't know anything yet. If we can keep him from the youngster, Grettex will deal with Delamere all right. Hullo! That's good! Gret has picked up a car all right!"

They had reached that part of the road where the stile led to the pathway over the fields. A little distance below the stile a car was drawn up, its lights dimmed down, and, as they approached, the big, bearded man walked towards them.

“All right!” Rignold reported. “Got this kid easily, and he’s taking us to where young Maynard is. We’ll have to move quickly, as Delamere’s evidently on the job—or gone to get an ambulance. You’ve seen nothing of him? I reckon—— Sh! Switch the lights right off!”

They were standing quite near the car, and in an instant Grettrex had put a hand inside and switched the lights off. From somewhere beyond the hedge a man’s voice, speaking in normal tones, floated to them on the still air.

“Not a sound!” Rignold whispered in Tim’s ear, and the youngster felt the touch of cold steel at the side of his throat for a moment.

“Don’t try to tell me anything yet, Dick,” Delamere was saying. “Sure your foot isn’t hurting you too much? I might have got a car to wait for us by the stile. Get over, Joe, and give a hand from the other side.”

A thousand ideas were in Tim’s mind. Rignold had pushed him forward, and Tim and his captors were now close to the hedge and right by the stile, even as Tim saw a dark figure clambering heavily over. With a sudden jerk Tim had jumped clear away from Rignold, though his wrists were still secured behind him.

“Look out, Dick! Ambush, Mr. Delamere!” Tim yelled the warning loud enough to be heard half a mile away. Then he jumped aside as Grettrex flung himself towards him.

Bratt was jumping down from the stile, and Delamere was leaping over it, leaving Maynard on the other side. Tim was sent sprawling by a fierce blow which Rignold swung at him, and he had no chance to save himself, but fell heavily to the ground.

Not that it mattered much, since he could have done little in the fight that had so swiftly sprung up. It was not easy to see all that happened in the dim light, but Tim was sure that the man who seemed to be jumping about the most and hitting with such amazing ferocity was Delamere.

“One for you, my hearty!” Bratt’s voice jerked out some sharp message every few moments, and this time Rignold went down and made no effort to rise. Klingmann took the count next, and Grettrex, who had dropped back, presumably with some idea of using the revolver he carried, never had a chance to carry out his ambition. They were both on him, and though Grettrex

made a brief pretence of fighting them, and might even have held them at bay, since he was a powerful fellow, he evidently judged again that discretion was the better course, and suddenly took to his heels.

“All right!” Delamere seemed quite content. “What about these pair? Are they wakening up now? Oh yes! Well, get them into this car, Joe, and we’ll leave them there. Maybe I’ll ring up the police later on, but I doubt if it’s worth while troubling much over such scum. Up with them, Joe! Come on, come on! You’re not sleeping quite so soundly as all that!”

Tim was on his feet now, and saw the two men placed in the waiting car by Delamere and Bratt. The door was banged to, and then Delamere turned and saw Tim.

“Oh, it was you who cried out then? Thought it was! What’s wrong? Tied up? We seem to be striking a whole lot of queer things to-night, Joe! We’ll get you unfastened and then we’ll get Dick along. After that, it’s home—and you can tell me your tale there, Tim. No, leave those fellows to themselves, Joe! We can’t trouble about them now.”

They took turns assisting Dick Maynard back to the White House, but they had no more interruptions from Grettex and his companions. Some time before they reached home they fancied they heard the sound of a car being started, and Delamere judged, quite rightly, that Grettex had returned to his companions and was now driving away with them. For the time being, at all events, their mission had utterly failed.

Sitting comfortably in Delamere’s room, they talked, and Tim began to understand more and more why Grettex and his companions had been so keen on preventing Dick Maynard from reaching John Delamere.

Grettex had been mate on the boat which Robert Maynard chartered for the voyage to Lotos Island. Once he realised the prize to be won on Lotos, Grettex had played false and attempted to oust Maynard.

It had merely led to his own undoing. The people of the island not only turned on Robert Maynard and his son, but upon Grettex and his companions. Maynard himself had made no attempt to escape, and had indeed undertaken to prove that he represented John Delamere, whose return they were so eagerly awaiting.

Of how Grettex had escaped with most of the crew and had set sail on the vessel which rightly belonged to Maynard, and of how Dick had stowed away on the same boat, unknown to Grettex, was a story which amazed even Delamere. Grettex had learned too late that Dick had escaped from the island



and was actually on his way to England to John Delamere.

Grettrex, with two others, had followed, and had obviously raced Dick in the journey to England. At first sight it seemed a tremendous amount of trouble to take, but the object of it became clearer as Dick talked.

“There’s some sign that Malam talks about,” Dick said, and then turned to Tim. “Malam is the King of Lotos Island—a queer sort of chap—and once he got it into his head that there was dirty work going on, he stuck out for this token being returned to him. He gave it to Mr. Delamere. I don’t know what it is, except that it is the Great White Queen in gold!”

Delamere had evidently been puzzled over Dick’s reference to a token, but he clapped his knee suddenly now.

“Your father talks about the Great White Queen in gold—and I didn’t quite grasp it when I first read the letter. But I’ve got it now! It’s a golden sovereign of 1857 or ’58, and Malam gave it to me. I never quite grasped that it would be regarded as a sign, though I knew Malam valued it a great deal.”

“If Grettrex and his crowd could get hold of that—or if they knew just what this token was and could get a duplicate—they could go back to Lotos, and Malam would simply do what they asked him,” Dick said. “That’s why they were so keen on keeping me from you, and then, I suppose, they relied on getting the token from you quite easily. That’s why they’ve gone to all this trouble. Now you know the truth, and know what they are out for, they’ve pretty well failed.”

“I’ve got the token all right,” Delamere said. “It was old Joe Malam’s, and Joe was the first white king of Lotos. He was not a bad fellow, so far as I have been able to gather, but he threw in his lot with the crowd who stole the *Good Hope*, and apparently he was the only one who lived to reap any benefit, though he never left Lotos after he landed there.”

Delamere briefly outlined the history of a certain British sailor, Joe Malam. So far as Delamere had been able to learn his story, Malam was a tactful man and had watched his chance. At all events, among a gang of cut-throats he had managed to preserve a whole skin. He had done more than that in becoming the ruler of the island of Lotos.

“Malam probably found difficulties at first in explaining what he meant, but there is no doubt that he expected a Government steamer to turn up sooner or later. He would be able to prove that he had taken no part in the mutiny on the *Good Hope* and that the gold was still quite safe. Possibly he expected some sort of a reward for handing the island over and having acquired it for the

British Empire.

“But the Empire never knew about it, and Joe Malam died before another white man came to Lotos. It is a son of Malam who carries on to-day. Probably the sovereign I have was handed to this son as a treasured possession and as a proof that the younger Malam, a half-caste but a native of Lotos, had British blood in his veins and still kept the Government property safe.

“When I landed on Lotos they welcomed me as the ‘Big Captain’ they had been expecting for more than half a century. The sovereign was handed to me; but I didn’t quite understand then that it was so important. For various reasons I had to leave Lotos after a short stay, but promised to come back to them.”

For other reasons Delamere had not made his discovery public. He meant to do so when the right time came, but he knew too much of the South Sea Islands to spread the news abroad too quickly. The islands have been exploited already far too much by the wrong type, and Delamere meant to carry through the job himself. Health had interfered, and the present curious position was the outcome.

“But we know where we are now,” he wound up. “You think your father will be safe enough for a time at all events, Dick? But the sooner we can get out to Lotos the better? Right! I’ll get busy on the arrangements at once. But for you two—bed.”

Ten minutes later both Dick and Tim were in bed, and Bratt had made Dick’s injured ankle fairly comfortable for the night. Despite the excitement of the day Tim was very soon asleep. He had gone out to seek adventure this afternoon, and, all things considered, he had undoubtedly found it!

And ahead of him lay more wonderful days and stranger adventures!

## CHAPTER III

### TO THE ISLAND AT LAST!

**T**O TIM GAMBIE the next few days were packed with excitement, even though they lacked any thrill of danger. He was pronounced fit by the doctor, who came along to run the tape-measure over them all, as Delamere phrased it. Delamere himself was apparently quite fit again, or at all events there was no suggestion that he was barred from taking the trip.

Great trunks were painted with their names in full, and a wonderful array of clothes was brought down from London. A watch, a compass, even a handy little revolver were handed over to Tim, and he had his first lessons in the use of both compass and revolver.

Delamere himself was busy with letters and cables, but by the end of a week all arrangements had been made. The four of them—Delamere, Dick Maynard, Tim Gambier, and Joe Bratt, with their mountain of baggage—said good-bye to the White House.

Nothing whatever had been heard of Grettex and his companions, though Tim gathered that the local police had been communicated with, and that they were keeping a watchful eye on the White House until the occupants departed on their trip to Australia.

Delamere intended to waste as little time as possible on the journey out, and, after crossing the Channel, they went through France and Italy to Brindisi, where they were in time to catch a boat to Port Said, and there picked up the Australian liner.

To Tim the whole journey was wonderful, though at times he wished they could have lingered longer in some of the places where they had to stay for a few hours. To Dick Maynard there was nothing very remarkable about the voyage, but he was just as happy as Tim in the thought that he had successfully accomplished his mission and had completely outwitted Grettex and his fellows.

“I guess we’ve shaken them off for good now,” he told Tim, as they strolled along the deck together. “Think of it! In less than six weeks, according

to Mr. Delamere's calculations, we shall be in Lotos Island. You wait till you've seen Lotos! Oh, but we'll have a great time there, old son!"

It seemed as though Dick's optimism was fully justified. They were in Melbourne on the very day Delamere had advised his friends to expect them. Almost as soon as they stepped off the boat, Delamere was busy with the final arrangements for their trip to Lotos.

The boys were left pretty much to their own devices during their few days in Melbourne. It was on the third day that Delamere and Bratt came into the sitting-room fairly late in the evening, looking as though they had both been mixed up in a rough-and-tumble. There was a rainbow touch of colour round Delamere's eye, and Bratt's collar had come unloosed from its moorings.

"Hullo, hullo! Not been meeting Grettrex again, have you? They can't be in Melbourne yet? What's happened, Skipper?"

Dick asked the questions all in one breath, and Delamere smiled. Bratt took off his collar altogether, having discovered that the buttonhole was no longer available for use.

"Oh, nothing very much, Dick. But I have an idea that Grettrex and his merry men are back. Not that they have been in the little argument at all. We had to make certain inquiries, Joe and I, in view of one or two hints that were given to us about the crew of the *Purple Heather*. You've never heard of a man called Valda Rumboltz, Dick?"

"Rumboltz?" Just for a moment Dick looked puzzled. "It's queer—but now you mention the name, I've an idea I heard Grettrex or one of his friends mention that very name just before they tumbled across me in Cranmere Woods. Rumboltz would see them through—something like that it was. But I can't tell you anything more. Who is Rumboltz anyway?"

"Oh, he's pretty well known in these parts and in all the islands," Delamere told him. "I have heard him called the 'uncrowned king of the Islands.' But his reputation isn't quite up to the description! Anyway, I'm inclined to think that it might be Mr. Rumboltz at the back of the awkward quarter of an hour Joe and I had this evening. If that is so, then it suggests that Grettrex has told him what he knows of Lotos Island, or that Rumboltz is interested in it in some way or other. So I think the sooner we slip away the better. As for our little argument with a crowd of larrikins to-night—we'll forget it!"

Thus it happened that on the following night the *Purple Heather*, a well-found steam-yacht which had been chartered on his behalf before Delamere reached Melbourne, put quietly out to sea. There had been quite a number of

difficulties, both with stores and crew, owing to the fact that the port was suffering from one of its periodical labour upheavals. But the difficulties had been overcome, and all was well.

If the voyage out to Australia had been a revelation to Tim, what should be said of the fortnight which followed? Once or twice they were among the islands, but most of the time they were out of sight of land. The days did not hang, for there were a hundred things to be done, a dozen tricks to be learnt, long talks with Joe Bratt on the lore and lure of the sea, discussions with Mr. Delamere about Lotos Island and the secrets which it held, or explanations of why this wonder-island, a gem set in the Southern Seas, had for so long been lost.

“To-morrow you will understand something of the reason,” Delamere told Tim one night, after they had been poring over maps and charts. “Somewhere about six o’clock in the morning we should be within thirty miles of Lotos, according to our calculations.”

It was a night of wondrous beauty—one such as only the Southern Seas can give. Added to this was a strange sense of excitement, which infected Tim. Dick could scarcely lie down to rest, but must be up on deck, walking to and fro and gazing across the gently heaving waters to that hidden place where his father, so he hoped, was still awaiting his return.

The sun came up, and even Bratt joined them to gaze across the sea. He, too, had been to Lotos Island before.

“I think I sight it!” John Delamere said at last. “What do you make of it, Joe? It’s the old cloud which hangs like a curtain around it. No one would ever dream——”

He broke off abruptly as a strange, horrible rattle filled the quiet air, followed by a dull explosion, which, in turn, was instantly succeeded by a rending and crashing as part of their main mast toppled foolishly backwards.

All in an instant, so it seemed, the quiet peace of the *Purple Heather* had changed to something resembling pandemonium. Men were running about the deck, and two or three fights appeared to have broken out with amazing swiftness. On the bridge they could see Captain McCurdy backing in bewildered amazement from the mate, and the latter had his superior covered with a revolver.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Delamere had lowered the glasses he held, and put one hand quickly to his hip pocket.

“A submarine!” Dick’s voice broke out. “I say, Mr. Delamere——”

On the opposite side of the boat something was approaching them. A long, dark grey shape it seemed, a ghost risen from the depths, with little showing above the surface except the queer, turret-shaped erection near the centre. As the shape came nearer they could see two guns, and there were three or four men standing together on the queer bridge of the strange craft. One of them was raising his hand to his mouth as though to shout out a command.

“Stand by, boys!” Delamere rapped out suddenly. “Are you there, Joe? It’s Rumboltz, unless I’m much mistaken. He’s come after all.”

In the next few minutes, despite all Delamere’s efforts to keep the boarders at bay, the men from the submarine had swarmed on the deck of the *Purple Heather*. In the confusion it was difficult to tell friend from foe, but two men at least had realised the ghastly truth. Both Mr. Delamere and Captain McCurdy grasped the fact that at least half their own crew had joined with the enemy the moment the yacht was boarded.

There could be no possible blame attached to either of them in this matter. Their job had been to concentrate on getting out of Melbourne, at an awkward time, as quickly as possible. The fact that Grettrex and his two companions, Klingmann and Rignold, had made the return trip to Australia almost as quickly as Delamere had made the voyage was likewise a matter of which Delamere was in complete ignorance. And still less chance had Delamere of learning that Valda Rumboltz, the uncrowned King of the South Seas, had become possessed of the ex-German submarine K.77, now renamed, ironically, the *Sleuth*.

In the confusion which followed the first onslaught of the men from the *Sleuth*, Tim and Dick struggled desperately to keep by Delamere’s side. But neither of them ever had a real chance. Tim was swept to the outskirts of the mob, and though he still clung desperately to the man who had first attempted to tackle him, some one quickly settled the argument from behind.

Tim never saw the man, but it was Grettrex himself, waiting his chance to lend a hand where needed, who brought down the short club he carried with stunning force on the side of Tim’s head. Tim’s grip on his man relaxed, and for a time, at all events, he was as helpless as a babe.

“Take him away!” Grettrex told the man who was still holding Tim. “We’ll have the lot settled in a few minutes now.”

Tim had a vague idea that another man took his left arm while his first opponent clung to his right, and they hurried him along the deck. Tim did not so much walk as allow himself to be dragged, since his legs seemed to have given way and his arms had lost their strength. He was flung into a corner of

one of the smaller cabins below, and was content to lie there for some time, dazed, bewildered, and aching, yet struggling to bring his mind to work.

Just how long he lay there Tim did not know. He had a vague idea that the door of the cabin opened once and that some one else came in and then went out. But at last Tim felt able to make an effort to stand upright and explore the cabin he was in. Not until then did he realise that there was some one else lying in a huddled heap in the cabin.

The light was not too good, but Tim recognised the figure by the clothes alone, and was bending down over the form.

“Dick! What’s happened?” The sudden fear which touched him now served as a tonic to Tim. It was pretty evident that Dick had been in the thick of the fight, for there was blood upon his head and clothes.

But he was alive, and at the end of a few minutes he was sitting up on the floor, still dazed and bewildered, but trying to ask questions about the nightmare experience from which he now seemed to be waking.

“What happened to Mr. Delamere and Bratt?” Tim asked presently, when both of them had begun to get a grip on realities again. “Are they still carrying on? If so, we ought to get out——”

“I saw Mr. Delamere go down myself,” Dick said. “He never had a chance. I don’t know what happened to Joe. I can’t understand it, Tim. Our own fellows were fighting against us and doing just what the others told them. We’ve been badly let down, Tim!”

He struggled to his feet, and for a time the pair were content to examine the little cabin which had now become a prison for them. They had been all over the boat many a time, and knew that every cabin on the *Purple Heather* was occupied. Yet there was nothing here to indicate that any one had used it.

They tried the door, without any particular hope, and, as they anticipated, found that it had been locked from the outside.

“But I can undo that!” Tim told Dick. “I know something about locks, because I’ve played about with them so often at my uncle’s show. Now what about it?”

The task, as a matter of fact, was not quite so easy as Tim expected, and there was the added disadvantage that at every slight sound they expected interruption. The light, too, was poor, and the electric bulb had been taken out. But at long last Tim accomplished the job, and they were free to leave the cabin just when they wished.



They had become aware some time ago that the *Purple Heather* was moving, but this caused them no uneasiness. They took it for granted that this brought them nearer Lotos, and the nearer they were to the island the more hopeful they became. The light had grown steadily worse, and it was Dick, endeavouring to peer through the thick port-hole, who discovered the reason.

“I say, Tim!” Dick suddenly turned from the port-hole. “Do you know where we are? We must have been steaming pretty steadily for quite a long time, and now we’re right in the Great Curtain! Sounds as though we’re going to stay here, too, for a time!”

The engines of the *Purple Heather* had ceased, and they could hear the rattling of chains, and the gentle lapping of waves against the sides of the yacht.

“What’s the Great Curtain exactly?” Tim asked.

“Mr. Delamere would tell you how it happens, but all I know is that there is always a curtain of mist hanging over the sea about four or five miles out from Lotos. You don’t really see it till you get quite close to it, and it only looks like a whitish cloud hanging over the water. It doesn’t affect Lotos at all, but it’s one of the reasons why so few people have ever discovered the island. Some of the natives think it is where the sea-devils live. But I’ll tell you about that later. We’re not out of our own troubles yet.”

“If there’s a mist, it may help us quite a lot,” Tim said optimistically. “Let’s take the risk now and get out of here.”

“Right-o! But we’d better decide just what we’re going to do. We want to find out what’s happened to the others first of all, and after that my idea is we ought to try and collar one of the boats or that small launch we’ve got, and try to get ashore.”

They discussed their plans and made full arrangements before leaving the cabin. It was decided that the best plan would be for them to separate and to meet later on. Tim went first, and turned to the right; Dick followed, and went to the left, closing the cabin door behind him.

Tim crept cautiously up the companion-way to the main deck. An amazing change seemed to have taken place in the last few hours. The warm sunshine and the glamour of the South Seas had gone, and over everything lay a ghostly mist, warm and damp and white as steam, yet blotting out everything on the deck. He could hear weird cries and calls, and there was evidently a certain amount of activity on board, despite the fact that the vessel lay motionless now.

A bulky shadow loomed up out of the mist, and instantly Tim squeezed himself back against the side of the companion-way.

“Rumboltz!” Tim felt pretty confident that this was the man who had taken command of the party boarding the yacht, and a sudden inspiration came to him to follow the man. Giving him time to get to the bottom of the companion-way, Tim slipped after him. Below-decks the mist was not so dense, and two or three pale lights were shining.

Just at first Tim thought the man was going to the cabin which Dick and he had left only a few minutes ago. But Rumboltz passed on, and entered a cabin some little way beyond.

“Better take cover till he comes out again,” Tim decided, because the idea of finding out something more about Rumboltz was uppermost in his mind at present. He found some sort of hiding-place, not very comfortable perhaps, but good enough for the time being.

Ten minutes must have passed before he heard footsteps again, and confirmed the fact that Rumboltz was going back the same way that he had come.

“We’ll have a look in this cabin first of all!” thought Tim, and found the task simple enough, since the door was merely hooked on the outside. In the dim light it was difficult to perceive anything at first, but as he crept cautiously round the place he realised that a man was sitting quite calmly and very still in a small circular armchair.

“Mr. Delamere!” Tim whispered the words as he guessed the identity of the silent sitter. “What has happened? Dick and I——”

“Hullo, Tim!” Delamere’s voice still held its cheerful note. “You’re all right—and Dick is, too? Good! We seem to have struck a nasty surprise packet in meeting Rumboltz at this juncture. I’d often wanted to meet the man, but I’d have preferred the first introduction to have been on more level terms. He’s not taking any risks with me, as you can see. They’ve weighted me down pretty thoroughly, and that gives Rumboltz an advantage when he starts an argument with me at present.”

Tim was already examining the chains which were attached to Delamere’s legs and arms, and in turn the chains were fastened to heavy weights which lay on the floor. Evidently Rumboltz had come prepared for making prisoners.

“There doesn’t seem much chance of getting these off quickly,” Tim said, rather hopelessly. “Of course, if we could get a file——”

“I’m not worrying for the time being, Tim,” Delamere said. “There’s no violent hurry just now, and to tell the truth I’d rather like to see more of Rumboltz. The big advantage he has had over me so far is that he knew all about me and my plans, while I was only vaguely aware of his existence. He knows about the sign, and he’s hoping to get it from me.”

“You won’t give it to him?” Tim asked.

“Not on any terms,” Delamere said. “They’ve made a pretty thorough search, but I doubt if they’d recognise the token if they found it. But I can tell you where to find it, Tim, and if you and Dick can get away with it, I think you could convince Malam, and he’d send out to make a counter-demonstration, though the islanders fear this mist. Still, don’t worry about me for the present. Listen, Tim!”

A few minutes later Tim was stealing from the cabin again, and crept cautiously back to the main deck. Whether it was the mist which deadened all sound, Tim could not say, but an eerie silence now hung over the *Purple Heather*. Nor could he tell whether the submarine still lay alongside. In any case Tim made for the other side of the yacht.

As it happened, luck, which does sometimes take a hand in such affairs, was entirely on Tim’s side at this juncture. When he reached the place where it had been arranged to meet Dick, quite close to where the motor-launch was slung from its davits, his chum was already there.

“Sh!” Dick had dragged him into cover almost before Tim realised it. “I found Bratt all right—got him free—and he’s in the launch now. We had a narrow squeak! Not seen anything of Delamere——”

“I’ve seen him,” Tim interrupted, and he gave Dick a coin fastened to a thin gold chain which he had taken from Delamere’s neck at his command. “That’s the token, Dick! You’ve got to take care of that! We’ve got to get ashore and see what can be done from there; but in any case we haven’t to worry one little bit about Mr. Delamere for the present.”

“Right! I’ll let Joe know,” Dick said, and presently the old sailor had joined them. They talked together very quietly, and the situation was explained to Bratt. He was at first inclined to stick out for making an effort to get Delamere away, but he gave way in the end, and they made ready to lower away the boat.

It was not an easy job, and every moment was fraught with anxiety lest they should be interrupted. But the boat was lowered at last, and everything was in readiness.

“Down the falls!” Bratt called softly to Tim, and the pair went down the ropes from the davits. It had been arranged, after some little argument, that Tim and Joe should go first and then Dick should follow.

Barely had Tim started the climb down the falls than there came a sudden cry from the deck. Just for a moment he was tempted to clamber back again, but a quick cry from the deck altered that decision.

“Get away! Coming over!”

It was Dick who called in what might be described as a whispered shout. Both Joe and Tim heard it, and they dropped down to the launch as quickly as possible. The first thing Joe did was to free the launch from the ropes, and Tim helped him, but waited anxiously for a cry from Dick.

On deck it was touch-and-go with Dick. Quite unexpectedly two figures had loomed up from the mist, and both Rumboltz and Grettrex suddenly grasped the fact that something was happening which was not according to their programme. Both of them made a sudden grab at Dick in the very moment when he called over to the two making their way to the launch.

Dick dodged and twisted, but again some one had grabbed his coat, and with a wrench to free himself the coat was literally torn from his back. Just for a moment he made as though to dodge across the deck to the other side, but turned again and with a sudden effort jumped up on to the taffrail. For a brief instant he stood balanced there—and again Rumboltz or Grettrex made a desperate effort to collar him.

They did not quite succeed, but they did at least precipitate Dick’s jump into the sea—and marred it. He managed to restore his balance to some extent, however, before he struck the water. He came to the surface again quickly, and, as soon as he recovered breath, gave a gentle call.

“Ho, ho! Ho, ho! Tim Gambier!”

“Here! Right-o, Dick! Call again!”

The gentle chug-chug of the little engine sounded quite near, but from above came several sharp reports. Some one on deck was firing down in the hope of hitting something, but the bullets went harmlessly into the sea.

“Here we are, Joe! Steady! I’ve got him! Hullo, Dick! In you come!”

Two pairs of hands gave him help in clambering into the boat, and still the bullets were spitting foolishly into the water. In this moment they scarcely heeded them.

“Next stop, Lotos Island!” Dick laughed, as he sat in his dripping clothes near the tiller. The little launch shot ahead, Bratt sitting grim and silent. He was perhaps the least excited and the least pleased of the three. He was leaving his ship and leaving “the Captain,” and though this was doubtless the best thing to do, Joe didn’t quite like it.

The mist seemed to be gradually lifting, until they could see each other quite plainly.

“We shall be in the sunshine again in a few more minutes, Tim!” Dick laughed. “You’ll get your first glimpse of Lotos——”

“Where’s your coat, Dick? I mean—you’ve got the gold sovereign all right? You put it in the pocket that buttons up——”

Maynard looked at his arms, still wet with the sea. The thin shirt he wore was clinging to his body, but there was no coat.

“Queer! I had it on me—it must have been when I wrenched myself free. I’ve never even thought about it since. This is rotten luck!”

He jerked the words out abruptly, as a man does when he has had a big shock but still tries to keep control of himself. In the excitement and thrill of that last struggle to be free he had scarcely had time to notice such trivial details as the loss of a coat.

“Slow her down a bit, Joe!” he said to Bratt. “This may upset things a bit. Let’s try and think the whole thing out!”

For ten minutes or so they simply drifted along, trying to decide what was the best course to take. At first Dick was inclined to take the risk of going back to the yacht and making an attempt to recover the missing sign. But in the end it was decided that the best plan would be to make for Lotos. After all, Bratt would be recognised as the servant of John Delamere, and he surely would be able to make them understand what had happened. Joe was the man to handle this affair in the right way!

“That’s right!” Joe entirely agreed, and the launch began to pick up speed again. The mist grew thinner and thinner, and presently they were out in glorious sunshine.

“There’s Lotos!” Dick cried excitedly. “We’re about four miles away, I think, though it looks nearer, doesn’t it?”

Tim gazed across the dancing waters at the wonderful colour picture before him. Dick had surely exaggerated when he said it was four miles to the island. At most, it seemed no more than one full mile. Tim could see the pale-green of

the palm-tree plumes rising above the pure white beach, which sparkled in the sunshine as though it were hard-set snow, and upon which the brilliant blue and white of the gentle waves were now playing.

All the colours of the rainbow were gorgeously combined, and over the waters came a faint perfume, more wonderful and fascinating even than the colours. It was all so peaceful, too, that the memory of those last few minutes on the yacht, with the clammy mist hanging round them, and with a hundred fears and doubts in their minds, all faded quietly away. Nothing could go wrong now!

They drew nearer and nearer the island. Now and again Dick pointed out some detail, or explained some feature. A thousand dancing colours showed up against the dazzling whiteness of the beach.

“Looks as though there’s some festival on,” Dick suggested. “Jove! But there’s a pretty big crowd there, too! You’ll have a first-rate reception, Joe! Run straight ashore!”

The launch grounded on the white beach, and they were jumping out and pulling the boat a little higher.

“You’re on Lotos Island at last, Tim!” Dick was curiously excited as he stood upright and turned to Tim, then to Bratt. “Lead the way, Joe! If I’m not mistaken, there’s old Malam himself—and he’s a pal of yours, Joe! Lead on!”

## CHAPTER IV

### A SINGLE-HANDED EFFORT

**A** BACKGROUND of waving palm-trees and green and yellow grasses; a glimpse of cayenne-pepper-coloured soil, shelving down to the snow-white, sparkling beach; rising above all the one great hill of Lotos, clothed in a mantle almost more gorgeous in colouring than any of the strange gowns which some of the people who had gathered on the beach were wearing; and the queer, sweet smell of that heavy perfume which he had first caught four miles out. These were Tim's first swift impressions of Lotos Island.

As they stood for a minute or so after having beached the little launch, an extraordinary chattering broke out among the crowd gathered on the beach away to the right of the three newcomers. Just what the excitement was all about they had not the remotest idea, but a dozen or more islanders—young men they were, so Tim decided—suddenly rushed towards them. They, too, were chattering, and the curious thing which impressed Tim was that now and again he caught an English word.

He judged, too, that they didn't mean to launch any attack—at all events not for the present. Bratt was apparently quite in his element, though it is doubtful if he understood any more than Tim did what they were chattering about. But Tim found himself being swept along towards the larger crowd, and for the time being he was separated from Dick and Bratt.

An even stranger and more impressive spectacle awaited them as they drew nearer the crowd. A kind of raised summer-house had been erected, open at the front, but with a projecting roof of yellow grasses. The floor of the place was six feet or more from the ground, and in the centre was a wonderful carved chair, on which a man was sitting, clothed in the most extraordinary costume imaginable.

On his head was jauntily perched an old and dilapidated sailor's cap, on the band of which could still be seen remnants of its former lettering. An ancient sailor's suit, patched with gaudy-coloured canvas, was the main clothing of the man, but over this was a robe which hung loosely. The robe was made of the



same soft canvas material which most of the natives wore.

Tim had the feeling that the man was an Englishman, tanned by long years in the South Seas. His features were inclined to be coarse and bullying, so Tim thought, though he modified the opinion later. Near him were two or three others, but they were obviously natives, and were dressed in queer gowns, strangely coloured and decorated with whitish beads or buttons.

Standing right by the side of the central figure was the strangest being of all. Most of the natives Tim had seen so far were pleasant-featured enough, but this man was repulsive in his ugliness, and his hands seemed to be clawing at some invisible enemy. He had been sitting on a low stool when Tim first saw him, but was now standing, and once or twice whispered to the man in the carved chair.

The crowd had parted for the procession of which Tim at present formed one. It was about then that Tim saw the pile of wood and branches erected about a great pole. Fastened in some way to the long, straight trunk was a man!

He was a white man, tall and thin, with a haggard face and straggling beard, and as Tim drew level with him there came a feeling of horror, touched with pity. It was so plain that this man had suffered, and his big eyes rested on Tim for a moment in puzzled wonder.

In that instant came a sudden cry. Tim had not seen Dick since they had been gathered up in this queer procession, but he knew his voice only too well when he cried out:

“Father! Father! It’s Dick! I’ve come back! Delamere is out there—in the Great Curtain! I’m coming to you!”

Loud cries and shouts filled the air, and for a time, at all events, everything seemed to be in a state of confusion. His own guardians pressed round Tim, but when at last he managed to force his way through them, he saw Dick standing knee deep in the branches and wood about the man who was tied to the upright trunk. And Dick was using a knife on the task of freeing the man whom he had hailed as his father.

The confusion seemed to have spread to those on the raised platform, but suddenly the man on the big chair jumped up and clapped his hands. Just for a space there was quietness and the man began to speak, but it struck Tim that he didn’t quite know what he wanted to say, and the repulsive-looking creature near him came forward and gave a call, then spoke—in English. It was curiously clipped, and his voice was a sing-song and droning one, yet charged with a certain passion.

“Kill! Kill! Kill’em all! Ever’-one! The sea-devils ’ave come! Kill! Kill’m—now! Now!”

The shouting and the chattering broke out afresh, and they took up the creature’s message as though it were a chant. Tim was lifted from his feet by half a dozen or more of those about him, and they were apparently intent on carrying him swiftly away, though where they were trying to take him Tim did not know.

But he heard another voice—a harder, clearer, more English-sounding voice, so he imagined—and it simply called out one word:

“Stop!”

Almost immediately Tim was put on his feet again. It must be admitted that so far he had failed to grasp the seriousness of the plight he had actually been in for a time at all events. On a glorious day, with one’s mind already hypnotised to some extent by the wonders of a strange land, it was difficult to grasp what all this performance was about. Even the cry of “Kill,” sung in a way which robbed it of the meaning it would have had when hissed in a harsh voice, had failed to carry any real meaning to Tim.

Perhaps it was as well. At all events he made no enemies by the fury of his fighting, as he might have done. But on this occasion Tim did not fight, and when he stood on his feet again there was no attempt to interfere with him. He made his way through the crowd as a boy struggles to the front through a loosely packed crowd at a football match, and he reached the big pile of wood just as Dick and his father were struggling free from the tangle of wood which had been piled up.

Even then there was something else to divert attention. Another voice was booming out, and there was no mistaking Joe Bratt’s tones. He was a little distance away from where Tim was now standing, but he could see him quite near the queer, raised summer-house affair, and Joe had a hand raised aloft as though commanding silence from every one.

“The Big Captain has sent me to you, O King Malam! He will come soon himself, but he needs your aid. I will tell you all!”

Not much of a speech, perhaps, but it sounded quite dramatic to Tim, and doubtless there were others who gathered the meaning of the message. The Big Captain had come!

Malam, King of Lotos, had seen Joe struggling forward, and it was that which had led him to give his definite command of “Stop!” It must be remembered that he had seen Bratt before, and, although Malam had never

been outside the island, he was a son of that shrewd Yorkshireman, Joe Malam, who had made himself ruler of the island.

The present King's mother, who was still alive, though few ever saw her in these days, was of the royal line in Lotos; and in the son who now sat on the raised pavilion there ran a strange mixture of native dignity, childish superstition, bravery in the face of known and understood danger but hopeless fear and terror of those things which were beyond his ken; and to this was added some touch of the shrewdness of the British sailor, born of Yorkshire stock, who had been his father and had given him such curious education, if one can use the word, as the present King of Lotos now possessed.

As many another ruler before him, Malam had of late found himself in a difficult position. Under the late king one great fact had been drilled into the islanders: one day there would come from beyond the Great Curtain a ship commanded by the Big Captain who came from the White Queen. On Lotos Island there still flew, on festivals and high days, an old Union Jack, the flag under which the late Joe Malam had served.

Just exactly what would happen when the Big Captain came, possibly no one really knew, except that it would be a very wonderful event for the island. The sea-devils would be driven from the Great Curtain, and all the evil spirits which came at times to torment the islanders would disappear.

The Big Captain had come in the person of John Delamere. It had not been possible for him at the time to spend many weeks on Lotos, but he had told them that he would come again, and that they would no longer be cut off from the great world.

It may be asked at this stage why Delamere did not make his discovery of Lotos public property, and the answer to that question can be found in the history of a hundred discoverers and explorers from before the days of Raleigh right down to the present century. Raleigh, the pioneer of British colonial empire, reaped his reward in the seventeenth century on the scaffold. In our own days, John Boyes, King of the Wa-kikuyu, one of the pioneer builders of what is now Kenya Colony, was merely "harshly treated by the authorities," and much that he did was grossly misrepresented.

Delamere knew the fate of most pioneers, and for that reason he took his own course until such time as his own interests could be protected. That is all.

Owing to ill-health at the time, he was unable to go back; but he fitted out the expedition of which Robert Maynard was in charge to return to Lotos to carry out fuller investigations, and in due course report on the prospects of establishing regular connection with the mainland.

It was unfortunate, though perfectly understandable, that Delamere failed to understand his own peculiar position in being the first white man to land on Lotos after Joe Malam, more than sixty-five years later. Nor did he grasp the fact that, in the event of being unable to return himself, the golden sovereign which the second Malam had given him was the sign and token that whoever did return came from the rightful Big Captain. Delamere had regarded the sovereign as he regarded several other mementoes of his trip to Lotos—as a purely personal souvenir.

But it was this trivial fact which had rendered the position of the second expedition to Lotos, under Robert Maynard, an almost impossible one. They were regarded as impostors. To add to his difficulties, most of the crew under Maynard, having learned something of the wealth which was hidden on Lotos Island, decided that the best thing was to desert their leader. The outcome of that has already been recorded up to the stage when Dick, with young Gambier and Bratt, came to Lotos.

In the time which had elapsed since Dick had made his escape, Robert Maynard's position had been a trying one. In Malam, the King, he had a friend, or at least one who would have been content to wait. There were others, however, who held different views, and the whole island had been torn by superstitious fears, which had been worked upon effectively by one, Malchior—the repulsive-looking native who had sat by the King's side on the dais. In the end Malam had been compelled to yield to what was the popular demand—the one white man still left on the island, Robert Maynard, should be offered as sacrifice to the sea-devils, whose wrath of late had been manifested in various ways.

The strange intervention at a critical moment of Dick, Bratt, and Tim created hopeless confusion. Malchior attempted for a brief space to take the lead; but then Malam asserted his right, and by the time Joe had made his brief speech, the attitude of most of the islanders could only be compared to that of riotous children who had been suddenly checked and had become afraid of the consequences.

Malam had come slowly down the steps which led from his pavilion, and Joe advanced to meet him. Malchior, the witch-doctor, remained in the background. Robert Maynard, with his son and Tim, had also come close to Bratt.

“Where is the Big Captain?” Malam asked, and to Tim, at all events, his voice had a curious fascination. “Why does he not come back to us?”

“The Big Captain is near,” Bratt said. “He stays for a time on the boat out

in the Great Curtain, but he will come by and by.”

“Has he sent the sign?” Malam asked, and Joe turned with a little look of perplexity to Dick.

“They are wanting the sign, Dick,” the elder Maynard said. “It is always the sign. Did you explain to Delamere? Has he brought it with him?”

“It’s somewhere on our boat,” Dick said. “But there’s a lot to explain, Dad. If we could get out of this crowd and have a talk, I could tell you just how things stand at the moment.”

Bratt had turned to Malam again.

“The Big Captain will come himself presently and tell you all about the sign. Have no fear. He just wanted us to let you know he was coming along.”

Whether Malam was entirely satisfied or not with the answer, it was impossible to say. He turned away from the little group, and Malchior had now come down and was standing near. Malam went back with Malchior, and just then four or five young men, with short clubs swinging from their right wrists, came quietly up and stood, quite respectfully so it seemed, near the white men. When Maynard turned, one of them came forward a little further and spoke to him.

“Go, Missa Maynard! Go quickly, while there is time. Go to the house of Janee. We will come by-’n-bye.”

He spoke softly but clearly, and in that curiously clipped way which made Tim think it was a foreign tongue, but for the fact that he understood it.

“It is good, Jim-boy,” Maynard told the young man. “We will go to Janee. It would be well for you all to come with us, too.”

The young man whom Maynard addressed as Jim-boy turned to his companions and spoke to them, evidently discussing the proposal to go with the white men. When he turned again he nodded, but said something to indicate that they would come part way only.

No one attempted to interfere with the queer little procession of four white men and five natives which now went along the beach. Soon after they were clear of the crowd about the beach, the five young men left them. They did not speak again to Maynard, and their attitude mystified Dick as much as it did Tim.

“Who are they, Dad? Why did they come part way with us and then clear off?” Dick asked, after their escort had gone.

Maynard, who seemed to be very tired and weary at this stage, put out his hands with a little gesture of helplessness.

“Everything has gone wrong just lately,” he explained. “The island is divided into factions and sections. At the moment, Malchior is the strongest man, and Malam is inclined to be afraid of him. That is why, in the end, he yielded to Malchior. At least, I take it that is what happened, though I hadn’t any notion of what the programme was going to be till I was seized this morning. The five young men who have just left us have been very friendly to me all along, and they are certainly enemies of Malchior.”

“Are they relations of old Janee?” Dick asked.

“Yes; grandchildren—and nephews of Malam. Old Joe Malam had a daughter, and these are her sons. They are full of the legends about the Big Captain, but they are not quite certain about my position. I think that explains their attitude.”

Dick nodded, but asked no more questions. They could wait until a more suitable time.

The little party progressed steadily up the winding pathway which led inland. Tim was almost over-awed by the wondrous colours of the luxuriant flowers and grasses. It was impossible after a time to see the beach, though as they climbed higher they began to catch glimpses of the fringe of the island to their left.

Two or three times on the upward journey they paused for a halt. It was during these rests that Dick explained to his father just what had happened up to the moment when they had met on the beach of Lotos.

“We must get Delamere here as early as possible,” Maynard said, when he had heard the full story. “Even if we cannot recover this sign on which Malam sets so much store, Delamere himself would soon make everything right. I’ve found out a good deal more about the island, Dick, since you went away. Delamere called it a treasure island, but it is more than that. There is a wonderful underground—— Hullo! What’s that?”

They were sitting in a fairly clear space to the left of the pathway, and almost at the top of the hill. Maynard’s eyes, even while he had been talking, were gazing out to sea. From here the Great Curtain appeared to be little more than a thin mist or haze resting on the water.

Bratt was the first to identify the thin grey shadow away out towards the Great Curtain, to which Maynard had pointed.

“It’s that submarine again!” Joe said. “It’s coming in towards this side of the island, too. What’s their little game this time?”

For some little time they sat watching the long grey shape as it came through the water. Half a mile or so from shore it slowed down, and presently lay quite still. They could see tiny figures on the bridge deck, and presently a panel in the upper part of the hull appeared to move back, and from this a small launch was swung out.

“Some one is coming ashore!” Dick said, and wished they had managed to bring a pair of glasses with them. At this distance it was impossible to recognise the figures which stepped down into the tiny craft.

“I’m thinking it’s about time we thought of getting back and giving the Captain a hand!” Joe interposed. “It could be done this very night!”

If they had been quiet on their journey here, they made up for it now. There was a good deal of discussion concerning the best course to take at this juncture. All four were quite willing to take a hand in the effort to get Delamere ashore, but for once Bratt insisted that two of them would be quite enough for the task.

It was Robert Maynard who attended to the practical side by bringing them food: bananas, bread-fruit, and cocoa-nuts, the latter supplying all the liquid nourishment they desired after Maynard had opened them.

It was Dick’s father, too, who was the first to perceive the darker shadow at the edge of the mist.

“Can you see it, Joe?” he asked, and pointed straight ahead. “Unless I am much mistaken your yacht has come nearer and is anchoring now just inside the Great Curtain. Look!”

Joe confirmed this impression, though to both Tim and Dick there appeared to be nothing more than a vague shadow.

“It makes it easier for us, Tim,” Joe said. “Now, sir, I’m thinking you’d better be getting on to this place where Janee lives. If you’ll give me the landmarks, we’ll find our way to you later on. And when we do come back, we’ll have the Captain himself with us!”

Maynard and his son were to stay ashore in Janee’s house. Joe and Tim were to make the attempt to get out to the yacht and bring Delamere back. Dick had kicked against the arrangement at first, but for various reasons it was better that at this stage they divided their forces.

“Good luck to you!” Robert Maynard shook both Tim and Joe by the hand

before they parted, and Dick added, "Good luck, Tim! You should have a decent chance, as I expect most of the Rumboltz crowd are on the submarine now."

For some time after the two Maynards had left them, Joe and Tim remained in the same place, discussing their own plans. When at last nightfall began to descend, they made their way down the hill again. Reaching the beach, they were again content for a time to spy out the land.

It was a wonderful night, clear and calm, with the sound of the surf breaking gently on the shore, while the sea itself reflected in a myriad points the stars which shone so brightly above. Far out they could see the Great Curtain, more ghostly and mysterious than ever it had been by day.

There was no sign of the men who had come ashore with the little launch, but the boat in which the three had made their trip ashore from the yacht still lay at the edge of the sea.

"We'll take no risks," Joe said. "We'll go together on hands and knees. You'll remember what we're going for? To bring the Captain safe ashore! And if so be that anything happens to me, it'll be your duty to carry on. By the same token, if it happens to be you that falls into the enemy's hand, I'll be forgetting you for a time till the Captain's safe. That's our plain duty, and the Lord forgive us if we fail!"

Slowly and quietly they crawled across the soft, warm sand, listening every now and again for any sound which might suggest danger, but they reached the launch without any surprise.

They got the boat afloat, and then Joe clambered aboard and began to try the engine, while Tim stood by, ready to push her out. But Joe himself slipped out again for a moment or two.

"Everything's all right," he told Tim. "Get on board, and I'll just push off!"

Tim did what he was told, having learned so much from Joe very thoroughly. There was no divided control so far as Bratt was concerned. One man was in charge, and whether he was right or wrong those under him carried out his orders to the letter.

It was almost by luck that Tim turned at that moment and saw the two forms which seemed to be springing out from the shadows.

"Look out, Joe!"

But the warning was too late. They were on Bratt and had closed with him the moment the sailor turned.



“Get away!” Joe’s voice was half smothered, but it came fiercely and commandingly. “Go—Tim——”

It was perhaps the most trying moment Tim had ever experienced. His whole instinct urged him to jump out to try and give a hand in the fight, but Joe’s instructions had been very definite. As he switched the engine on, he dared to turn, and it seemed to him that Joe was already down and out. The next instant Tim ducked as a shot rang out, and he heard the whistle of the bullet as it passed over his head.

For a few moments Tim crouched there at the bottom of the boat, but he had his hand on the controls and the little launch was going at its topmost speed. Two or three times shots rang out, but then all was quiet save for the noise of the engine. Even this died away to a pleasant chug-chug presently, when Tim slackened speed and tried to decide his course.

“I’ve got to find Mr. Delamere! I’ve got to find him!”

That was the decision which repeated itself in Tim’s mind with the throb of the engine, as he sat peering ahead across the waters and trying to locate the dark shadow in the ghostly haze of the Great Curtain.

## CHAPTER V

### JOHN DELAMERE COMES ASHORE

THERE was a little side-drama on board the *Purple Heather* during those first few hectic minutes when Rumboltz boarded the yacht. Rumboltz himself was chiefly concerned about securing Delamere, but others had their tasks to do.

Among them was the mate, and his interest was concentrated on Captain Angus McCurdy. During the present voyage, the first on which the two men had sailed together, there had been a distinct touch of antipathy between the two, and the mate, a great, hulking fellow, had been saving it up, as he phrased it, for McCurdy.

It came as no surprise to the mate when that order came from Rumboltz. He was on board this ship as a servant of Rumboltz, though McCurdy was entirely unaware of this. That was why the captain had never a chance when his mate turned on him, at a time when McCurdy was expecting all help from that quarter.

In the excitement which pervaded the ship, no one had time to worry about what happened to any individual. McCurdy went down before a blow which would have felled an ox, and lay on the bridge unconscious. Grettrex was one of the first up on the bridge, and he nodded questioningly in the direction of the limp form of the captain.

"I've settled him!" the mate said. "He'll never see Melbourne again to tell tales about me. The bottom of the Pacific has had better men than McCurdy! Best do it now! Lend a hand, Mr. Grettrex!"

They dragged the little captain across and hoisted him up between them. Both were big men, and with one mighty heave the body of Angus McCurdy was flung into the sea on the port side. Probably no one else but the mate and Grettrex even saw the deed.

But McCurdy never reached the bottom of the Pacific. Dazed, aching, and bewildered, he came to the surface and swam slowly along the side of the yacht, his dulled brain trying to understand the meaning of all this. He also

tried to find some way of getting on board again, and after some difficulty and with just a little luck, he accomplished it.

McCurdy knew every inch of his boat and was proud of her. Within twenty minutes the captain of the *Purple Heather* had effected a disguise which would have done credit to a detective. A dirty boiler suit had taken the place of his own smart clothes; his beard and moustache had been cut off so closely as a pair of scissors could accomplish the job, and his face was covered with the dust and grime of the stoke-hold, and a greasy cap added the finishing touch to the transformation.

Having found a comfortable though temporary hiding-place, McCurdy ventured out. The yacht was under steam again though moving only slowly in the heavy mist into which it had run. It suited McCurdy all right at this stage, as he was anxious to collect certain trifles for his own use in the shape of a couple of revolvers, a good supply of ammunition, and a stock of food to last for a day or two.

McCurdy actually saw something of Dick Maynard's escape, and observed that the little launch had gone. For himself the captain was not particularly anxious to leave the boat. The idea of escaping from his own vessel was not an appealing one. He was much more concerned with finding out just what lay behind the swift change which had taken place.

In due course, as he wandered round, he discovered the cabin in which Delamere was a prisoner. He did not observe at first the chains which rendered Delamere a prisoner for all practical purposes, and McCurdy's first words concerned himself.

"How d'you do, Mr. Delamere? I'm wondering whether you'll be able to enlighten me a little on the change of plans that's seemingly taken place aboard?"

Delamere enlightened him, and mentioned the detail about the chains and the weights.

"They came all prepared?" McCurdy mused. "Rumboltz, you say? I've heard of the man, and never anything good about him, but I've never run against him myself. Still, the first job'll be to get rid of those ornaments you're wearing, Mr. Delamere. We can talk about this blackguard then. I'll be back shortly."

Perhaps it was as well that McCurdy took some time over the job of finding the files and tools he needed. While he was away, Valda Rumboltz and one or two others came to the cabin. The interview that took place is scarcely

worthy of record beyond the fact that Delamere began to get some measure of the man who now threatened him with sudden death if he did not agree to his terms. John Delamere scarcely said a dozen words.

“You’ll have a few more hours to think it over!” Rumboltz told him in the end. “Then—there won’t be any bandying words then, Delamere! They tell me it’s a long way down to the bottom of the Pacific! I’m willing to make terms \_\_\_\_\_”

“I’ll think it over,” Delamere said, simply because he was anxious for Rumboltz to get out before McCurdy came back. “I’m quite content here for the time being.”

Rumboltz went out at last. The yacht had come to anchor again, and, judging by the light which came through the port-hole, they were evidently lying somewhere towards the fringe of the Great Curtain. Other sounds reached Delamere, and for a time he judged that there was a fair amount of activity on board. But by the time McCurdy came back to the cabin, silence reigned again.

“They’ve gone off on that submarine they’ve brought up,” McCurdy said. “I’m thinking there’s not more than a dozen men aboard now, and one or two are our own, though whether they’ve gone over to Rumboltz, body and soul, I’d not care to say. But I’ll be getting busy on this job, and we’ll talk it over.”

The task took time, but McCurdy plodded steadily on, while they talked of what had happened, of what Rumboltz was after, and of how he had come to learn something, if not actually all, of the secret of Lotos Island. One detail was quite certain: Rumboltz did not know the actual hiding-place of the gold which had been the cargo of the *Good Hope* long years ago. That was why he showed an apparent anxiety to make terms with Delamere.

“And then give you a quick bullet,” McCurdy suggested.

“I should imagine so,” Delamere agreed. “But you say he’s gone aboard his own craft? I’m inclined to think, McCurdy, that my rightful place is ashore. I’d like to be certain that everything is well there. I should imagine that the yacht is likely to remain here for some time. What do you propose to do? Take the risk and try to get ashore? Or take the risk and remain here for the time being?”

“I’d prefer to remain here, Mr. Delamere. I’m captain of this boat, Rumboltz or no Rumboltz, and I’ve got one or two accounts to settle before I quit. But I’ve no doubt you’re right about going ashore yourself——”

There was quite a fair amount of talk before all details were fixed up, and

then McCurdy made another tour of the yacht. All things considered, fortune was on the side of Delamere, or so it seemed, since the submarine had moved off, and whatever crew had been left on board the *Purple Heather* were evidently making holiday, to judge by the sounds of revelry which reached them.

There was no difficulty in Delamere collecting whatever belongings he desired, and he took the precaution of covering these in macintosh sheeting and fastening the package to an ordinary ship's life-buoy. He himself had put on a regulation life-belt, and McCurdy assisted him in the task of lowering one of the yacht's boats as quietly as they possibly could.

In due course Delamere lowered himself over the side and clambered into the small boat. As he pushed gently off, he fancied he could see McCurdy's face through the thin mist above him, and imagined rather than heard the captain's whispered "Good luck!" as the boat began to move.

Delamere rowed very quietly at first, and not until he was clear of the Great Curtain did he begin to put his back into the job, and for ten minutes or so pulled steadily towards the island.

At the end of that time he paused to listen to the curious sound which had begun to make itself heard above the gentle splash of the oars. Chug-chug-chug-chug!—Delamere rested on his oars and turned round to find out from what direction the noise came.

"Friend or foe?" Delamere wondered, as he saw the little launch which was apparently heading straight for him. It was slowing down now, but was making direct for the rowing-boat. Delamere pulled round a little and tried to make out some detail which would help him to identify the launch or the figure which seemed to be crouching at the back.

Actually it was much easier for Tim to recognise the figure in the rowing-boat, silhouetted as it was against the whitish background of the Great Curtain. And Tim had a glorious thrill in that moment when he grasped the fact that his task to-night was going to be a wonderfully simple one.

He slackened speed and headed direct for the rowing-boat, and then, when within hailing distance, his voice echoed across the quiet waters.

"Mr. Delamere! Skipper!" He used the affectionate title Dick often conferred upon Delamere. "Tim Gambier here! Coming alongside!"

Delamere shipped an oar and manœuvred with the other till the launch came very gently alongside, when he gripped on to it. In its own way the meeting of the two was one of the most pleasantly thrilling incidents that Tim

had experienced on this strange adventure. It was marred only by the problem of what had happened to Bratt, but it was not until they had exchanged greetings that Tim mentioned that to Delamere.

“Take this painter and tie me on to your stern, Tim,” Delamere said. “I’ll come aboard, I think, but we may as well keep this boat in tow. Got it? I’ll put this life-buoy aboard, too. Now—steady!”

Delamere’s personal baggage, secured to the life-buoy, was transferred to the launch, and presently he was carefully getting aboard himself. The boat in which he had left the *Purple Heather* had been tied behind, and in a short time the launch was heading back for the island again.

At this stage everything was going like clockwork. Delamere was inclined to be optimistic even about Bratt, asserting that the old sailor had been in many a tight corner before, and that although his attackers had scored the first surprise, it was highly probable that their turn would come before Joe was beaten.

They were not more than half a mile from the shore when a beam of light swept across the water. Just at first Tim was completely puzzled, but Delamere was already speaking to him.

“Searchlight from the submarine,” he said. “Better keep as low down as you can. Not that it will make much difference, but we may as well—— Ah! Full speed ahead, Tim!”

The searchlight was concentrating on them now, and there came a shrill whistling, followed by a dulled explosion and a splash some little way ahead of them. Two seconds later it was followed by another, and this time the spray came over them like heavy rain.

Crash! It seemed to Tim that the boat was suddenly lifted bodily from the water, and that he himself was being flung violently into the air. Then he was striking the water—and a few moments later was instinctively striking out as he rose to the surface. From somewhere near him came a gentle “Ho, ho, Tim!” and he realised that Delamere was somewhere away on his left.

He turned and swam towards him. At this stage, if the truth were told, Tim was doing everything more by instinct than from actual knowledge of what had happened. Any one who has experienced the sensation of being blown up, without actually suffering any kind of injury, knows that for a time the mind is in a semi-dazed condition, and that one does the right thing in the right way without realising it.

“All right, Tim? Were you hit at all?” Delamere was pushing something

before him. "They got us that time all right! How are you?"

Tim was perfectly well so far as he knew, and Delamere pushed his life-buoy, with the mackintosh-covered package still secured to it, towards him.

"Cling on to this!" he told him. "I've got a life-belt. I doubt whether either the launch or the boat are much use now, but in any case we should be only asking for trouble if we tried to board either of them. Keep low!"

The searchlight swept across the waters again, and then came to rest for a brief space on the launch and boat. Just what damage had been done it was, of course, impossible to say, but both of them were now partially submerged and lay helpless on the gently moving sea.

Whether the inspection satisfied those who were watching the beam from the searchlight on board the *Sleuth* cannot be said, but the light disappeared, and the two swimmers were left alone to make their effort to reach the shore.

They must have been about a quarter of a mile out when they had their surprise packet from the submarine. Once or twice before then, Delamere had fancied that he could see the low, grey hulk of the *Sleuth*, and it had scarcely come to him as a surprise when they began to drop the shells, or at all events not so much as it had been to Tim.

Now they kept close together and began their slow journey towards the white strand which glistened ahead of them in the light of the stars. In some ways the big life-belt was an added burden to Tim, but on the other hand it enabled him to take brief rests.

It seemed to Tim that it must have taken them more than an hour to reach the shore, but, as Delamere told him as they struggled along, it was better to go slowly than to run the risk of exhaustion before they found their feet touching the sand again.

Once or twice they were aware of the searchlight playing across the water again, but with that curious luck which plays its part in such adventures, the broad beam seemed to miss them each time it flashed round.

So the time came when they were scrambling from the water and across the warm sand towards the shelter of the trees. Possibly it was due to the fact that Tim's capacity for emotion had been employed to the full when he lost Joe and later when he met Delamere, but at this stage he was scarcely aware of any feelings whatever except a desire to lie down and rest.

Delamere was apparently the same, and it just struck Tim that the Skipper evidently felt the cold very quickly, as he seemed to be chattering with it when

he did speak to his younger companion.

“Five minutes rest, I think, Tim. You’re tired, boy? Did we bring that package fastened to the life-belt up? Oh, good! I put in a special supply of quinine, and I guess it’s time I took some! If the human body—— Hullo! What’s that? Listen!”

From somewhere quite close at hand came a gentle whistle, followed by a rustling sound as though some one were crawling through the undergrowth at the fringe of which the two were now lying.

“Captain! Is it the Captain?”

The voice came in an eerie whisper before they could see the figure, but Delamere was calling out in answer to it.

“Joe! We’re here, Joe! And you——?”

Ten seconds later Bratt had dragged himself beside them. It struck Tim in the first few seconds that Joe wasn’t quite so cheerful as he usually was, though he was obviously pleased to find Delamere was there and that Tim had returned with him.

Yet it was a curious little party which sat there. Even Joe didn’t seem to want to talk about what had happened to himself. The blackguards had knocked him down and tried to beat the life out of him, and when Joe began to get a real grip on things again, he had found himself lying at the edge of the water, but the two men who had taken him by surprise had disappeared.

Whether they were under the impression that Joe was finished with, or whether they had been recalled, he did not know. But he was quite certain he would recognise both of them again if ever they stumbled across his path. Their faces, as he had seen them in the pale light of the stars, were photographed on his mind, so he asserted, and the next time they met he simply hoped that it would be on more equal terms than it had been on this occasion, when Joe’s main desire had been to get the launch off.

“But you’re shivering, Captain!” Joe’s voice lost its harsh note quite suddenly and was touched with alarm. “It’s not one of the old attacks? It’s going in the sea. Have you got the quinine with you?”

“I’ve got it, Joe,” Delamere assured him. “After a little rest I shall be all right.”

In the history of any adventurer, explorer, or pioneer, it is almost certain that at one stage or another the whole programme is held up and possibly abandoned through sickness. The indomitable will of Livingstone, which



overcame so many obstacles, could not conquer the fever which eventually brought his career to an end. The wonderful courage of Captain Oates could not overcome the handicap of frost-bite.

Twelve months ago it had seemed that Delamere's roving days were over. A few months of peaceful country life had, however, made a new man of him, and when the question arose of a pleasant holiday trip to the South Seas, the medical adviser agreed that, providing he took reasonable care, there would probably be no danger whatever.

But for a man, subject to the particular type of fever from which Delamere had suffered, to go through the experiences which he had endured in the past eighteen hours—the strenuous fight on the *Purple Heather*, the confinement in the cabin while the yacht lay in the damp atmosphere of the Great Curtain, followed by his hard work on the oars, and then his slow swim in the sea—was far removed from the doctor's idea of a pleasant holiday trip. And Delamere paid the price.

His two companions, Bratt and Tim, were also very thoroughly played out, and for the time being they were all content to lie in the shadows of the great palms. Tim, at all events, slept like a tired child, and even Joe had several hours of slumber. To Delamere it was a long-drawn-out nightmare.

When Tim wakened the sun was shining, and he could see the rolling surf and the dancing waves, and away beyond lay the Great Curtain, looking no more than a summer haze in the bright light of morning.

Joe was up and about, but Delamere was apparently still asleep. Joe had evidently been on a little expedition of his own, and had returned with water, bananas, and bread-fruit. Delamere stirred and made an effort to sit up when Joe went to his side, and Tim, looking across at him, was surprised at the change which had taken place in him since last night. All the healthy glow had gone from his cheeks, and he looked drawn and haggard and much older than Tim had ever imagined him to be.

Obviously he had no desire for anything but water, though Tim was prepared for anything in the way of food—and Joe saw that he had everything that was available!

“And the Captain thinks we'll be getting along to the King's palace,” Joe told Tim. “Leastways, they call it the palace, but it's not what you or I would give the name to. He's anxious to let Malam know that he's here, and I've told him all about the sign we mislaid when we came away from the *Purple Heather*. Once we've seen Malam I doubt not but what everything will be all right, and I'll be able to give the Captain the care he's needing, now the fever's

on him.”

They made their way through the belt of trees, and past a number of small huts, till they came to a big open space in the centre of which was a building, rather than a hut, though its roof was of grasses and its sides made of thin, yellow laths. A wide veranda ran round it, and the ornamental effect was produced by big bunches of dried, coloured grasses. At the wide main entrance stood two well-built islanders, each holding a long stave tipped with some shining metal.

They regarded Delamere and his two companions with curiosity, but did not move until the three were within a few feet of them. It was obvious then that they were prepared to defend the door, if the necessity arose.

“I come to see the King,” Delamere said, speaking slowly and very distinctly. “Tell him that the Big Captain has come at last and would like to see him. Go quickly!”

“The Big Captain!” Their voices, with that pleasant softness which had impressed Tim in the beginning, were touched with awe, and both of them went down on one knee swiftly and brought their queer weapons down to lie flat on the floor of the veranda for a moment.

“You come with me, Big Captain!” One of them spoke as they both jumped to their feet, and presently the three were following one of the islanders into the big, airy apartment beyond the door.

Here he called aloud in his own tongue, and two or three men who were sitting about on the floor of the room were jumping up. Within the next few moments there seemed to be quite a commotion, and the noise evidently attracted others, who came hurrying into the apartment. Tim could not make out what was said beyond the fact that the two words, “Big Captain,” were frequently uttered.

Joe kept near Delamere and gave him support. Presently into the room came the King, Malam, the son of Joe Malam and the son of Janee. The early morning light shone full on Delamere’s face and figure, and as Malam entered he started back for a moment, as though he had seen a ghost.

“The Big Captain!” he cried the words aloud as though anxious that every one should know that he had recognised him at once. “The Big Captain from over the seas! They said you would never come again. Is the white man, Missa Maynard, who came to us, a friend, Big Captain?”

“He is a friend,” Delamere said. “I sent him to tell you that I would come when I could.”

“But the sign? He did not bring the sign! Have you brought the sign, Big Captain?”

“I brought it and it is now on the boat which lies out in the Big Curtain. Enemies have followed us, and for a time they have the boat; but we shall get it again very soon. But I am weak and ill, Malam. I have travelled far. Presently I will go to the home of Janee, and she shall nurse me well again. But now I will lie down and rest.”

Malam clapped his hands, and a few moments later a low rush couch was brought in and Delamere was made comfortable on this. The group of islanders who had gathered in the room went out, and, after a short time, Malam also left the three alone.

During the next few hours Delamere simply rested. It was strangely quiet in this main apartment of the King’s palace, and it came as a pleasant rest to all of them. To Tim it seemed that the air grew more and more stifling as the day went on, and the same idea was evidently in Bratt’s mind. It would be much better if, later in the afternoon, they could arrange to carry Delamere up to the house of Janee, where Robert Maynard and Dick were doubtless now waiting for them.

There was no difficulty in making the arrangement. Malam was only too anxious to do anything he could, and it was evident that he was still rather worried over the attitude he had taken up against Maynard. Of Malchior they saw nothing.

Somewhere late in the afternoon a litter was brought into the room, and Delamere was lifted on to it. Four stalwart young islanders were in attendance, ready to carry the sick man to the house near the hilltop, where Janee lived.

Tim and Joe accompanied them. It was a slow journey through trees and then up the rough, winding pathway to the top of the hill, but Tim, feeling now as fit as ever he had done, enjoyed it, and when he caught sight of some one who was coming to meet them down the pathway, he gave a cheery call, then turned to Joe.

“It’s Dick, Joe! I’m going ahead to meet him. It will be jolly when we’re all together again! Cheer-o!”

And when, two or three minutes later, Tim was greeting Dick, there wasn’t anything to worry about. Delamere was down with the fever—but he would soon be well again. Malchior might be trying to stir up more trouble in the island—but he would fail! Somewhere at the fringe of the Great Curtain lay the *Purple Heather*—but Captain McCurdy was aboard, and he’d see that it

would be ready for them when they needed the yacht.

Rumboltz and the others might be prowling round in their submarine—but they couldn't do anything really.

“It's topping to be all together again!” Dick said, repeating what Tim had said to Joe only a few minutes before. “It's hard luck the Skipper is down with the fever—but I don't suppose that will last long. We're going to have a good time on Lotos, old son. There's Janee's place—that long hut over there! Race you to it! It will do my father all the good in the world to know that all's well. Come on!”

# CHAPTER VI

## THE NIGHT OF THE STORM

**T**HAT evening in Janee's house stood out long afterwards in Tim's recollections. It was not that anything wonderful happened, but it was the air of calm peacefulness which seemed to pervade the place for some hours, at all events.

Janee herself was to Tim an extraordinary creature; she seemed older than any one he had ever seen in his life, and yet she was fairly active. Her voice, like all the islanders, was curiously soft, and had a tendency to chant the sentences, but her English was even clearer than Malam's. She seemed to be attended all the time by two or three younger women, who followed her about, ready to obey her slightest command.

Joe Malam, so Tim learned, had preferred this hut to the one on the lower part of the island, though he had spent his time between the two of them. There were probably seven or eight quite good-sized rooms, and some of the furniture had obviously belonged at one time to a well-fitted ship, though in some cases it had been repaired by the islanders.

Quite a sumptuous meal was served them in due course. Janee herself wandered round in the background, rather as a head waiter might have done, anxious to see that her guests were well supplied. There was some strangely spiced fish, which had apparently been a favourite dish with Joe Malam long years ago, and there was a bird, which Dick christened Lotos turkey, served with sweet potatoes, and a wonderfully flavoured sauce or gravy. They drank, too, a very refreshing beverage, slightly bitter in taste, which seemed to possess a tonic effect.

Delamere did not join them at the table, but he was very well attended to, both by Joe and the women who wandered round with Janee. It was, of course, a distinct misfortune that at this juncture he was unable to take his place as the leader of the party.

Robert Maynard, Joe, Dick, and Tim talked over the situation from every possible angle. There was no disguising the fact that they were still in a pretty tight corner, and it was difficult at this juncture to decide what steps to take to

counteract any scheme Rumboltz might have in hand.

At this stage, too, Janee became rather a worry. She kept going to the wide-open windows of the house and talking about the sea-devils and the floods. And the sky, too, had become an enemy.

They looked through the windows through which a cool breeze was now blowing. There was certainly a change in the weather. Last night the stars had hung like glowing pendants from the blue-black canopy of the sky above. To-night they were hidden, and the blackness above was dull and heavy.

Yet far away on the sea below them they could distinguish the outlines of the yacht, which had moved farther inshore from the Curtain, and now and again lights flashed across the waters.

“The submarine is lying somewhere to the right!” Dick said suddenly. “And they’re signalling to the yacht!”

It was impossible to read the message, and in any case it was only a brief exchange of signals. But as they stood there, they fancied they could hear the faint chug-chug of a motor-launch rising up through the heavy silence which hung over the island.

“There’s something doing to-night!” Tim asserted to Dick. “What do you think? Your father said that to-morrow we ought to arrange with Malam about getting his men ready for any attack Rumboltz may make. I think it would be a good idea if you and I went down and saw Malam to-night. He was quite friendly with me this morning—even called me the Little Captain! There’s no need for any one else to come, but it wouldn’t harm us!”

Robert Maynard and Bratt were again dragged into the discussion, but in the end it was Tim’s suggestion which won. Joe was better staying where he was, because of Delamere, and for various reasons it was inadvisable for Maynard to go down to the village.

It would take Tim and Dick an hour or more to get down to the beach. But they could go cautiously, and, all being well, they could explain the situation to Malam and do their best to fix up with him the arrangements suggested by Maynard. It was probable that they would stay the night in the King’s house, but would return early in the morning with any news they might have gained.

Even as they set out they caught a glimpse of lights among the trees below, and it seemed highly probable that some of Rumboltz’s men had landed and were fixing up a camp on the beach. It confirmed their idea that the sooner they had some arrangement with Malam the better it would be.

Once or twice, too, they saw the searchlight from the submarine sweeping across the water. But to-night the glamour of the South Seas was missing; even the surf had lost its pleasant, soothing murmur and began to sound angry.

“Must be high tide or something of the sort,” Dick remarked, as they glimpsed the bright light of the searchlight again. “The sea looks higher to me, and it sounds as though there’s real breakers smashing on the beach. Jove! There’s going to be a rainstorm, too!”

The atmosphere had been curious when they started out from Janee’s house, but in the last half-hour or more it had gradually become more tense, or so it seemed. Now the rain began to rattle down on the palm-fronds above them. It came quite suddenly and in the first ten seconds or so it increased in violence from a sharp shower to a furious, lashing storm which stung their faces and blinded their eyes.

“Keep together!” Tim had to shout the words now, because the rattling of the rain and the rising roar of the sea had become intensified by the wind which had begun to blow almost at the same time as the rain began.

But above even this noise they could hear shouts, smothered and stifled perhaps, but beyond all shadow of doubt the voices of human beings struggling to make themselves heard above the tumult which had been so suddenly released.

“Look!” Dick was gripping Tim’s arm and pointing with the other hand below him. “It’s the sea, Tim! And there are lights. They’re islanders and they’re coming up from the beach!”

“That’s Malam!” Tim jerked the words out. “He’s got that old sailor suit on again. They’ve got lights. Jove, Dick! But I think we’d better think about turning back! The sea’s rising and rising! Give a call to Malam. We’ll get him to come back to Janee’s house with us.”

They raised their voices and shrieked out a call. Malam must have heard and understood, because a few minutes later he and the two guards, who had queer enclosed lights on the end of their staves, were scrambling up by their side.

Neither Dick nor Tim grasped fully what was happening, but they realised that Malam was perfectly right in telling them to hurry back. Almost it seemed now that the sea had become a live thing and was pursuing them.

They began to scramble upwards again, their backs to the sea. For a time Malam and his two men were ahead, since they seemed better able to fight against the creepers and tangled undergrowth as well as the slashing rain, than

either Dick or Tim.

Once Tim fell heavily over a thick creeper. Even as he scrambled to his feet again the water swirled round his legs, and he struggled forward with a sense of fear touching his heart.

They were losing ground now, though Malam and his two guards, still bearing their faint lights, were well ahead. Dick and Tim were plunging, struggling, and scrambling in the pulpy, drenched undergrowth and trailing creepers. Now and again the fast-rising tide even helped them a little as it swept upwards, then receded again for the next sweep.

“It—it’s going to swallow the island!” Dick gasped. “They say—oh, Jupiter! You go on, Tim! I’ll catch up!”

He had tumbled again and twisted the leg which had been sprained in England. Tim struggled to help him up.

“It’s no use——” Dick began, and now the sea seemed to lash at them as though anxious to drag them back. It was just then that Malam and his two men came back a little way.

“Come! Come!” Malam himself was helping to drag Dick forward and upwards. “We must get to the Secret Place. Come quickly!”

The last stages of that journey were a ghastly nightmare to Dick Maynard, and it was scarcely more pleasant for Tim Gambier, except for the fact that all Tim’s limbs were sound and caused him no discomfort.

They were clear of the tanglewood at last, and it seemed, too, as though the sea had begun to grow tired of its mad pursuit. Malam himself rested for a while and tried to stare downwards. Below them came the dull thudding and swishing as the weight of water throbbled upwards and then receded a little way.

“It is good,” Malam spoke simply to Tim and Dick. “Now we shall go to the Secret Place.”

They struggled forward again, but now there was only the heavy rain, and the mist which it had brought, to fight against, and Malam and his two helpers seemed to know their way instinctively.

Presently they had a fairly reasonable idea of where they were, though in the darkness it was difficult to decide. But Tim himself had noticed when they were at Janee’s house that on slightly higher ground—right in the centre, indeed, of the plateau which was the highest part of the island—a kind of square, stone obelisk had been erected, and Joe had told him that it was the



entrance to the Secret Place. Joe himself had never been in the Secret Place, and knew little or nothing about it, but he knew that some of the secrets of the island were hidden there.

As they came to the obelisk they could see through the driving rain the gleam of a light, and, coming nearer, they could see dark figures moving about inside the obelisk. Evidently one side could be opened and closed as a door. It was Malam who bade the two boys to follow him inside, and they entered what might have been a stone-floored entrance-hall some twelve feet long by nine or ten feet wide and nearly eight feet high. The sides and roof were of heavy timber, though the outside was of rough-hewn massive stone slabs.

Here at all events they were sheltered from the rain, but Tim gathered that there were steps leading down to a bigger place, and there came the sound of music—at least Tim took it to be some kind of music. In this particular entrance-hall there was a certain amount of excitement in the air, and even Dick, hobbling just a little but otherwise practically fully recovered, just as Tim was from their efforts to get here, was apparently asking questions from some of the guards at the door.

“It’s all right, old son!” he told Tim cheerfully, as his companion hung on the outskirts of the little crowd. “All the others are in—Delamere, Bratt, and my father! They had the tip about this affair, I suppose, some time after we left. Anyway, they’re expecting us to turn up all right. Practically everybody else in the island had had warning, and they’ve all got up here safely and are tucked away down below. There’s over a thousand folks on the island, you know, so it should be some crush!”

Outside the wind had risen till it seemed to rock this great obelisk, and the rain was coming down harder than ever. But Malam was at their side, and begged them to come with him to the Secret Place below.

There must have been some fifty or sixty stone steps to descend, but before they reached the bottom they had a view of a mighty cavern, lighted by hundreds of native candles, most of them fastened in some way or other to the great pillars which served as supports for the roof above. Moving about in quite orderly fashion, or settling down apparently in family groups, were the islanders.

There was no suggestion of confusion or panic. Only later did Tim learn that the older men had experienced this same catastrophe half a dozen times or more in their lives. Most of the younger men had gone through it once or twice.

Here was another of the secrets of Lotos Island, just as the Great Curtain,

which had quite possibly disappeared completely for the time being, was the secret of why the island remained hidden.

Away in Europe and America learned professors were watching through great telescopes the conjunction of certain stars, and endeavouring to deduce the part they played—if indeed they had a part—in relation to the earth.

On the morrow or perhaps the next day newspaper offices in London, Paris, and New York would be receiving messages about the tremendous flood which had devastated great areas in China, and sub-editors would be compressing long reports concerning the tidal wave which had swept over certain islands in the tropical seas. Other learned professors would be stating that there had been seismic disturbances on the floor of the sea in some part of the Pacific.

Away in Lotos Island they knew nothing of the scientific reason for the terrible storm which swept over them, nor did they understand why the tide should rise till it almost engulfed the island. All that they knew was the wisdom which had been handed down to them, and that always at the coming of the storm the warning would be issued and they would make for the Secret Place.

At normal times the Secret Place was forbidden ground to most of the islanders, though all of them contributed their share towards the preparations that were made—stores of candles were taken in and carefully put away by those who held high office, specially prepared food was taken down at stated intervals, and everything was kept ready for the time when the great storms came.

Every succeeding king had counted it part of his duty to carry out some improvement in the Secret Place, and one interesting detail which Tim and Dick discovered in due course was that there was an efficient water-supply in the place itself. This had been carried out under Malam, the first white king of Lotos, and presumably he had made use of the pipes taken from the *Good Hope* to connect the tanks now in the Secret Place with the store of water from the spring near Janee's house.

Just as they reached the bottom of the stairs some one came up and greeted the two boys. The light was so dim that not until he was close to them did they recognise Bratt.

“We reckoned you'd be getting back all right,” Joe told them. “Janee was right about the weather! But you'd better be coming along with me. We're fixed up over there, on that platform sort of place you can just make out.”

Malam and several others accompanied them to the platform, but at this stage the King began to assume control and was giving orders.

“I guess we can leave the job in his hands now,” Dick said. “I don’t think I’d ever have got here but for him. He may have been a bit of an ass so far as my father was concerned, and he wasn’t exactly chummy with me when I first came to Lotos. But I’ll forgive him all that now! After all, I suppose it was really only his way of being loyal to John Delamere. Wonder whether that old scoundrel, Malchior, has managed to get here?”

It was a question to which no answer could be given just then. With Joe they crossed the rough, rock-hewn platform to where Mr. Maynard was arranging temporary beds for the night. Near him, still lying on the litter upon which he had been carried from the King’s house to Janee’s, lay Delamere.

“You’ll be comfortable enough here,” Maynard told them, after they had given him a brief outline of their own experiences in the last hour or two. “I should get down now and have a real sleep. There won’t be anything exciting happening for a good many hours, or so I gather, but Malam has a strict watch kept above.”

“Then I’m going off right now!” Dick answered, and Tim nodded his head in complete agreement.

Matting and fibre coverings had been brought from Janee’s house, and these had already been arranged. Within five minutes both Tim and Dick, freed from most of their wet clothing, were lying down. Robert Maynard and Joe followed their example, and there was no fear in their minds of any surprise attack.

Even here they could hear the dull thud of the sea, which had now risen to the height of its fury. And the torrential rain swept down over the sea and over the little patch of Lotos Island which still reared its head above the waters.

Somewhere not far from the island the submarine, to which most of Valda Rumboltz’s party had managed to return, was lying submerged. This storm had interfered considerably with their plans, and for the time being their chief concern was their own safety from the fury of the elements.

Another vessel was fighting even more gallantly than the submarine. The *Purple Heather* was still afloat, and her depleted crew were slaving at their tasks. On the bridge one man stood alone, clinging desperately at times, but never losing his grip. For the time had come when Captain McCurdy took command again of his ship, and there was never a man aboard who was not thankful to obey him. When the *Purple Heather* needed him, her captain was

there and ready!

There were others, too, who fought for their lives that night. Three of those who had accompanied Rumboltz on his shore expedition, failed to get back to the *Sleuth*. In the fulness of time they were flung helpless and injured on the high ground near the obelisk, and they lay there till the storm died down.

Of all this, however, neither Tim nor Dick knew anything until a long time afterwards. While the storm raged they slept peacefully enough, and when at last they wakened they would have had no idea of how long they had slept but for Delamere's wonderful watch, which would have ticked merrily at the bottom of the sea.

"Just twelve hours you've had!" Joe informed them, when at last they rose. "And now you'll be wanting a bath and something tasty for breakfast? A good job you're staying in a high-class hotel where there's plenty of variety."

Joe was exaggerating, but he did his best to live up to his jests. They found, too, that Delamere was actually up and about. The fever which had overthrown him so swiftly was dying down again almost as rapidly as it had come.

"Nearly as fit as ever I was!" Delamere declared. "I'll take care not to overdo it, but I'd like to show you one or two things to-day while we're down here."

In the great main cavern or hall the islanders all seemed to be occupied with some task or other. There was, indeed, a suggestion of real organisation about the way in which everything was done.

"Discipline of the British Navy and the Mercantile Service," Delamere explained, when they questioned him about it. "The people of Lotos have had some queer experiences in their history, but nothing quite so queer as when a British sailor became their King and mixed up local ideas and superstitions with the hard facts he had learnt himself. He was a good sailorman, I should imagine, and he's certainly left a legacy behind him in the shape of a high standard of cleanliness. This place will be as clean and tidy when this crowd go out in due course as it was when they came in. But here's Malam coming along now. I'll get him to take us round."

On to the rocky platform came Malam, King of Lotos Island. Neither Tim nor Dick had quite made up their minds about Malam. There was something impressive in his manner as he walked towards them, and yet his attire gave a touch of comic opera to it all. That same mixture of sound common sense, mingled with utterly childish superstition, apparently applied to his character, so far as they had been able to judge.

To Delamere and the elder Maynard it was perfectly understandable. It was useless to apply the ordinary standards of civilisation to one who had never known a world outside this small island. The marvel was that the leaven of civilisation brought to the island by one simple sailor should have persisted so strongly.

Delamere explained to Malam what he wished to do, and the King nodded his head in agreement. Malam gave a call to one of his counsellors, and a few moments later a little procession was descending from the platform to the floor of the great hall.

They did not pass through the crowd of islanders, however, but turned to the left and came to a passage or tunnel, hewn out of the rock, which neither Tim nor Dick had observed before. Two men went before them carrying big candles, which gave out quite a decent light.

At the end of the passage they came to a stout oak door, which seemed rather out of place in some way.

“This was doubtless put in by Joe Malam, or under his directions, though I imagine this passage and the place beyond was made long before he came to Lotos,” Delamere told them, as Malam produced a key and unlocked the door. “The door was probably brought up from the wreck of the *Good Hope*, and Malam turned this particular place into his strong-room.”

The door was opened, and they entered a fairly large chamber hewn out of the rock.

“It is here that my father rests,” Malam said. “It is here that he stored the treasure for the Big Captain of the White Queen when he should come for it across the seas.”

Tim and Dick were staring in wonder at the ship’s figure-head, which had been fixed at the other side of the chamber. Below this had been fastened a long, slightly curved piece of wood in which could be seen the deep-carved letters, *GOOD HOPE*.

In the light of the two candles they could see, too, the block of wood to the right of the figure-head, and this had also been carved with deep lettering:

JOSEPH MALAM,  
OF HULL, YORKSHIRE.  
Carpenter of the *Good Hope*.  
King of Lotos Island, 1863—  
Loyal Subject Queen Victo—

“Joe Malam’s own tombstone,” Delamere whispered, as they stood looking at the strange monument to the man who had ruled over the island. “Apparently he did not start his task until he began to fear that the long-expected Government ship would never come in his lifetime. His son has told me that he died with this before him, struggling to complete the last line—a loyal subject of Queen Victoria.”

“He’s buried here?” Tim asked.

“That was his own wish. All the kings of Lotos before him were buried in queer little caverns leading off from that main hall. Each one had in his burial-chamber certain of the treasures and ornaments he had gathered during his life. At least, that seems to have been the idea, and Joe followed their custom. He, too, had his treasures—the chests containing the bar gold which the *Good Hope* was carrying.”

Malam was already turning to the big boxes which were laid on the other side of the cavern, and Delamere and the two boys went over to watch him as he raised the lid of one of these. Here was the secret which Valda Rumboltz had crossed the seas to learn!

## CHAPTER VII

### IN THE SECRET PLACE

WHEN MALAM held the lid back and moved some of the canvas which had been used as packing, the result was scarcely up to the expectations of Tim and Dick. The dull reddish-yellow bars which scarcely reflected the light of the candles held above them did not at first strike the imagination.

“Gold!” Delamere said, and struggled to lift out one of the bars. “Probably among the first shipments of gold sent from Australia. There’s thousands upon thousands of pounds worth here. Most of it came from the *Good Hope*, I fancy, but there was another wreck some time after Joe Malam landed here. I have not had time to do more than delve into some of the records and papers he left. I think this is the box in which he kept his personal belongings.”

He raised the lid of another chest, which was not locked. It was a larger but probably not quite such a heavy box as the first one they had opened. There was no gold in this second chest, but a strange assortment of tarnished instruments, books, papers tied together with string or tape, and a dozen other oddments.

Tim could have sat down there and then and spent the rest of the day in going through these relics which Joe Malam had left, but Malam was already opening other boxes. Some of them would have required three or four men to move them, and the marvel was that they had ever been brought here.

Most of the boxes apparently contained bar gold, but there was one other box of relics: suits of sailors’ clothing, some of them almost dropping to pieces but others in as good a state apparently as when they were first made.

“The clothes of the king!” Malam said to them. “I am the king. But these are for the white men who serve the Queen over the seas. My father told me so.”

“I suppose that’s all right, only it’s a King nowadays,” Dick said to Tim. “Old Joe Malam seems to have had it all mapped out; but what a queer life he must have lived—waiting and hoping for a chance to get back to old England

again! I wonder——”

He stopped as the same idea flashed into his mind as that which had once or twice come into Tim's mind, even while they had been in this treasure-chamber. Would they ever see England again?

Delamere interrupted further talk. There were other strange things to be seen in this Secret Place of the Kings of Lotos, and he was anxious that they should know just as much as he did. That sharp attack of fever, which fortunately had almost passed now, had been a warning to him.

They left the vault of Joe Malam, and the heavy door was locked by Malam himself. Presently they were in another small cavern, almost a duplicate so far as size went of the one they had just left.

But here there were no iron-bound boxes stacked round the place. Instead a strangely carved figure, with queer signs cut into the block of stone on which it stood, served as the tomb of some bygone King of Lotos.

The walls of the cavern were not bare, however. Rough chains of what seemed to be copper were hung about the place, and here and there hung a remnant of the silky canvas cloth which so many of the islanders wore even to-day. Long pieces of wood, sharply pointed and tipped at the end, heavy clubs, and queer weapons or implements not unlike the entrenching tools of the British Army, were also hung on the walls or arranged about the foot of the grotesquely carved figure.

Round the neck of the figure hung long strings of beads. Delamere raised one of these and pointed out to Tim and Dick certain points of interest.

“Coloured stones chiefly,” he said. “This, for instance, is only a bright-red pebble picked from the beach, but it was probably counted quite as valuable as this—which is a genuine pearl. I should rather imagine there's a fortune in pearls alone on Lotos, though I can't learn that they are valued very much here. I picked up a few when I was last here, but I hadn't the time then to go into everything thoroughly.”

They saw other tombs and treasure-houses, and one could almost read the history of Lotos in these caverns. Probably at one time the island had been much larger than when Joe Malam first discovered it, and it seemed highly probable that at different periods it had been swept by terrific storms. That was why this great underground shelter had been gradually made, and why to-day the islanders had no panic when the warning came, but simply made for the Secret Place. Whether that name was Joe Malam's own invention or whether it was his translation of what the islanders had themselves called it, was a moot



point. To-day it was known simply by its English name of Secret Place.

They spent altogether several hours in the queer caverns which had been excavated by succeeding kings, and then returned to their allotted place on the platform in the big cavern. Here they ate sparingly of the food which had been brought from Janee's house. Malam was beginning to grow anxious now as to the state of affairs outside, and, after several messengers had reported to him, he went off himself to the entrance above.

"I think we might go up and have a look—if nobody objects," Dick suggested, and eventually Tim, Dick, and his father climbed back to the entrance. The great door was closed, but even so the big candles seemed in continual danger of being extinguished by the draught which managed to get through. Eight or ten islanders were crouching here, trying to keep warm, for it was much colder here than it was in the great chamber below.

At first it seemed highly improbable that the guards would be persuaded to open the door which led to the outer world, but Dick made the suggestion to Malam himself, and the King gave an order.

Three or four men got busy on the task of putting their weight on the simple lever which swung the stone door back, and the others waved to Dick and Tim to stand back, with quick cries of "Back! Back! Great wind!"

A violent gust of wind swept into the place when the door did swing back, and the candles were extinguished instantly. But it was daylight beyond, and the wind, after all, brought refreshing air into the place.

Tim went on his hands and knees and crept towards the door, and Dick promptly followed his example. When they reached the door it was not nearly so bad as they expected, and both of them judged that the fury of the storm was now dying down.

But the sea! It stretched out before them in heaving mountains, and the spray was flung upwards and whirled about in the wind like snowdrift. Now and again an eddy would whip into their faces, stinging them for the moment but bringing a sense of joy in its very freshness.

"It's going down!" Dick spoke confidently, remembering that last night the trees had barely shown above the dark waters. Now, with a far heavier sea running, they could glimpse again the waving palm-trees which had withstood the violent onslaught of the storm.

Suddenly Tim gripped Dick's arm.

"Look!" He tried to point to the right, where the grey light revealed three

forms lying outstretched on the wet, wind-swept grass of the plateau.

“They’re men—and one of them’s moving!” Dick Maynard could have sworn that he saw one of the three forms make an effort to move.

“Ahoy, ahoy!” Tim Gambier shouted at the top of his voice, hoping that it would carry through the wind.

One of the forms moved again, and for a moment an arm was half raised as though the man were trying to answer the call.

“Come on, Dick! We’ve got to get them in—if they’re still alive. Looks as though one of them is, anyway!”

They half rose, then scrambled from the obelisk into the wind which howled across the plateau. All that they could do was to get down on hands and knees again and crawl across the long, wet grass towards the three figures ahead of them.

Robert Maynard had been standing farther back when the two made up their minds to go. The moment he realised what they were doing, he decided to go after them. He followed their method too, and went on hands and knees, but it was not until he had gone some little way that he realised what the object of their journey was.

“Cast up by the sea!” Maynard thought, and wished the boys had not been in such a hurry. “Surely they can’t be alive after this storm!”

Maynard decided to turn back then and get some rope. He explained to those on duty inside the obelisk just what he wanted them to do. Four of them were to hold on to this rope while he crawled out to the others.

Both Tim and Dick were thankful that Maynard did join them, since it was practically impossible for them to do anything on their own. Maynard was able, too, to confirm the fact that all three men were alive, though two of them were unconscious. Even with the aid of the rope it was a long job getting the three men in, but at the end of half an hour they had accomplished the task.

It was just before Tim and Dick turned to follow the last man in, that an even more amazing discovery was made. Others had come out to help Maynard, and the two boys had only themselves to look after on this journey back. Perhaps because of this they lay and had a last look round, with some vague idea that there might be some one else to drag in.

They could see the tops of the palm-trees still swaying and swishing and yielding to the wind and the sea. Now they disappeared as the sea rose up, but again they rose from the receding waters, dripping and swaying as though to

shake the sea from them.

And then Dick saw a darker shape, more solid and immobile than the trees. A broken mast lay cross-wise, and near it they glimpsed a black and yellow shape—and they both recognised it instantly. Once it had been the funnel of the *Purple Heather*, and now, even though they could not see much of the yacht, they knew that she had reached Lotos Island in the end!

But she had reached it, just as the *Good Hope* long years ago had done, only to break to pieces.

They made their way back to the obelisk, and were quite content to rest for a time, once they were under shelter again. Maynard had seen about the three men being carried below and made comfortable.

“They’re all members of the crew of the *Purple Heather*, from what I have been able to gather,” he told them. “They had a pretty terrible time, and they think the yacht has been smashed to bits——”

“We’ve seen it!” Dick put in. “It’s lying over there!”

“He thinks most of the others who were aboard have been lost,” Maynard said. “Captain McCurdy apparently turned up and did his best, but he had never much chance against that terrible storm. I’m wondering——”

He did not finish his sentence, but they could guess just what the thoughts in his mind were. So long as the *Purple Heather* had been lying off Lotos, even though for a time it might have been in the hands of their enemies, they had very little doubt concerning the end of their quest.

They stayed for an hour or so in the entrance of the obelisk. In some way they did not feel inclined to go down yet to tell Delamere the news about the yacht. Possibly he would gain his first knowledge from one of the survivors.

But at last Maynard rose from where he had been sitting, and went to the doorway again. There was no doubt now but that the storm was rapidly dying down, and in its place a steady rain was coming. It was not the fierce, sheeting deluge which had first caught the island, but just a steady, persistent downpour.

“Hullo!” Maynard suddenly gave a little cry of wonder, and Tim and Dick jumped to his side. The elder Maynard was pointing through the rain towards the figure of a man, walking upright, though he reeled a little at times as a man does towards the end of an exhausting journey. As he came nearer they perceived that the man was dressed in great oilskins, and that his face was almost covered by a huge sou'-wester, which was evidently tied on securely.

When he staggered into the shelter of the obelisk and made a movement to unfasten and remove his heavy cap, both Tim and Dick recognised him immediately. It was Captain McCurdy!

“We’ve met before—aboard the *Purple Heather!*” he jerked out, and seemed to be gasping for breath. “I was captain—captain all the time, as Mr. Delamere will tell you. And I’ve lost her in the end! She’s gone! Broken! She’s lying down there now. There was only half a crew aboard, but they did their best. But the *Purple Heather* has gone!”

It was as though he sounded their knell of doom. The yacht had gone—and gone, too, were their chances of leaving Lotos Island!

“We’ll go below again,” Maynard said at last, and turned to McCurdy. “Will you come with me, captain, and I’ll try to give you a comfortable shake-down for a time at all events. I’ve no doubt you’re needing it.”

“Ay, ay!” McCurdy was looking about the queer entrance-chamber to the Secret Place in bemused wonder. After his fierce fight he scarcely grasped the miracle of the fact that his own life was still safe.

“We’ll go down with them,” Dick said to Tim. “There doesn’t seem to be any more rescue work, and I’d like to hear what the Skipper thinks of it all.”

Following Maynard and McCurdy they descended again into the great cavern below. Delamere was resting in his own corner, and Joe was hovering round. As soon as Joe saw McCurdy, he came forward to assist the captain to remove his great oilskins.

“Allow me, sir!” He might have been back again at the White House to judge by his manner. “Very glad to see you, captain! We’ve been wondering how you’d be getting on. You’ve been having nasty weather?”

“Nasty weather?” McCurdy echoed the words. “Man, I’ve seen nothing to equal it in all my sailing of the seas! But what’s this place? I’m wondering if I’m alive or whether I’m dreaming! And that’s Mr. Delamere himself! How d’ye do, sir?”

“Wonder of wonders! McCurdy!” John Delamere struggled to rise from his couch, his hand outstretched to the little captain. “You can tell me later how you got here, but the great thing is we’re all together on Lotos Island!”

“Ay, and likely to stay here,” McCurdy answered. “The *Purple Heather* has gone, sir. She’s piled up on the island, and probably she’ll be little more than driftwood by morning.”

“Well, come and sit down,” Delamere said philosophically. “You’ll have

something to eat and drink first, McCurdy, and then we can talk of the future.”

But it was more of what had happened than of what was likely to happen that they talked. It was difficult, if not impossible at this stage, to decide on any definite course of action until they knew more clearly their own position. In any case, for the time being, all their little plans and hopes were overruled by the forces of Nature. From time to time during the day one or other of the party went up to learn how the world outside was progressing. They were still prisoners in the Secret Place when night came.

In the morning Tim and Dick were the first to climb up to the entrance-chamber once more. The door of the obelisk was already open, and they stood together and surveyed the scene outside.

The wind had died down almost completely now, but the rain still came down with a steady persistence, and over everything now hung a white mist which seemed to be moving gently as though touched by the slight breeze.

“Looks as though the Big Curtain had got loose and was going to settle on the island,” Dick suggested. “Anyway, if and when we get back to England anybody starts to talk about the weather, I guess we’ll be able to go one better. But I’ll be glad when we can get out of the Secret Place!”

“So shall I,” Tim agreed. They had been more than glad to come here when the waters were rising, but, after all the excitement, it was difficult to settle down to a kind of time-killing existence. There were so many things they wanted to know, and so much to be done. What of the yacht? Would McCurdy’s fears be realised, or would the position turn out more hopeful? What had happened to the submarine? Had Rumboltz escaped, and, if so, would he return to Lotos?

There was Malchior, too. It was difficult to believe that he alone of all the islanders had failed to escape the fury of the storm. But nothing had been seen or heard of him since they had come to the Secret Place.

The day wore on slowly, but it was evident at each succeeding visit to the entrance that conditions outside were steadily improving. Late in the afternoon the rain had practically ceased, and even the sun began to give some hint of its power, and the quality of the mist had changed. They could see across the plateau to where Janee’s house stood, slightly lower than the obelisk. So far as they could make out, it had suffered very little in the storm.

“Maybe we could see something of the yacht now,” McCurdy suggested, and the four of them went out together.

The air was warm, yet with a curious freshness in it, only faintly tinged as

yet with the sweet scent of coco-nut oil and the white *tieré* flower, which at normal times penetrated every nook and cranny of the island. Even the fury of the sea and the wind had not quite driven it away.

Below them the pure white mist was rolling gently backwards and apparently gathering density as it went. They could catch no glimpse of the sea yet, but they could hear the thud and the splash of the waves as they rose and fell. The fury had gone, but there still sounded a note of sullen anger as though the waves were resentful that they had not claimed complete victory.

But half of the hill which led down to the broad level of the island was practically free again, and the palm-fronds, still glistening, waved lazily in the air. All things considered, it was marvellous that so far there were few signs of that utter devastation which they had expected.

“She’s still there!” McCurdy pointed down, and they saw the *Purple Heather*, lying over on her side, with broken masts and twisted wreckage entangled about her. It seemed absurd to see her there, high and dry on the hillside.

They scrambled down over the damp grasses and the heavy creepers, beaten and crushed by the sea and the rain. As they came nearer the vessel they saw two or three figures struggling to scramble from the deck.

“Ahoy! *Purple Heather*, ahoy!” McCurdy raised his voice and waved to the men.

Within a few more minutes he was with them, and Robert Maynard and Tim and Dick joined him very soon after. Apparently there were still four men alive who had clung on board the *Purple Heather* all through the storm. McCurdy himself had been swept overboard at a time when the yacht was utterly out of control. Only by the grace of Providence had he been flung on the high ground.

But there was not much sympathy in McCurdy’s tones when he spoke to the men. They had not played the straight game when first Rumboltz came up with the yacht, and he was not trusting them very much even now. Maynard’s suggestion that the men should come back to the Secret Place for a time was promptly rejected by the captain. They could rig up some sort of camp here with material taken from the yacht, and they could decide later what would be done about them.

“There’s secrets that will be best kept from them,” he explained to Maynard, when they had left the men again. “Ye’ve got three of the crew already down there. I’ll keep a careful eye on them when such time comes as

we're able to leave the place."

It was impossible to say just what damage had been done to the yacht, and whether it would ever be practical to refloat her. That was a matter which would require a good deal of examination and consideration, and for the time being they were prepared to leave it.

"But there's stores aboard we can get off as soon as possible," McCurdy said. "I'll consult with Mr. Delamere about that as soon as we get back."

That night was passed in the Secret Place again, but it was not quite such a quiet time as the other nights had been, so far as those in the great cavern were concerned.

Dick and Tim, indeed, only slept for a few hours before they were up and about again. It was a strangely beautiful night. As though to make up for the wild fury of the storm, an eerie stillness lay over the island, broken only by the gentle booming and murmuring of the sea below. The mist had completely cleared from the island, but the moon and the stars shone on the white curtain which had settled over the sea like some great wall around the island.

"Looks like cotton wool!" Dick summed up its appearance quite aptly, since more than ever to-night the Great Curtain had a curiously solid look.

They saw something of the native discipline to-night, too. Parties were moving hither and thither, and evidently making preparation for the great exodus, which it was hoped would take place on the morrow. Before then, however, a thorough inspection would have been carried out. Malam himself was apparently in command, and when Delamere came up to the top, they stood for a time talking together.

"They sing because the sea-devils have gone," Malam told Delamere, when he asked what the natives were singing about. "I tell you what they say. They say I am a good king and they say the Big Captain is good and the Little Captain and Missa Maynard. All are sorry because they did not know Missa Maynard was a friend of the Big Captain. But Malchior has gone. The sea-devils took him when the great storm came."

"Malchior has really gone, has he?" Both Dick and Tim asked the question, for they had been wondering just what had happened to the repulsive-looking witch-doctor.

"I don't quite know," Delamere told them. "Malam says that the sea-devils have taken him, but just what that really means I can't say. Malam also tells me that there is going to be a great feast in three or four days' time, when the big fish have been caught and the food has been gathered again. He himself

will become a brother of the white men from over the sea. I think he'd rather like to have a big bonfire and to put the other men—the sailors from the *Purple Heather*—on that by way of a diversion. He's gathered that we're not very friendly with them, and that's his idea of paying us a compliment. Burn the lot!"

"And what should we be doing while that was going on?" Tim asked, half jokingly, since he judged that Delamere was scarcely likely to tolerate that sort of thing.

"Oh, we should be enjoying ourselves at the feast. They've got the whole programme mapped out already. Two or three days to tackle the food problem, and then prepare for the festival. I don't quite know what this blood-brotherhood can mean here. It's hardly likely old Joe Malam would introduce anything of that sort, so it must be an old island custom. Anyhow, whatever it is, we've all got to go through it!"

"The next few days should be full of interest," Robert Maynard remarked cheerfully.

"And full of problems, I'm thinking!" Captain McCurdy put in.



## CHAPTER VIII

### WHEN RUMBOLTZ RETURNED

IN saying that the next few days would be full of interest, Maynard had not exaggerated. They awakened on the following morning to find that the night had completed the transformation-scene on the island. Lotos Island had passed through its terrible ordeal, and once more the sun shone down on its white beach and waving palm-fronds.

True, some of the gorgeous colours were still missing, but even these began to return in the course of two or three days. So far as could be seen, the actual damage done by the storm was ridiculously small, though there was naturally a fair amount of repair work and general clearing to be done.

Even the white men were not idle. The *Purple Heather* was inspected, and the prospects of getting her to the beach and making her seaworthy again were carefully discussed. It was obviously a difficult proposition, and even at the best would be a task requiring several months of hard work.

Of the six members of the crew of the yacht who had been rescued, four had suffered little ill-effects from their experiences, but two were on the sick-list, suffering from injuries and exposure.

One other man had been found. He had apparently managed to escape the storm to some extent by taking refuge on the roof of Janee's house, and it was partly chance that led to his discovery. This particular case was the most serious of all, and for a time it seemed doubtful whether the man would ever regain consciousness.

It was not, indeed, until they had managed to carry him down the hill and into one of the rooms, now being used as a hospital, in the King's house near the beach, that they even realised the identity of the man, and it was Dick who first made the discovery.

"It's Grettrex!" he told Delamere. "Ask my father to have a look at him. He's altered quite a lot since I last saw him—but I'm sure it's Grettrex!"

Robert Maynard confirmed Dick's opinion, but the man himself lay unconscious for many hours. Grettrex had been mate on the boat Maynard had

chartered for his trip to Lotos, and there was now precious little doubt that, even before Maynard sailed, Rumboltz had had some suspicion that the voyage had an interest for him, and for that reason Grettrex had sought and obtained his position on the boat.

So far as the present expedition was concerned, Valda Rumboltz had assumed full command of the operations to obtain control of Lotos Island, and Grettrex evidently occupied the position of right-hand man. The other two men, Rignold and Klingmann, who had once followed Dick to England, were also on what might be called Rumboltz's personal staff. How Grettrex had become separated from his companions was something which only he could explain when he had recovered, and in the beginning that consummation seemed very doubtful, though Delamere made all possible arrangements for the man's comfort and nursing.

On the night before the great feast of rejoicing was to be held, Tim and Dick retired to rest in one of the rooms of the King's house. So far Tim had always been quite ready to sleep whenever the opportunity offered, but to-night he was wakeful, his mind roaming back over all the events of the past few weeks. He rose at last from his matting bed and walked across the room to stare through the square opening in the wall which did duty as window.

The King's house had been built on the flat ground above the beach, and through the palm-trees Tim could see the white surf, now running quite gently over the sparkling beach. Far out, the Great Curtain, ghostly white in the pale light of the stars, hung very calm and still. To-night the sea itself seemed strangely calm, and on its surface there was not——

No! Suddenly the sense of peace which had fallen on Tim went from him, and in an instant every sense was alert as he peered intently through the window.

A black shadow lay on the surface of the sea—a queer, dark, slowly moving island it seemed, with here and there a pin-point of light apparently glowing.

“It's the submarine!” The thought flashed through Tim's mind instantly, to be succeeded by a riot of new ideas and emotions. Had Rumboltz himself come back?

Tim stepped back from the window and crossed over to where Dick lay peacefully asleep. He touched him gently, and in a moment or two his chum was sitting up.

“Sh! Don't make a sound, Dick!” Tim whispered. “But the submarine's

back. I'm pretty certain it's the *Sleuth*. I think it's only just turned up——”

Dick was jumping up and wide-awake in a moment.

“Are you sure, Tim? If it is——this is where we start being busy again.”

“Come and look! I don't suppose they'll come ashore to-night, but——What do you think, Dick? I propose we wander out and try to find out whether anything's happening. Then we'll come back and report to John Delamere.”

“That's the best idea!” Dick agreed. “Get into some clothes——the darker the better. If there's any chance of learning anything, we're the fellows who can do it.”

They hunted among the baggage they had brought here from the *Purple Heather* during the past day or two, and having found clothes more suitable for the present expedition than those they had been wearing, they scrambled quietly through the window.

The two crept cautiously away from the hut and through the palm-grove towards the beach. They had, however, gone only a little way among the shadows when Tim gripped Dick by the arm.

“Sh!” Tim was pointing to his left, but slightly ahead of where they had now pulled up. At the edge of the palm-grove, where the ground sloped fairly steeply towards the white sand, they could discern quite clearly a dark figure.

Even as they watched, the figure moved slightly and put out his arm. A moment later a beam of light flashed out. The figure was clad in native costume, but it seemed incredible that it could be an islander who was signalling——and with an electric torch!

“Forward——carefully!” Tim whispered, and they separated a little but crept steadily ahead, keeping as low as they could and dodging cautiously from one shadow to another. When presently they were within a few yards of the figure, they lay very still on the grass and watched him.

It was an islander who was using the torch. There was no real attempt at signalling so far as they could make out, beyond the mere fact that he indicated his presence to some one at the edge of the sea and away to his right.

As he put the torch away, his face turned towards them, and the pale light of the stars revealed his repulsive features. It was Malchior, the witch-doctor of Lotos, who stood there!

Both Tim and Dick recognised him, but they lay so close to him that neither dared breathe a word. Once or twice, indeed, they were afraid lest

Malchior had become suspicious.

Then they realised that three men were coming across the beach and Malchior was waiting for them. Not until they were close to the witch-doctor did Tim and Dick recognise two of the men as Rignold and Klingmann. They had not got rid of Valda Rumboltz and his men after all!

They were talking together, but it was difficult to understand more than a few odd words.

“Carry . . . orders. Aboard *Sleuth* . . . both sides . . . guns . . . finish the job to-morrow.”

Other odd words drifted to them, but even more disconnected. Yet they grasped some hint of the plans and understood something of what had happened, though not all.

Apparently, however, Malchior had actually spent the days when the great storm raged on board the submarine, which had evidently weathered it quite safely. It was equally plain that Malchior was now on the side of Rumboltz and his gang, and had doubtless been offered some share of the reward in one form or other.

Both Tim and Dick found their minds working at full pressure, and it was not entirely accidental that one particular idea came to them both. In the past day or two they had all lamented the fact that the small launch they had on the yacht had gone completely—lost during the storm. The boats on the *Purple Heather* had been swept away or smashed to bits. But it was the loss of the launch which had troubled them most.

Tim wriggled very cautiously and slowly until he was quite close to Dick, and whispered the idea which had begun to take shape.

“Right! Go ahead!” Dick nodded, though it was doubtful if Tim really heard the whispered words. But he understood, and in a few moments both were crawling stealthily down the slope to the beach.

Going across the beach they ran more risk. At any moment the conference between Malchior and Rignold might break up, and their chances of accomplishing their task would sink to vanishing-point.

They had covered about half the distance to their objective—which was the little launch at the edge of the sea—when they realised that the worst had happened. A scuffling sound as men began to run across the fine sand came to them, and they caught the sharp whisper of someone giving quick commands.

“Caught, Dick!” Tim rapped out the moment he realised the truth. “We’ve

got to do it, old son! You get ahead—push the boat off! I'll try—— Watch your chance!"

It was Dick's turn to obey the one who took command. He did not argue, but went as hard as he could for the launch. Tim ran more slowly and did not aim for the boat, but headed off as though intending to keep level with the margin of the sea. Then he turned and zigzagged for a few moments, wondering whether their wild scheme would have a chance.

They were on him now, and Tim realised, even before he went down, that there were only two of them.

"Now then! What's the game?" It was Rignold who had brought Tim down, and then dropped on him. "One of the kids, isn't it? Young Gambier? So you're butting in again, are you? You make a sound now and it'll be your last!"

In that queer way one's mind is apt to work at critical moments, Tim's chief thought just then was that all the men who worked under Rumboltz were fond of uttering sudden-death threats.

"Now then!" Rignold had taken out a revolver as he jerked Tim to his feet. The other man stood back a little way, evidently under the impression that Rignold could quite easily deal with one youngster. But even as Rignold flourished his weapon, the other man gave a sharp cry.

"Gee! The other kid——"

Dick had got to the launch, and Tim's ruse had succeeded in the fact that he had drawn the chase after himself. Now the sound of the engine suddenly reached the ears of the two who had made Tim prisoner.

Rignold turned for an instant when his companion gave that quick cry of alarm—and it was Tim's chance! He had been standing limply, almost dejectedly, as though frightened, but he was waiting for just such an opening as this.

In a flash he had wrenched the revolver, on which Rignold had temporarily relaxed his grip, from his captor. He was hard and tough these days, and the sudden fury which he put behind his blow at Rignold staggered the man for the moment, since it came just at the juncture when his whole thoughts were suddenly switched to what was happening at the launch.

It was just that moment of surprise which helped Tim. He was free, and flying like the wind across the sand towards the sea. As he drew nearer, he gave a loud call so that Dick would know where he was.

In a race over that fine sand Tim could have given any of the men a good thirty yards in the hundred, and on this occasion he had had quite a reasonable start.

“Dick! Dick! Ho, ho! Ho, ho!” He yelled fiercely as he neared the edge of the sea.

“Right, Tim!” Dick had the little launch under perfect control, and, as often before, he realised just what was in Tim’s mind and what he was expected to do.

There was not a second wasted. The launch was chugging slowly and as close in as it was safe to bring it, when Tim dashed through the surf and made a spring for the stern.

“Right ahead, Dick! I’m aboard! Swing her right out!”

Tim was half sprawling in the boat, but he was safely aboard, while Rignold and his companion and the other man, who had stayed behind with Malchior for a time but had now joined up, were all running foolishly across the sands.

“Got a revolver too!” Tim managed to jerk out, as he struggled to sit upright. “They won’t dare fire. But keep low, Dick! We’ll make for that cave—remember it? The one we were in yesterday?”

“That’s the scheme!” Dick agreed. “We’re getting a bit of our own back this journey. Look! I can just make out the crowd on the beach. I guess they’re feeling pretty wild just now.”

Both Tim and Dick had a pleasant sense of exultation as they sped through the water, and certainly in the next half-hour or so it seemed as though fortune were right on their side to-night. Yesterday, in their exploration of the island, they had been over to the side which was much more rocky and steep than the southern shore.

The cliffs were not very high, however, and not by any means inaccessible. Tim and Dick had climbed down and discovered quite a number of caves, which would have beaten Tim’s old retreat in the Daresbury Woods quite easily. Right at the water’s edge they had discovered a fairly big cavern, and they had even then, without any premonition of what lay ahead, discussed the possibilities of the place both as a hiding-place and as a real smugglers’ cave.

Slowly and very carefully they sought for it now in the pale light. It was tricky work, but at last the little launch was going very gently into the mouth of the cavern. The tide was fairly high, but certainly not at the full, and in a

very short time they were aground.

“Wish we had a light!” Dick said. “However, let’s pull the thing right up as far as we can, then tie her up with plenty of slack rope. She’ll be all right in here.”

It took them quite a fair length of time to make the little launch as safe and secure as they wished it to be. Then they began to consider their next steps. The job of getting out of the cavern without a boat and in the darkness was not quite so simple as it had been yesterday, when the tide had been lower.

They had to wade in up to the waist, but at last Tim was round the corner and clambering on to the jutting rocks a little way above him. Dick kept close behind, and the two sat together at last, a foot or two above the gently rolling sea, and to the right of the big cavern where the launch was now hidden. Behind them lay a fairly stiff climb, but with caution there was no particular risk in the task.

“Shall we be moving on now?” Tim suggested presently. “It will take us a full hour to get back, and by then it will be daylight. We’ll tell the Skipper—— Hullo! What’s—— Get back, Dick! Dodge along quickly!”

Quite suddenly a blaze of light had come sweeping across the sea. Until this stage the vessel had lain very quietly, and though the two chums were fully aware of its presence, they had never any feeling of fear that it would interfere with their plans. They judged instinctively that the *Sleuth’s* part for the present was to keep in the background and not to advertise its presence until Rignold had made whatever plans he desired on shore.

Presumably now the *Sleuth* had learned that there had been a hitch in Rignold’s programme and that the launch was missing. They were searching the coast for any sign of the craft, and it was obviously important for both Tim and Dick to avoid discovery if possible.

At first the beam of the searchlight was directed towards the shore, away to their left, and this gave them time to scramble back into the shadow of the cavern again. Now it moved along, and the cavern was temporarily illumined with its searching glare. Dick and Tim flattened themselves back against the rocky sides and trusted to fortune to be on their side.

But the searchlight passed on, and was presently concentrating on the cliffs to their right, which were steeper and somewhat higher than at this particular spot.

“We’ll get out of this place,” Tim suggested. “I’ve an idea the *Sleuth* is coming very slowly inshore, and we’ll be better away, though we’ll watch

what the game is, if we have the chance.”

They clambered out again, and crawled farther away from the cavern, slowly climbing higher up the cliffs. This time they went to the right, even though it might be slightly more risky, but once again they were both obsessed with the idea of learning all they could. Presently they rested behind a jutting boulder of rock, which seemed to afford them complete protection.

“The *Sleuth* is coming right in!” Dick whispered. “There’s quite a broad platform along there. Jove! But if they’re not asking for trouble I’ve never seen any one who did! They’re going to land from the submarine.”

The submarine was manœuvring now, very slowly and gently, and for twenty minutes or so it seemed to be nosing its way nearer and nearer to the cliffs. It was a dangerous game, or so it seemed, but evidently Rumboltz was in the mood to take risks to-night. Yet his plan was successful, and the *Sleuth* at this state of the tide lay right alongside the cliff at last, and men were jumping ashore ready to make her secure. They would be safe enough perhaps for three or four hours.

A narrow gangway was being run out from the submarine, and the men who had landed made this secure. Other men began to come ashore then—eight or nine of them there were, and each had a rifle slung over his shoulder, as well as haversack and bandoliers. Rumboltz was meaning real business to-night or in the early hours of the day which would soon be dawning.

“I think that the sooner we get back and warn the others, the better it will be!” Tim whispered. “I guess we’ve learnt quite enough to be going on with. Go this way!”

They began to clamber up the cliffs again, working away from the submarine. Now they were at the top, and for a moment or two lay there, panting a little after their exertions. Then, as Dick half rose, another figure, which was apparently crawling on hands and knees, loomed up before him.

“Tim!” Dick gasped out the word as a warning, and Tim was alert on the instant.

“It’s all right, boys!” a voice assured them, and both Tim and Dick felt they wanted to laugh at the sudden anti-climax to this shock. It was Delamere himself who had surprised and startled them by his abrupt appearance.

“You, Skipper!” Dick whispered. “But why——”

“I might ask you the same thing—only I’ve got a pretty fair idea of what you have been doing,” Delamere told them. “I think our best plan is to get back



now. We had an idea that there was mischief afoot to-night—— Sh! Quiet! Lie flat!”

Not more than twenty yards from where they lay, the party of men armed with rifles were climbing on to the flat ground at the top of the cliff. As the three lay there they could see them gradually spreading out, as though their instructions had been to cover as wide a field as possible. It was evident, too, that they were keeping a sharp look-out.

Their appearance upset the plan Delamere and the two boys had decided upon. It would be more than risky to try and take the shortest cut back to the King’s house.

“Why not get down the cliff again and get away in the launch?” Tim suggested. “There’s plenty of oil aboard, and she’s running well, isn’t she, Dick?”

“First-rate!” Dick said. “I guess we could get her out quite easily now.”

“And if we’re going to do it, the sooner we make the move the better,” Delamere said. “It will be broad daylight in another half-hour! Lead the way, Tim—and keep low, in case they’re keeping a look-out on the *Sleuth*. We’ll run no risks we can possibly avoid!”

Tim was already beginning the slow climb down the cliffs, and he worked steadily away from the submarine now. It was not an easy or swift journey, and by the time they reached the cavern the light of day was upon them. Yet they struggled to get the launch out, and then, as Dick started up the engine, Delamere gave the order:

“Full speed ahead, Dick! I’ll keep to the tiller.”

# CHAPTER IX

## THE FIGHT FOR THE ISLAND BEGINS

**T**HAT particular night was, if not exactly an exciting one, a disturbing and an important one for quite a number of people on Lotos Island or on the only vessel which lay within easy reach of its shores.

To Valda Rumboltz, aboard the *Sleuth*, it was meant to be a decisive night. All things considered, his plans since he first made up his mind to come to Lotos and “annex” it, as he himself termed it, had not gone with that smoothness which usually characterised the schemes of the “uncrowned king of the South Seas.”

It was not the first time Rumboltz had desired to possess an island in the possession of some one else. It would not be the first time that unpleasant rumours had gone round as to the manner in which he had achieved his object, if perchance later on some whisper leaked out through his servants concerning this adventure.

“Lotos Island is mine!” Rumboltz had said when he had finally settled everything with Grettex, Rignold, and Klingmann, some months ago now. “It’s going to be useful later on!”

It was not only for the sake of what the island was alleged to contain, according to Grettex. There were other aspects which appealed to Rumboltz. An island right off all regular routes and wonderfully hidden by an amazing natural phenomenon so that any vessel sailing near it would never suspect what lay hidden beyond, would be valuable in any emergency that might arise. And in the life of Rumboltz, the possibility of an emergency in which he might have to seek safety in flight was never disguised.

Grettex had been quite straight with Rumboltz, since Grettex himself lacked both the money and the means to take the island himself. But Grettex was to have a goodly share of the profits, and whatever other tales may have been told of Rumboltz, it was generally agreed that he played straight with those who gave him a straight deal.

But this expedition in the *Sleuth* had struck difficulties, and success had not

come so easily as had been expected. That was why, having safely come through the storm and having discovered that the people on the island had also got safely through, though the yacht had come to grief, Rumboltz had chosen this night and the following morning for the settlement of all difficulties.

Unfortunately there was a hitch quite early, though it was some time before those on the *Sleuth* could understand just what had happened. Rignold had gone ashore to find out if there were any men of Rumboltz's party still on the island. If they were being held as prisoners, as seemed quite possible, they were to be released.

Another item which was on Rignold's programme, assuming that he found some of the crew from the yacht, or even discovered Grettex, was to get Delamere and bring him out to the submarine—as a prisoner of course. According to the plan laid down by Rumboltz, neither Delamere nor Maynard, nor any of their party, would ever leave Lotos alive—and no one would ever know what their fate had been except those whose business it would be to keep their tongues still.

But Delamere might be useful for a time, and in any case he would be safer aboard the *Sleuth* than directing operations against it.

Just what did happen on shore Rumboltz did not learn for some time after. He managed to grasp by the signals from Rignold that the launch had been stolen from them and that the party he had sent on shore had been temporarily marooned. The *Sleuth* let its searchlight play then, but could pick up no sign of the missing launch.

Meantime, Rignold discovered that there were three or four members of the *Purple Heather* crew, who had more or less agreed to come under Rumboltz long before this, still safe and sound on the island. There were also, so he learned, two or three sick men, and one of these was Grettex. But Grettex was in no condition to take part in any effort Rignold wished to launch.

Rignold accordingly fell back on a man whose name was Cory, second mate of the *Purple Heather*. Cory agreed to do just what Rignold wished him to do, but it is still very much open to doubt whether Cory ever would have carried it out. In any event, he never had any chance.

Cory was to get to Delamere's room and tell him that Malchior was back, and that with him were some of the men from the submarine. He was to persuade Delamere to come out—and Rignold and his friends would be waiting for him. There would not be a sound, but, according to Rignold, Delamere would take the count almost as soon as he came out.

It was unfortunate, from Rignold's point of view, that Delamere, Maynard, and McCurdy had arranged between them on the very first night they slept again in the King's house that some sort of watch was desirable. They said nothing to the boys about this, as they had not the slightest desire to give them any idea that there was the least cause for alarm.

So that it came about that Delamere, prowling round very quietly about the King's house, while he was taking his two hours' turn, saw Tim and Dick stealing softly out. He saw, too, quite a lot of the chase across the sands and their ultimate escape in the launch, but he was not near enough to give them any help. In any case, it was wiser not to interfere, so long as they got safely away.

Delamere saw, too, the signalling in which Rignold indulged in due course, and then he went back to the house and aroused McCurdy and Maynard. When eventually Cory stole softly into Delamere's room, he never had any chance to make his carefully worded explanation, but was securely tied up and gagged before he quite grasped the fact that something had come badly unstuck in Rignold's scheme.

There was some delay after this, and apparently Rignold had grown tired of waiting for Delamere, for he had gone down to the beach again when the next cautious inspection was made. Bratt was now a member of the party, and he went into the hut where the other three ex-members of the *Purple Heather* crew were lying, and called one out.

Whether these men would have remained loyal to Delamere and his party, or would have thrown in their lot, had the opportunity offered, with Rumboltz and his men, can never be told. Their own assertions were that they would have remained true to Delamere, but it was no time to take risks of having traitors in the camp, nor yet a time for gentle methods.

Cory was a prisoner, and shortly afterwards he had a fellow to keep him company. The other two remaining in the hut from which Cory had come were also due to receive a surprise, and they, too, were eventually secured.

Malam and some of his guards had been roused, as quietly as possible, and explanations made. Meantime, it had been observed that the dark hulk of the submarine had begun to move and was evidently making round the island.

"I'll go over there and keep watch for a time," Delamere decided. "I'm anxious to know what's happened to the two boys, as I fancy they were heading round to that side. No! You stay here, Bob, and you, too, McCurdy. One man will be enough on this little expedition, and I'm of the opinion we'll be needing everybody here very shortly. But I'll be back as quickly as I can."

Maynard, McCurdy, and Bratt did not waste their time after Delamere had gone. A good many useful articles had already been brought from the *Purple Heather* and stored for the time in the King's house, so that it was possible to give each of them a fair supply of ammunition. McCurdy tried to gain information from Cory, whose gag had now been removed, since it served no useful purpose. It would have done him precious little good to cry out for help now that the King's own bodyguard were on duty.

It must be admitted that McCurdy felt as Maynard did, that against modern weapons the natives would have very little chance, nor could they be really termed fighting men. But they were strong and active and had little fear, and in certain circumstances their help might be invaluable.

Cory had very little information to give, and was chiefly concerned in asserting that he had intended no harm. McCurdy left him and tried to find out the whereabouts of the men who had apparently come ashore and talked with Cory. But Rignold and his two companions had disappeared, temporarily at all events, nor was there any sign of Malchior, whose presence on the island had been reported by Delamere.

In the next hour or so there was a fair amount of commotion on the island, and both Maynard and McCurdy, acting as advisers to Malam, did what they could to organise. In one way it was not difficult, since the whole island were practised in what might be called storm-drill, as Maynard had already seen when the great gale had come.

But in another way it was likely to prove very difficult. The Lotos Islanders were not a warlike race from the mere fact that they did not know the meaning of war, and although doubtless there had been local quarrels, there was no real knowledge of defence against attack from outsiders.

"I'm thinking it's about time Mr. Delamere was back again," McCurdy said, but he was staring across the sea at the time. "If anything has happened to him or to the two boys—— Hullo! So they're running a party ashore right now, are they? Take a look, Mr. Maynard!"

The captain was pointing almost directly ahead. A little motor-launch was tearing through the water, having evidently come round from the other side of the island, and was now heading straight for the shore.

Maynard called out a swift command to those nearest him. If the occupants of the launch were going to land, it would be better to take them by surprise, and he was ordering his party to keep under cover for the time being.

"Three of them!" McCurdy said, and shaded his eyes with his hand as he

stared across. "They're landing! We'd better—— Glory, Mr. Maynard! It's Mr. Delamere himself and the boys!"

Sure enough there was Dick and Tim splashing ashore and carrying the little anchor of the launch with them. Delamere followed them more slowly, and the launch was being made secure by the time Maynard and McCurdy hurried down to meet them.

"A good run!" Delamere said, as though he had been on a pleasant picnic. "Our friend, Rumboltz, has been having a busy night. There's eight or nine men armed with rifles who are lying in wait somewhere up yonder!"

He waved a hand in the direction of the roadway leading up to Janee's house, but there was not a sign of any men to be seen. They would have had easy cover among the trees in any case.

"And that looks like Rumboltz himself," McCurdy said, and they all turned to look across the sea again in the direction he pointed. Round the corner of the island came the low, dark form of the *Sleuth*, moving very slowly, or so it seemed. They got back again on the higher ground and nearer the King's house. From here they could see all that was necessary through the trees, without being quite so exposed themselves. Some of the islanders were already dragging the launch higher up the beach on the instructions of Delamere. It was just as well not to leave it in such a position that it might be a help to any of Rumboltz's men who wanted to make a quick escape back to the submarine.

"I don't think the big feast will be held to-day," McCurdy said, as he stood and watched the slowly moving submarine. "We've explained to the King—— Now what's the sense in that?"

A puff of smoke had gone up from the submarine, followed by the report of the small gun she carried. The shot went shrieking high over their heads, and exploded on the hillside, well above the village, possibly uprooting a tree or two, and sending a little cloud of earth and smoke up in the sunlight.

"Silly asses!" Dick said, though his laugh was possibly a little forced. One only needs to have a very brief experience of being under shell-fire to gain a certain dislike for it.

And even to those lacking that experience there is something rather terrifying in the dull thud and the sharper crack which follows, and in the fierce flash of flame and the spectacle of earth flying upwards. Delamere was watching the islanders, and judged that if Rumboltz began to pound them at all, it was highly probable that there would be a panic.

"Hullo, hullo! Professor Malchior in his famous dance!" It was Tim who

spoke jestingly, but, as in Dick's case, there was just a little hint of puzzled wonder behind the flippancy. Like some demented creature Malchior, the witch-doctor, came running from the palm-grove, his arms waving and his queer robes fluttering. He was shrieking aloud at the top of his voice, and his savage cries were more horrible and piercing than the whistling of the shell which had just passed over them.

"What is he saying?" Delamere had gripped an islander who had been standing quite near him, but was now apparently anxious to follow Malchior, as others were doing already.

"He—he says that the sea-devils have come again and that we shall all die," the man answered. "Ever' one shall die, but those who follow Malchior to the Secret Place. I—we must go, Big Captain! Come—come quickly!"

From different hiding-places where McCurdy had stationed groups of men, as well as among those who had been drawn up in loose formation on this broad patch of ground near the King's house, dozens began to break away, and, going slowly at first, but hurrying presently, began to follow Malchior.

Again there came the boom of the gun, but this time the shell fell on the beach, and almost instinctively Tim and Dick were ducking as they heard the rattle of pebbles and flying fragments striking the trees.

Malchior was still dancing and waving his arms, and his voice shrieked forth its fearsome wail. It was marvellous in a way that the creature could keep it up, and that he possessed so much energy. And by now he was surrounded by an ever-growing mob, who had taken up his shrieking chant as their own.

It was another side of the islanders' character, and one that was difficult to understand, or so it seemed to Tim and Dick, when they thought of the calm way in which they had faced the storm and tackled their different tasks in the Secret Place. They were so like children—docile and diligent under conditions which they understood, but utterly unreasoning and uncontrolled in the face of unknown fears.

"You'd better jump in on this, sir!" McCurdy turned abruptly to Delamere. "I guessed—Rumboltz wants to start a panic among the natives. They're all the same, once the witch-doctor starts them off, and no one knows that better than Valda Rumboltz. You pull some weight with the crowd. Look out, sir!"

He had pulled Delamere to the ground in an instant. The third shell came from the submarine, and fell only a few yards from Delamere and McCurdy, and for a moment or two they were smothered with flying sand and pebbles. Maynard and the boys were some little distance away, but they, too, were

ducking and trying to shield their faces from the flying sand.

“Right!” Delamere was jumping up again and shouting out to Maynard and the boys. “Head ’em off, Bob! Stay! Stay! The Big Captain commands!”

He was bellowing out, and it was just then that Malam came from his house and walked swiftly towards Delamere. As he did so a figure appeared suddenly at the edge of the belt of palm-trees, and there was the glint of metal as the sunshine caught the weapon the man raised. Then came a report and a sharp spurt of flame.

The bullet struck Malam in the arm, and the sudden shock sent him toppling forward. Just for an instant Tim saw the face of the man who fired the shot, and he recognised Rignold. But the fellow had jumped back among the trees and disappeared almost as swiftly as he had stepped forward.

Delamere was running forward, crying out at the top of his voice, while McCurdy was shouting out to Maynard in his desire to join up with him and restore order among the islanders. The battle of Lotos Island had begun—and it seemed that it had begun well for Valda Rumboltz.



## CHAPTER X

### THE *SLEUTH* TURNS TAIL

**F**OR a brief space it seemed as though utter confusion would overwhelm any efforts which the Englishmen might make to control the current of events on the island.

Malam the King was staggering across the sandy patch, and some of those who called themselves kinsmen, and others who acted as his advisers, were running towards him, apparently anxious to get him to make the journey to the Secret Place as swiftly as possible. It looked, too, as though they were also gripped by the panic, or the delirium, which had come upon most of those who were now following Malchior in his mad dance.

“Stay! Stay!” Delamere was giving his powerful voice full play. “The Big Captain commands you to stop! Stay with your King! The sea-devils have hurt the King! Come and help! Come and help!”

At first it seemed as though he might just as well have appealed to the sea or to the waving trees for help. The Lotos Islanders, though they themselves had no knowledge of the fact, had this in common with other natives of the South Seas: they quickly became intoxicated with their own singing and were carried away by the words they sang. It was on that knowledge Malchior was now playing, just as it was the wide experience of the South Seas which had led Rumboltz to seek alliance with Malchior.

Yet here and there little groups hesitated and began to rally round Delamere, until he, too, was swept along in a new procession which formed a rival to Malchior’s.

The shriek of a siren sounded from the *Sleuth*, and almost immediately it was answered by the rattle of rifle-fire from somewhere among the tree-clad hill. It is doubtful if any bullet found any other billet but in the trunk of some tree, but this was all in accordance with Rumboltz’s plan. Confusion and panic would pave the way to the last short, sharp tussle with Delamere and his friends—and victory would be swiftly with Rumboltz.

He was trying to watch the progress of the fight, or its preliminaries, even

now. The submarine had come in as close as it dared—so close indeed that the glasses which Rumboltz held were scarcely needed.

“Why doesn’t Rignold get his men together and rush them?” he demanded of the man who stood near him. “What’s the fool signalling about now? Get on! Get on! Delamere’s coming back! Give me that megaphone!”

Rumboltz’s voice, magnified by the megaphone, was yelling across the water, but it is doubtful if any one took much notice of what he called at this juncture. Rignold had been completely nonplussed for the time being by the disappearance of Cory and the others who were to have joined him.

The other two men who had been with him had been sent off on a search expedition, while Rignold tried to signal Rumboltz to hold up for a time. He had carried out certain of his instructions, and Malchior was playing his part in a way which justified the belief of Rumboltz that this was an important move. Rignold had taken the first opportunity, too, of trying to settle the question of the kingship of the island, and his shot at Malam had been carefully taken.

Then he crept back, went to the beach again, and tried to give a signal to Rumboltz to go slow for a time, returned cautiously once again to the palm grove in the hope of picking up his two companions, and then, as he turned to go back again, puzzled as to what course he should now take, he felt himself suddenly seized by the legs and somebody butted violently into him from behind. Rignold fell with a crash to the ground.

“Got him!” It was Tim’s voice which gave the triumphant call to McCurdy. Dick was already kneeling in the middle of Rignold’s back, and he was trying to twist one arm back while Tim struggled with the other.

It had been McCurdy’s idea to creep into hiding and take Rignold. Evidently Rignold had instructions from Rumboltz, and if they could get him out of the way it might be a big help. McCurdy had managed to get hold of some of the rough but very strong rope made by the islanders, and he used it expeditiously now in trussing Rignold up securely.

“You’ll pay for this!” Rignold managed to blurt out, and McCurdy laughed.

“I’ve buried better men than you,” he retorted. “I’m warning you that I’ve got a gun and my finger’s itching to pull the trigger. Maybe there’ll be a good many funerals before the day’s out, and I’ve little doubt but what you’ll be among them. But if you’re not in a hurry for it—you’ll just keep quiet!”

They rushed him through the grove and into one of the huts near the King’s house. Robert Maynard met them here, for he had been making certain that the

other prisoners were still secure.

Fortune, which has a way of swaying first to one side and then to the other, was on their side in the next half-hour or so. They came across another man and he, too, was taken by surprise, and ended in the same way that Rignold had done. Klingmann, who had been with Rignold last night, was evidently somewhere about, and a search was made carefully for him. It was their job to clear away all risk of any surprise from this direction, while Delamere, supported by Bratt, was doing his utmost to restore order elsewhere.

They discovered Klingmann all right. He had evidently got some idea that Rignold had been made a prisoner, and was now trying to keep out of the way himself until such time as reinforcements came from the *Sleuth*. But the fight which he put up was very brief, and he, too, was numbered among the prisoners taken.

“We’ll be needing half the island as a prison at this rate,” McCurdy said in his queer grim way. “And we’ll want a strong guard. Do you think we could get some of these young fellows with the clubs along to keep watch? I’m thinking it would be wiser.”

There was no suggestion of confusion so far as this little party was concerned, and it seemed as though Delamere, after an experience which had been more strenuous than fighting would have been, had succeeded in getting more than half the islanders to his side. Malchior’s crowd had gone their way for the time being, and were lost among the trees on the hills.

Somewhere, too, among the trees, the riflemen were waiting patiently for the signal to attack. But the programme seemed to be held up, and presently the leader sent one man out to try and find out how things stood. It was unfortunate for this man that just as he arrived quite near the broad patch in front of the King’s house, he happened to be observed by two other people who had decided to try and find out what had happened to the riflemen.

McCurdy and Tim had not left Delamere and the others for more than three minutes when they had their glimpse of the rifleman, treading his way very cautiously among the trees. Practice makes perfect, and in this matter of making prisoners, Tim had had quite a fair experience this morning. The man with the rifle was being trussed up, or at all events his arms were being securely tied behind him before he quite grasped the fact that a battering-ram had butted into him from behind. McCurdy took his rifle and slung his bandolier over his own shoulders.

Then they ran their prisoner across the open patch to one of the huts, where two of the young men armed with clubs had their orders to take care that this

particular sea-devil did not escape. The panic, which Rumboltz had been so keen to organise, had completely fizzled out so far as the islanders now ranged under Delamere were concerned.

Malam's arm had been bandaged up by Joe, and for the time being the ruler of Lotos was resting on the broad veranda in front of his house. Delamere was struggling to get the islanders into ordered companies, appointing leaders, arranging and lecturing and instructing.

"I think we're getting a grip of the situation, McCurdy," Delamere said, when McCurdy returned. "It might be well to keep careful watch on the *Sleuth*, while Maynard and I take out parties to inquire into the activities of the riflemen. There will be eight of them now, I fancy."

Delamere had no intention of risking any of his men, if it could be avoided, but the riflemen were a source of danger, and he was anxious to get rid of their threat if it could be managed. While he was discussing plans with McCurdy and Maynard, however, there came the echoing sound of a name. There was at first something mysterious about the call, until Delamere realised that it was being shouted by a powerful voice magnified by a megaphone.

"John Delamere! Delamere!" They could hear the name quite clearly. "Give you ten minutes. . . . Surrender. . . . Blow the whole lot of you to bits. . . ."

"Surrender!" McCurdy turned to Delamere and laughed. "I like that! You'll be wanting the two boys to come with me for the time being, Mr. Delamere? We'll keep watch from the beach."

"Take no risks," Delamere said. "You understand the signals? I'll get these men in their right places."

McCurdy, with Tim and Dick, went towards the beach, but at the edge of the grove of palms they lay down and watched the *Sleuth*. Whether Rumboltz, standing on the little bridge of the submarine, saw them or not it is impossible to say, but some one who stood near him had taken up a rifle, and there came the echoing report as it was fired. The sand just in front of Dick spurted up—and Dick dropped his head swiftly.

"Keep low!" McCurdy warned them, and again the rifle from the submarine cracked forth and the woods on the island echoed back the sound.

And then came another crack and a puff of smoke, but this time it came from the palm-grove. Crack—crack—crack! McCurdy was not breaking quick-firing records, but he was quite pleased at the speed with which he accomplished the "five-rounds-rapid."

Both Tim and Dick were watching the big figure of Rumboltz, which even at this distance could be quite plainly distinguished. As the crack-crack of McCurdy's rifle ceased, they saw Rumboltz suddenly stagger backwards and then collapse on the little bridge.

"Jove! But he's hit!" Dick said to Tim. "And the other chap——"

They could see the other man on his hands and knees now, and he was obviously trying to help Rumboltz down from the little deck into cover below. And again from the right of Tim came the sharp crack-crack-crack, not over-rapidly but with a certain efficient regularity, as McCurdy tried out another clip of five.

But the two men on the bridge of the *Sleuth* managed to get below. Rumboltz had been hit, beyond all shadow of a doubt, but possibly not seriously.

They lay watching the vessel, and presently perceived that it was moving again. It was very slow at first, but gradually the *Sleuth* got under way and began to swing round and head out for the sea. For the time being, so it seemed, Rumboltz had had his fill of fighting.

"I guess that's about the end of the battle of Lotos!" Dick said cheerfully. "Well done, Captain McCurdy! There's not been very much fighting after all!"

"No!" Tim agreed, but had the feeling that the time had not yet come to begin rejoicing. "Anyway, they seem to have had enough for the present. Wonder how the Skipper is going on?"

It was true enough that, for the time being, the fight had fizzled out, and the honours rested with Delamere's party. The *Sleuth* was moving slowly out, and the riflemen had presumably hidden themselves away. Yet they remained a menace to Delamere's party, and when night came none of them had any thought of sleep. Such rest as they needed had been taken during the afternoon.

It was decided that Maynard, Dick, and McCurdy should remain at the King's house to act as sentries and as a guard over their prisoners, in case any attempt was made by Rumboltz, or by the men he had landed on the island, to get into touch with them.

Tim was to go with Delamere and Bratt to the other side of the island and keep observation there. As the submarine could get moorings on that side, it was quite probable that they would make use of the same place to-night. They set off an hour or so before nightfall and were able to spend most of that hour in the shelter of the woods. They went cautiously lest by any chance they stumbled across some of the men Rumboltz had sent ashore early that

morning.

But they saw no sign of them, and they came at last to the open space which sloped down towards the cliffs.

“We’ll separate here, but don’t get too far away, Tim,” Delamere advised. “We’re not out for anything very serious to-night; we’re on a scouting job in the hope of picking up information about the enemy. I’ll give the signal when we’re to rejoin each other.”

Tim crept away over the short grass towards the edge of the cliff. Before he actually reached the edge he realised that the *Sleuth* was again there, but this time it was lying some twenty yards or so out. Nor was the searchlight working, and all that he could see was the low, dark shape of the vessel, touched here and there with a pin-point of light escaping from behind the covered port-holes.

He dropped over the edge and began to work his way downwards. Then, suddenly, he stopped, for some one was slowly climbing up the rugged pathway. At this stage Tim was barely below the top of the cliff, and the only hiding he could find was by crouching in a narrow cleft of rock.

The man passed within a few feet of him, and only a yard or two farther along he clambered over the rocks and stood at the edge of the cliffs. So far as Tim could make out, he lay down almost as soon as he had clambered to the top.

Twice the man whistled—a long, wailing call it was—and then for five minutes or so he lay there waiting, then repeated the whistle once again.

Presently Tim, crouching back in the shadows, saw another figure ambling with a queer gait across the plateau. He recognised him long before he could see his face. It was Malchior, the witch-doctor, who kept his appointment with the man from the *Sleuth*.

The two men sat together talking, but it was difficult for Tim to catch much of what was said. Now and again he caught a phrase or an odd word, but he could make very little of their conversation.

“The Big Chief—many presents—Malchior king—many guns—kill—kill \_\_\_\_\_”

Malchior took part in the conversation too, and it was easier to hear his voice. Evidently he was telling the man just what had happened on the island during the day.

“Give this!” The *Sleuth* man handed Malchior something that shone white

in the starlight. As Malchior pushed it away among those weird robes of his, Tim realised that it was an envelope.

He gathered, too, that it was for Rignold, who was at present a prisoner in the hands of Delamere's party. And the letter was to be delivered as soon as possible, but only when it was perfectly safe to do so.

The *Sleuth* man rose at last and began to clamber quietly down the cliffs again. Malchior still sat near the edge of the plateau, apparently peering down and following the progress of the man. For the time being Tim did not dare to make any movement.

But at last Malchior rose and stood like some grotesque scarecrow at the edge of the cliffs. Tim could see the horrible smile on his face, as for a space he took out the letter from the folds of his robes and held it in his hands, as though it were some wonderful prize he had gained.

The spectacle filled Tim with a sense of bitter hatred, and with that came an almost overwhelming desire for action. He forgot for the time being that Delamere had said that this was simply a night for observation, and that no risks were to be taken.

Malchior turned at last, and was on the point of moving away. As he did so, Tim gripped the edge of the plateau and levered himself up, then ran lightly across the grass and drew level with Malchior.

"That letter?" Tim was conscious of a sudden thrill sweeping through him as he asked the question. "Give it to me!"

He scarcely gave Malchior an opportunity of answering him before he was on him, taking him utterly by surprise. The witch-doctor went down before the sudden onslaught, and both of them were on the ground. Yet it was not so much a fight as a tremendous swoop. Malchior still had the letter in his hand, but one swift snatch and it had been ripped from him.

Tim was on his feet almost instantly, and was flying swiftly over the grass before Malchior had time to recover from the shock of it all. He had a broad idea of where Delamere was lying, and he gave the light call which was their signal. Within a couple of minutes Delamere was coming to meet him.

"What on earth has been happening?" Delamere began, but Tim was pushing the letter into his hand.

"The *Sleuth* is pushing off again, I think," Tim told him. "Some fellow came ashore from her some little time back—I fancy he swam across, but he managed to keep this letter dry all the same. Malchior must have expected

some one to come. Don't suppose he could make out what the letter says, but he had to give it to Rignold."

"Right!" Delamere said quickly. "The *Sleuth* is getting away. I've been watching her. That fellow swam back. I wondered what his game was. I fancy they have got the riflemen off, too. You think this will explain? Good! I think we'll be getting back now."

Actually there was nothing very secret in the letter, but the mere fact that Rumboltz had taken the risk of sending such a message was proof that he was in a desperate hurry.

"TO RIGNOLD, OR CORY, OR ANY OF MY MEN.

"Was hit this morning and am cutting for nearest doctor and help. Shall come back earliest possible and will settle D. then. Lotos Island is mine—and yours. Soap Malch. Whinny Del. O.K. 3-5 ticks.  
—V. RUMBOLTZ."

"It doesn't help us a great deal," John Delamere said, as they discussed the note afresh on the following morning in the chief room of the King's house. "We have beaten Rumboltz off for a time, but we're still in an awkward position ourselves, and we've got to face the hard facts of the situation."

"Meaning that it will take us three or four months to float the *Purple Heather* again—if we're lucky," McCurdy said. "And Rumboltz has cleared off to get patched up, and he'll doubtless come back with enough explosives to blow the lot of us up. Meantime, all we can do is to sit here and wait for him."

Delamere did not reply, but appeared to be thinking, and McCurdy went on.

"I've a proposition to make, sir. The only vessel we've got on the island, bar these rackety affairs the islanders managed to save, is that launch. We've got a fair supply of oil aboard the *Heather*—and by my reckoning our nearest neighbour is Mochdre Island, about two hundred and fifty miles from Lotos. If we could get there—well, there's a heap of possibilities opening up. It's a chance, sir!"

"But the launch won't hold more than three or four——" Delamere began.

"I'm proposing to take Tim Gambier with me," McCurdy answered. "We should have to take the chance of rough weather, but once there we might pick up a steamer. What we've got to do is to get help along, and be ready for Rumboltz and his crowd when they do return."



The whole question was thoroughly discussed. A hundred problems were brought up and overcome. Even Dick kept chipping in. "Wouldn't it be as well if there were three on the launch?"

"It would!" McCurdy agreed. "And I'd as soon have you two youngsters as any one. I think, if you'll permit it, Mr. Maynard——"

There was more discussion then, but in the end it was McCurdy who stood up first.

"Then that's settled," he said. "It'll take us a couple of days maybe to fix up the coverings we'll need and pack all we shall want aboard. But we can carry a fair-sized cargo, and given fair weather we should make Mochdre on the third day. We'll go and look at the launch now, and I'll be getting my orders from you later."

# CHAPTER XI

## A STRANGE WELCOME AT MOCHDRE

CAPTAIN McCURDY had said that it would take a couple of days to prepare for the voyage he proposed to make. Actually it took the best part of three days.

There were covers to be made and fixed: an awning to keep off the full force of the sun during the day, and screens made from tarpaulin taken from the *Purple Heather* to keep off the chill breezes they might encounter at night.

Then the food and water had to be carefully arranged. It was wonderful how much could be stored in the little launch under the expert direction of McCurdy, Delamere, and Bratt.

Once they got to Mochdre Island they would not be completely out of touch with the world. John Sinclair, who had the rights on the island, could communicate with his agents by wireless. Had all gone well, there would actually have been a proper wireless transmitting station fixed up on Lotos Island; but of all the damage which had been done during the storm there was nothing which had suffered quite so much as the wireless equipment Delamere had shipped on the *Purple Heather*.

McCurdy was provided with all that was necessary for navigating his small craft, however. They had re-christened the launch, and the name of the *Sleuth* no longer appeared, though McCurdy had shown his sense of humour when he chose the new name, and scrawled in chalk on the bows, *Chance*.

Nothing of great importance had happened on the island during the past few days; but there had been parleying between Malchior and some of those who had ranged themselves on his side and the King's counsellors. Of anything in the nature of open rebellion there was at present no real sign whatever, but there was an atmosphere of doubt and even nervousness in the village on the beach.

Then, too, the prisoners who had been captured from Rumboltz's party still remained a difficult problem and a real menace. It was impossible to keep them in close confinement, and the situation in some ways approached the

ridiculous. Delamere actually visited Grettex most days and treated him as a doctor would have done, but made no attempt to discuss other matters with him. So far as Rignold and Cory, and those who were with them were concerned, there was simply a state of suspicious truce.

That was the position broadly on the day when the *Chance* began its voyage from Lotos to Mochdre Island. Delamere, Maynard, and Joe wished them God-speed as they gave a hand in getting the little craft off.

“Good luck!” Tim and Dick called out across the waters together as the *Chance* began to pick up speed and headed for the Great Curtain, and from the shore came the last echoing call, “Good luck!”

“I guess they’ll have their hands full if Malchior starts raising trouble and gets in touch with Rignold and his crowd, especially while Malam’s on the invalid list,” Dick said, when they had at last passed through the Curtain and were in the sunshine again. “All I hope is that your friend, John Sinclair, can fix things up for us, Captain. You’ve got some pretty big scheme in your mind, haven’t you? Mr. Delamere was telling me last night that you would explain everything to us on this trip.”

“Ay, ay!” McCurdy agreed. “We’ll have time to talk before we finish this trip. But it wasn’t until a couple of days ago that I understood why Delamere was so put out when he found the wireless equipment he’d brought on the *Purple Heather* was useless. If Sinclair’s the man I take him to be, I guess Rumboltz is playing up for a first-class shock!”

“Good!” Tim laughed joyously, and there came once more the old feeling of sheer delight. Oh, but this was adventure more thrilling than he had ever dreamed! As the gentle breeze touched his cheeks he felt like shouting aloud. Here in the open, with the little launch bounding over the waters, he forgot the horrors and the nightmares of the past. It was enough that they were alive—and they were going to beat Rumboltz.

Of the actual voyage little need be said. It was a joy-trip for the most part, despite the fact that their legs grew stiff and cramped, or that their food lacked variety, and their chief drink was only rather warm water with occasionally a few drops of lime-juice added.

McCurdy told them all that he had arranged with Delamere before leaving Lotos. In Melbourne was a man whose name was Mark Prescott, who, if not actually in the Commonwealth service, was carrying out experiments on their behalf in connection with sea-plane services between the islands and the mainland.

It was Prescott to whom Delamere had cabled concerning the chartering of the *Purple Heather*, and he had been responsible for the wireless equipment which it was proposed to erect on Lotos Island. It was understood that after Delamere reached Lotos Island he would communicate by wireless with Prescott. They would doubtless have to rely entirely on Morse signals, but a code had been arranged so that the communications would be secret.

McCurdy had a copy of this code, and in turn the two youngsters copied it out. Both of them had some knowledge of Morse, though neither could claim to be very expert. But they knew enough to be worth while in the event of an emergency.

It was on the third day after leaving Lotos when McCurdy, examining his chart and compass, then sweeping the sea with the glasses he had brought, gave a sudden exclamation of joy.

“Land!” He shouted the word triumphantly. “Take the glasses, Tim, and see what you can make out. Give me the tiller.”

Tim took the glasses, but it was some time before he was sure of what he saw. Then gradually the queer patch on the horizon began to assume a definite shape and to take different colours.

“Have a look, Dick,” Tim handed the glasses over. “It’s an island all right. Bigger than Lotos, I should think.”

“Different type,” said McCurdy. “Mochdre is one of the low islands. I’d been thinking as we came along that maybe the big storm had finished Mochdre for good, but by the look of it, it must have been well outside the track. Take the awning down, Tim. There’s Sinclair himself coming down to meet us.”

As they ran straight for the island, a sense of excitement gripped all three of them. Even McCurdy, usually so dour and grim, could scarcely keep still. In some ways Mochdre appeared more impressive than Lotos, though it lacked the commanding hill and the cliffs on the west side. But it had a longer sea-front, and its splendid circle of palms above its dazzling beach seemed to cry out a welcome to the three.

A figure in white had come from among the palms and was strolling down to the little green-painted landing-stage which added to the fairy-book appearance of Mochdre. There came, too, that heavy, sweet scent of tropical flowers and coco-nut oil and copra, and this, with the glorious colours of the late afternoon sun, brought to Tim and Dick a wonderful sense of contentment and quiet confidence.

They were near enough now to distinguish the figure of the man who was watching their coming. McCurdy had picked up the glasses again, but put them down a few moments later with a little shrug of disappointment.

“It’s not Sinclair,” he said slowly. “Maybe Johnnie has taken a partner. He often said he would. But you can see the wireless masts all right.”

They had observed the big masts some time ago, and it had added to their confidence. Now, as the boat drew up alongside the little wooden landing-stage, they were ready to jump ashore and cry out their greetings to the white man who awaited them.

Yet as Tim jumped out and took the rope to tie up the launch, he was aware of a queer sense of disappointment coming to him. The man did not rush forward to give him a hand, but stood back a yard or two, watching him with the manner of a policeman.

The other two had jumped on to the stage now, and McCurdy was calling out to the white man. Two or three islanders, dressed in fancy-striped cotton shirts, had come behind, and stood watching the performance.

“’Evening, sir!” McCurdy advanced towards the white man. “My name’s McCurdy, late captain of the *Purple Heather*. We’re just taking a trip round your parts, and I thought I’d drop in and see my friend, John Sinclair. Hope he’s at home, and well, sir?”

Tim, standing just behind McCurdy, was watching the white man’s face. It was not a pleasant one, and even in repose there seemed to be a perpetual sneer resting on his lips, while the eyes, somewhat deep-sunk and small, did not look straight ahead, but gave one the impression that he was pretending to look in a different direction.

“You’re a friend of Sinclair’s, are you?” The man spoke for the first time. “Well, Sinclair’s left. Went away months ago, and he’s not coming back. If it’s Sinclair you’re wanting to see—I’d advise you to push off again. We’re not receiving visitors on Mochdre Island just at present. I’m telling you that for your own good, Captain McCurdy!”

McCurdy stared at the man in hopeless bewilderment. Just for a moment or two a flush of anger swept over his face. He had called at dozens of the islands in his time, and never a one but where a cordial welcome awaited him from the lonely white man or men who had chosen copra and the other products of the South Seas as their surest way to fortune.

“I’m sorry!” McCurdy jerked out at last. “Maybe we won’t be staying long here if John Sinclair’s gone. But I’d like to stretch my legs and sleep a night

ashore, Mr.——?”

“Grinnell’s my name,” the man answered. “You’d like to stay here for a time, though I haven’t pressed you? Good! It’s no business of mine anyway, and you’re welcome to anything I can do. But—you ought to know, Captain McCurdy, when a man gives you a straight tip. I’ve warned you. Will you come up to the house with me?”

“I thank you kindly for the invitation,” McCurdy answered, and the old grim note was in his voice again. “I’ll be glad to accept it on behalf of myself and my two friends, Tim Gambier and Dick Maynard.”

“How d’you do?” Just for a moment Grinnell’s face changed, and he looked at the two lads with a smile in his eyes. “I’m glad to meet you. I’ve heard something of—— You’re not afraid of man nor devil? You’ll meet both in the South Seas. Well, we’ll go up to the house. I saw you coming half an hour ago.”

They formed a little procession and went slowly from the landing-stage, through the palms, and towards quite a charming-looking bungalow, built in a wide clearing. Tim had already observed that there were other big wooden buildings among the trees, and caught also a glimpse of groups of natives working amongst big piles of coco-nuts.

On the short journey to the house there was scarcely a word spoken. McCurdy walked alongside Grinnell, while Tim and Dick followed a yard or two behind. Once Tim nodded towards the big wireless masts erected some distance from the house, and Tim smiled back his understanding.

They entered the house, and Grinnell led them through the big airy room to a smaller place beyond. Judging by the papers and general litter, this particular place was evidently used both as a sitting-room and an office.

“You’ll have something to drink?” Grinnell turned to McCurdy abruptly. “And the boys? Lime-juice or—— But help yourselves! We’re pretty well stocked just at present.”

It was difficult to weigh up the man. He seemed to be nervous and uncertain of himself, and once or twice Tim noticed that he turned at the slightest sound. He had made it plain in the beginning that he was not anxious to have visitors, yet it seemed now that he was doing his best to make them more welcome.

He almost dropped his glass as the curtain over the doorway was raised and another figure appeared. A short, jolly-looking man stood there, but again there was something about him which Tim did not quite like. His big and not

unpleasant eyes were inclined to be bleary, and the smile on his face had a touch of foolishness in it.

“Hullo, Grinnell! Got visitors? Introduce me. Friends or en’mies of the boss? Never know, you know. Sometimes——”

“Sit down, Murdoch!” Grinnell spoke sharply. “These are friends of John Sinclair. Captain McCurdy, late of the *Purple Heather*; Mr. Dick Maynard; Mr. Tim Gambier—Dr. Murdoch!”

He jerked out the names stiffly and formally. Murdoch’s face underwent a queer change, and the foolishness about his eyes and mouth seemed to sink away. One could almost see the man making an effort to pull himself together.

“McCurdy—and young Maynard—and Gambier!” he repeated the names quietly to himself as he held out his hand. “I’m glad to meet you. But—if you’d take my advice, gentlemen, you’ll not rest long here. I’d advise you ——”

“Better look after yourself, Murdoch!” a harsh voice interrupted, and the curtain of beads was pulled aside. Into the room came a man whose left arm was bandaged tightly to his chest, and he had the look of one who is only just recovering from some illness.

Tim recognised him instantly. One had only to see Valda Rumboltz once to remember him always. And it was Rumboltz who came into the room now. McCurdy’s hand slipped swiftly to his pocket, and for a moment a smile flickered across Rumboltz’s face.

“Put that down, McCurdy!” he said. “The shooting will come later all right. Sit down, the lot of you! What are you hoping to get this journey? What’s the scheme? Let’s have it!”

Tim and Dick were standing together, and both felt that this was the dramatic moment. In the still, warm room, with the sound of the surf mingling with the crooning of the natives at work among the trees, Valda Rumboltz had brought a sense of doubt and even of fear to their hearts. It was not that they were afraid of anything happening just now; it was simply that they were keenly conscious of the dominating personality of this uncrowned king of the South Seas.

By him the little captain seemed a pleasant, gentle figure, yet he still retained that touch of dignity which made him a forceful man at normal times and among ordinary people. How would he answer Rumboltz?

“My scheme is a perfectly straightforward one, Mr. Rumboltz,” McCurdy

answered. "I'd got the idea that you left Lotos Island because you were tired of it. My reasons are just the same, and, as your launch was available, we decided to run to the nearest island and tell them how we are fixed there. We're not wanting to spend the rest of our lives there. I didn't know you'd also come to Mochdre. I know the place well. Sinclair—my friend, John Sinclair—used to own this island."

"Oh!" It was more a growl than anything else which came from Rumboltz as he nodded. "Maybe you'll get to Australia one day, McCurdy, but you'll be sailing under me when you do. Just think that over. I'll leave you here for the present, but I'll give you one word of advice. Don't try to run away. I'll be wanting you. Come on, Grinnell!"

Grinnell, who had never spoken a word since Rumboltz entered, followed his chief from the room. Murdoch had already gone, evidently acting on a nod from Rumboltz.

Captain McCurdy, Tim, and Dick were left alone in the room. They talked together very quietly, having the queer feeling that they might very easily be overheard. The good fortune which had apparently been on their side during the trip from Lotos had deserted them at the critical moment, or so it seemed.

They waited expectantly for another visit from either Rumboltz or Grinnell. Murdoch, so they assumed, did not count very much, except for the fact that he was a medical man and that his knowledge in this direction was doubtless useful on occasion.

Yet it was Murdoch who came to them eventually, and by now darkness had fallen, and McCurdy had lighted a small lamp. Tim's impression was that the doctor had changed again in some way. He looked as though he had just come from a bath, and he had certainly lost the untidy, dishevelled look he had had when first they met him.

"Sorry!" He faced them abruptly and jerked the word out apologetically. "You'll have guessed that I'm a bit of a fool, but I'm not standing by and seeing you two lads—— Look here! You've got to get out of this as soon as you can. But you've got to go quietly."

"Where's the wireless room?" McCurdy asked quietly, and had summed up the fact that Murdoch, whatever his faults and whatever his reasons for being on this island, was genuinely anxious to help them.

"If you want to get there, I'll do my best to help you," Murdoch said. "You were a friend of Sinclair's. Well, Sinclair's dead. He didn't agree with Rumboltz. That's all. I tell you, McCurdy, your only chance is to get away."



Get back to Lotos. Take your chance of picking up a steamer—but get clear of Mochdre Island! I can show you where the launch is lying now and——”

“Take the boys to the launch,” McCurdy said, “but show me first the wireless room. Can I get in without forcing the lock? Is there any one likely to be on duty? I’m not an expert, but I guess I can get out the message I’ve got to send. If you please, Dr. Murdoch.”

It was useless for Murdoch to try and persuade him not to run risks, and in the end McCurdy had his way. Very quietly they crept out of the house, keeping in the shadows as far as possible, till they came to the hut in which Sinclair had built his radio apparatus. It was not very often used, according to Murdoch, but he believed it was in full working order.

The lock required no forcing, and they entered the place without any difficulty. Here in the darkness McCurdy laid down his plans.

“I dare say I’ll be spending some time here myself,” he explained. “I’ve got to get through the message Delamere gave me. But the boys had better get to the launch and be ready for me when I join them. Perhaps you’ll be good enough, Doctor, to explain to me where the launch is now lying?”

Murdoch told him. This island was not unlike many another in the South Seas. There was a deep lagoon in the centre, and this was now connected with the sea by the widening of a natural fissure—a task which had been carried out by Rumboltz’s orders in the past few months. At this moment the submarine was lying in the lagoon, while the little launch had been tied up nearer the sea, at a point about half a mile through the trees from where they were now.

“I understand,” McCurdy said. “And you’ll be taking the boys there, Doctor? They’ll get aboard and wait for me. But if anything happens—then you two boys get away. You’ll know your course if it does happen I can’t join you? But if there’s no interruption you’ll wait till early morning, if need be, for me to come along. Is that clear?”

They asked one or two questions and discussed in whispers two or three minor points. Then, very quietly, Tim and Dick stole out from the wireless hut and followed Murdoch. It seemed more than half a mile before they caught a glimpse of the open sea again, and presently they came to the side of what seemed to be a canal. Within a few minutes they had found the *Chance*, apparently untouched since they left it, despite the fact that it had been brought round from the landing-stage.

Tim and Dick made a quick examination, and confirmed their first impression that everything was very much as they had left it. Murdoch stayed

with them for a time, but eventually decided that it would be wise for him to get back. After he had gone, the two boys spent some time in getting the launch round so that she was heading for the sea instead of the lagoon. They did not risk using the engine, but poled and pushed it round.

They felt safer, too, sitting in the boat itself instead of on the side of the waterway. It was very quiet and peaceful, and the gentle movement of the boat lulled them both into a pleasantly dreamy state, so that they scarcely worried about the passage of time.

And then, quite suddenly, the quietness was broken by the reverberating echo of a shot. Instantly the two boys were wide-awake, and their eyes were trying to pierce the queer light among the trees—the bright patches where the moon and the stars shone through the palm-fronds and the strange shadows which lurked beyond.

“Ready, Dick!” Tim was crouching in the boat, watching and listening intently. “Have her ready—stand by, Dick!”

A figure suddenly burst forth from among the trees and the shadows some twenty yards higher up than they were, and Tim gave a quick call as he recognised the man. McCurdy turned and seemed to take a few strides towards where the boat was lying.

Another moment and other shadows seemed to jump out of the darkness, and McCurdy went down. Tim was on the point of jumping out of the launch, driven by instinct to go to the aid of their companion on the journey here. But McCurdy’s voice suddenly rang out, echoing and re-echoing among the trees.

“Go! Get away!”

Even then Tim hesitated, just as Dick with his hand on the lever and with the engine of the launch now throbbing gently, did not make the one movement which would have set them going.

“Obey orders!” McCurdy’s voice shrieked it forth. “Go, Tim!”

It acted as a sharp reminder to them of the lessons both McCurdy and Bratt had given them at different times on the importance of instant obedience of commands. Almost immediately the little launch moved forward and was presently gathering speed.

They were out in the open sea before either of them spoke. There was not a sound from the island, and in the minds of both was the same horrible fear.

“Yet McCurdy ordered us to go,” Tim said, and voiced both their thoughts.

“We were bound to do what he told us,” Dick agreed. “I wish we knew whether he’d managed to get the message through. It’s not much use going back to Lotos unless we can report that we’ve done that part of the job. What do you think we ought to do now, Tim?”

They talked quietly together as the little engine throbbed and the launch pushed steadily ahead across the wide sea.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE FLIGHT OF THE *BLUEBIRD*

IT was possible afterwards to record exactly the position of the launch on the second morning after Tim and Dick left Mochdre Island. It would be much more difficult to map out the exact course they followed.

They had compromised to some extent, and, optimistically enough, had calculated that they would be able to pick up their course as well as if McCurdy were aboard. Their idea was to sail south-east for a time, with the hope that by so doing they might run into a vessel going to or from Australia. The vessel would doubtless be fitted with wireless, and their big hope was to get through the message which Delamere had been so anxious for his friend, Mark Prescott, to receive.

Of course McCurdy might have succeeded in getting the message through, but they had no knowledge on the point. If McCurdy had called out "O.K.!" they would have known that he had been successful. But the last desperate calls from McCurdy had been stifled by his attackers, while his commands had been clearly heard and understood.

So for two long nights and one full day they ran, but not a sign of any ship did they see. Their supplies were getting low, and they were rationing themselves very carefully so far as the water went. But not for one moment did their optimism sink low.

"Bound to get in the way of some boat or other in the next day or so," Dick asserted confidently.

"Sure to!" Tim agreed, without the slightest justification for it; and he took up the glasses, which were still on board, and swept the endless expanse of water again.

As he looked he saw the first hopeful speck he had seen since they left Mochdre Island.

"It's a boat, sure enough," Dick Maynard declared, when he, too, had looked. "Hurrah! Coming straight for us, too, unless I'm a Dutchman. Queer-looking craft, but—— You have a look."

It became steadily larger, and Dick was getting out their signal. Obviously it wasn't a big vessel, and it seemed to be well down in the water.

"I think it's a submarine," Tim said presently, and stared intently through the glasses. When at last he brought them down, his hands were trembling very slightly, and a hint of doubt had crept into his eyes.

"Have a look, Dick," he suggested quietly. "Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think so. It's the *Sleuth*—and she's spotted us!"

On the bridge-deck of the *Sleuth* some one else was using a pair of powerful glasses to watch the tiny craft dancing on the waters. A sharp look-out was always kept, since, generally speaking, Rumboltz preferred not to advertise his expeditions in any way.

The *Sleuth* had left Mochdre Island a good many hours after the *Chance* had got away. It was Rumboltz's intention to run to a much larger island, which was in the nature of his headquarters for the South Seas. Here he could replenish both his crew and his stores, and after that there would come the final expedition to Lotos Island, which would settle the question of ownership once and for all. There would be no half-measures in the attack this time!

Rumboltz did not know that McCurdy had been in the wireless room. McCurdy had been discovered quite accidentally after he had come away from that room, having, so he believed, successfully accomplished his task. Possibly he was in too great a hurry to get away, but he had certainly got through to Melbourne.

It was Rumboltz himself who had caught a glimpse of McCurdy's figure, apparently stealing quietly round. Just what he hoped to discover, Rumboltz didn't know, and at the time he did not particularly care. The chase was up very swiftly, and McCurdy was overpowered.

Actually it was not until the launch was making its way to the open sea that it was realised that the two boys were aboard. Nothing could be done about them then, and McCurdy was forced to go back and be taken into Rumboltz's presence. Rumboltz was informed, of course, that the boys had got away in the launch.

"What's the idea exactly?" Rumboltz demanded, but was not nearly so annoyed as the captain had expected. If the truth were told, Rumboltz put McCurdy in a different class from Delamere and his party. The captain had been merely taken over with the yacht, and on the staff of Valda Rumboltz there was certainly a vacancy for a sound master-mariner with a good knowledge of the South Seas.

McCurdy had lost his ship, and, according to Rumboltz's argument, he doubtless knew that he might have difficulty in getting another. In any case, McCurdy would certainly realise presently that his choice lay between taking service under Rumboltz, or of ending his career very abruptly before ever he got back to Melbourne. No one would ever know what had happened to him, any more than they would ever learn what had happened to others who sailed on the *Purple Heather*. It would not be the first nor yet the last mystery of the seas.

"The idea?" McCurdy repeated the phrase as though he had never heard the word before. "There wasn't any idea, Mr. Rumboltz. I came to Mochdre Island expecting a welcome, and in the hope of getting a message through in some way to any ship that chanced to be in the neighbourhood, to let them know just where certain people are marooned."

"You'll get no message through from here!" Rumboltz told him, and McCurdy nodded in understanding.

"That's what I gathered," the captain said. "It seemed to me that our presence here was not desired—and I never stay where I'm not wanted, Mr. Rumboltz. I sent the boys ahead to get the boat ready, thinking we'd slip quietly away without troubling to say good-bye to you. However, your men interfered at the last moment—and I'm still here."

"And likely to remain for a while, McCurdy!" Rumboltz told him. "Where do those boys hope to get to? Back to Lotos again?"

"That'll be the safest place for them, I'm thinking," McCurdy said, and after that the conversation petered out. Two boys in a tiny launch might conceivably get back to Lotos, if they were lucky. They certainly wouldn't get anywhere else, and although Valda Rumboltz rarely underrated the strength of any opponent, he saw no hint of danger in the fact that the two boys had got away from Mochdre and would try to make Lotos Island.

So that he was chiefly concerned just now in trying out McCurdy, and his idea that the captain of the *Purple Heather* was chiefly concerned with his own safety was justified. In this he overlooked two details: that McCurdy was fully aware of Rumboltz's reputation, and was just as capable of playing a game of bluff as Rumboltz himself was. Secondly, that McCurdy had a very strong strain of loyalty in him, and that loyalty was pledged to John Delamere.

"I dare say I've been very foolish, Mr. Rumboltz," McCurdy told him. "Maybe you'll consider a proposition later on to take me to Melbourne as a passenger. I've got a home there—I don't know if you're acquainted with Rosslare Avenue, but there's a wee house up there——"

McCurdy had every hope of returning to his wee house, but it would not be with the aid of Valda Rumboltz. Yet he played for safety to-night, and listened quietly to all the warnings he had about what might happen to him if he tried any tricks. Then, meekly and quietly, he went with the men, who had been told to see that he had a small room in one of the huts which two or three of them occupied.

McCurdy was still on Mochdre Island when Rumboltz went aboard the *Sleuth*. His arm was still in a sling, but the wound was healing quite well, and there was no need even to take Murdoch with them. Yet it still gave him a certain amount of pain at times, and was a continual reminder of the account he still had to settle with Delamere and his party. It had been a longer and more difficult game than he had expected, but the end would be the same.

Yet he was not in the best of tempers when they brought word to him that a tiny craft had been sighted, and that in the opinion of Quayle, once mate to Captain McCurdy aboard the *Purple Heather* and now chief navigator of the *Sleuth*, it was the launch which had once been the property of the *Sleuth*, and that there were two boys on board.

“We’ll get that launch back!” Rumboltz decided. “We’ll take the pair of them on board and find out if they’ve anything more to tell us than McCurdy had. Make ready, Quayle!”

Quayle went below, while Rumboltz stood watching the little craft through his glasses. He could see the two figures crouching in the boat, and they were evidently trying to get the last ounce out of the launch. Over them stretched a bright awning, made by McCurdy from cloth taken from the *Purple Heather*; but it was sufficiently high not to spoil either their view or that of Rumboltz, who was smiling in contempt as he watched. The launch could not escape!

On board the *Chance* Tim and Dick were weighing up their prospects.

“Let her rip, Dick!” Tim said. “We’ll swerve round now and begin to circle the *Sleuth*. That’s where we’ll have them guessing.”

Some one had given Rumboltz his megaphone, and he was shouting through it now.

“Stand to there!” he yelled. “Stand to—or I’ll blow you to bits!”

“Tell him to get on with it!” Dick jerked out. “They’re slowing down, aren’t they?”

For the next ten minutes or so it almost seemed as though the *Chance* would have the best of the game. Rumboltz was still bellowing through his

megaphone, but he might just as well have shouted to the sea itself for all the notice the boys took of him.

Then a shot rattled over their heads and exploded twenty or thirty yards beyond them, followed two or three minutes later by another. The steady chug-chug of their own engine, the crash of the shell as it exploded well away from them and sent up a great leaping spout of water almost drowned a strange, deep, humming sound of which both of them had been conscious for some little time past.

They had heard it on the *Sleuth* before the boys in the launch thought it worth while to try and find out what it was. Rumboltz had gripped Quayle's arm, and let the megaphone drop to the deck. Quayle looked upwards just as Rumboltz was doing, and both of them stared at the shadow above them.

"Jumping snakes, Boss! Look out! It's—it's for us! Government mark! I know it!"

All that Rumboltz saw at first was the vast expanse of greyish white which rushed over them, not more than a dozen feet or so above their heads. The insistent drumming had died away, and a whirring, swishing sound came instead as the great white-winged sea-plane glided on the surface of the waters.

It swept across the face of the sea, curving gracefully as a sea-gull as it swept round the tiny launch. Both on the submarine and on the *Chance* they had no eyes now for anything except this new wonder from the skies. It came tearing past the *Sleuth* once more, its engine breaking forth once more into a deafening hum; then round by the launch, where they had now pulled back the awning to get a better view.

Two or three times it swept round, and then seemed to glide very gently on the sea and come to rest a hundred yards or more ahead of the launch.

"They're signalling to us!" Tim said. "Hullo! One of them's climbing out. Jove! But he's diving in! Slow down, Dick! He's swimming for us!"

On the *Sleuth* Rumboltz found it difficult to make out just what was happening. He was tempted at this juncture to bring his gun into play again, but for the time being withheld the command. He wanted to understand this game a little more thoroughly before he took action.

The swimmer had reached the launch and was throwing up a rope as he grabbed the side of the boat. Tim was struggling to help him aboard, dripping and panting, but trying to smile as he gasped out his instructions.

"Tie the rope securely!" he jerked out. "Right in the bow! No. Lend it to



me! I've got the idea. Shut your engine off! And sit tight! We'll be moving quite soon! Now—we're off!"

Their new comrade, whoever he was, was wearing nothing more than a pair of white shorts and a thin cotton shirt, but he was apparently enjoying this adventure. Ahead of them the plane had begun to move again and the rope had tightened. The sea-plane was going to give them a tow!

"We'll get away all right!" their passenger told them. "Prescott knows how to handle a job of this sort. By the way, my name's Waverton, and I'm a friend of Mark Prescott's, who got your message all right two nights ago. We haven't quite got the hang of the story yet, but you know John Delamere all right? You're one of his crowd?"

"Yes. That's all right," Dick told him, and explained briefly who they were and what had happened. "So Captain McCurdy got the message through all right?"

"Well, we got a message. That's certain. But the first time it was a bit mixed up, and when our operator asked for a repeat, the chap who was sending it had apparently closed down for the night again. But we gathered that the *Purple Heather* was piled up on this missing island of Lotos, and we got the exact position of that all right. We also gathered that a launch with two youngsters and one man aboard was putting off—whether from Lotos or some other island we couldn't grasp. Prescott decided the best plan was to get out the *Bluebird* and find out for ourselves. We had to make certain preparations, of course, and it took us longer than we expected before we could get away. But we're here!"

"And you guessed we were the launch?" Tim asked.

"That's so. It also happens that your friend McCurdy got in something about Rumboltz. That was one of the mixed-up bits. Couldn't make out whether Rumboltz was at Lotos or not. But it just happens that there's a rumour knocking round that Rumboltz is doing some weird work among the islands in a submarine. So when we spotted this submarine a short time back and got an idea that he was dropping a shell or two over you—well, we rather jumped to conclusions. Mr. Rumboltz looks like having to answer a few awkward questions one day in the near future!"

The *Chance* was almost flying through the water now, her bow right out and the water sheering from her sides in what seemed to be one solid, stationary wave. From ahead came the drumming murmur of the *Bluebird's* engines as the great plane skimmed over the sea.

Behind them there was now no sign of the *Sleuth*, and for probably an hour they flew through the water at a faster rate than the *Chance* had ever run on her own engine! Waverton had the complete story of the expedition to Lotos by the end of that time, and had also learned just what had happened so far as McCurdy was concerned.

“Hullo! I think we’re slackening down now!” Waverton said presently. “I’ll loose the rope and then we’ll toddle up to them gently on our own.”

The *Bluebird* had gradually slackened speed, until now it was floating quietly on the sea, its broad wings balancing, so it seemed, on little more than a few slender struts. As the *Chance* came slowly up, moving now under its own engine, some one clambered over the side and down a light ladder till he stood on the narrow platform just above the floats.

It was a picture which impressed both Tim and Dick almost as much as some of the strange sights they had seen on Lotos Island. A tall, well-built man was standing on what seemed to be a very slight support, with the mighty plane rocking gently above him, while he waved a welcoming hand to those on the *Chance* as they came nearer.

“Well, what’s the news, Waverton?” he called out as the launch drew right alongside the floats. “What’s the news about Delamere?”

The *Chance* was made secure for a time, and then Waverton explained just what news he had gathered from the youngsters. Prescott asked them a few questions about the course they had taken since they left Mochdre, and gave a little wry smile when they explained. Tim judged that he hadn’t really much opinion of their navigation!

“Of course, I’ve brought you back another thirty miles or so,” Prescott explained to them. “But you’d have been a mighty long time making Lotos, according to the position I make it out to be. We’re a lot nearer Mochdre just now than Lotos. And this chap, McCurdy—I know him quite well, by the way!—is still on Mochdre?”

“That’s right,” Tim agreed. “I think—if we could possibly arrange to get him off as soon as possible, it would be the best plan. They may have taken him on the submarine, of course, or—you never know what may have happened. Anyhow, there can’t be many of Rumboltz’s men on Mochdre just at present, and it seems only fair to try and find out how the captain stands, if we can.”

Mark Prescott agreed, and there followed quite a long discussion. The launch at this stage became something of a difficulty, but in the end it was

decided that Waverton should remain on board with Dick Maynard, and that they should simply lay a course due east from where they were now. If all went well, the *Bluebird* would pick them up again in three or four hours' time.

Tim would go on the sea-plane in case they needed some one on board who knew a little about Mochdre. A certain amount of fresh food and water was transferred to the *Chance* as well as additional fuel in case anything went wrong.

Actually nothing did go wrong. The *Chance* went ahead and kept a steady course, while the plane made its trip to Mochdre. Here, as Tim had suggested, there were now very few of Rumboltz's men, and since the departure of the submarine no attempt had been made to restrict McCurdy in any way whatever. Grinnell avoided him, but Murdoch was in his company the whole time, and it is safe to say that there was precious little in the history of Dr. James Murdoch which Angus McCurdy did not know by the time they sighted the sea-plane bearing down on the island.

Nobody argued about the question of McCurdy leaving Mochdre, and it was McCurdy and Murdoch who were the sole representatives to greet Mark Prescott as he lay off the little quay. They put out to him in a small boat—and they never returned to the island! The little boat was anchored, and after some discussion both McCurdy and Murdoch went aboard the *Bluebird*.

A few minutes after that the plane was heading away from the island, and somewhere in the afternoon the launch was spied. On board the *Bluebird* there were now Mark Prescott, two mechanics, McCurdy, Murdoch, and Tim. When they came to rest by the side of the little launch, it was decided that McCurdy and Murdoch should go into the *Chance*, and that this should be towed at a fairly good rate until they were quite close to Lotos.

"The launch may be very useful when we get to this secret island of yours," Prescott said, after McCurdy had exchanged greetings with Dick. "It may slow us down a lot, but we'll cling on to it. You'll signal us if there's any trouble at all, McCurdy?"

It was during the hours of the night that they struck the Great Curtain, and for various reasons it was decided to hang round outside this strange belt of mist until morning came. The *Chance* moored alongside the *Bluebird*, and for some three hours or so they lay there till the light of day came again.

Then the *Chance* was loosed altogether from the plane, and McCurdy and Murdoch would run the launch to Lotos alone, while the *Bluebird* went aloft and took a general view of the place before coming down.

Even at the fair altitude the *Bluebird* reached, the mist of the Great Curtain still surrounded them, but at no part was it quite so thick as both Tim and Dick had experienced on the yacht. Then, as they came out of the mist, they saw below them, like some myriad-coloured gem, the island of Lotos, rising above the deep blue of the sea.

The *Bluebird* dropped again until she was almost skimming the water, and then she swung round and kept parallel with the shore as she slackened speed. Tim could see the village quite plainly, but it seemed as though there had been an epidemic of fires, for most of the huts appeared to be smouldering. The plane rose a little as it turned and then came back, while Prescott was calling out to Tim and Dick to keep a sharp look-out, and let him know if they saw anything of importance.

“There’s been trouble of some sort!” Tim called to Prescott. “I think some of the men—on the beach now—are Rumboltz’s crowd. Better be careful about landing——”

“Right!” Prescott nodded an abrupt agreement. “We’ll slacken down a lot more and try to do a little scouting work first of all. I had the feeling when I saw that smoke—— But I hope we’ve not come too late after all!”

## CHAPTER XIII

### MALCHIOR PLAYS HIS PART

**L**IFE on Lotos Island did not exactly settle down to lazy peacefulness after the departure of McCurdy with Tim and Dick in the little launch.

Malam, the King, had been wounded in the arm by the shot from Rignold's weapon. It was not a very serious wound, but it caused a certain amount of fever, and Delamere insisted on Malam being treated as an invalid.

It was a perfectly wise precaution to take, for Delamere knew only too well the dangers run by a wounded man in that climate. Yet it was unfortunate from another point of view that just when Malam's influence might be exerted to the full he was laid on one side.

Away on the top of the island Malchior still had his followers, and he was weaving strange stories to them. Then there was much coming and going between the plateau and the village. Delamere and his companions, Maynard and Joe, went among the islanders and tried to learn what they could, but it was difficult to get them to say very much. Among the islanders themselves there was obviously some difference of opinion, and now and again there had been something in the nature of a fight.

Meantime, the so-called prisoners—Rignold, Cory, and the other six or seven men—were just as free as Delamere himself. It was impossible to keep them trussed up as they had been for a time on the day of the fight, and there was no place on the island where they could have been kept secure. They had been relieved of all arms and ammunition, and every step had been taken to ensure that these were hidden away in a safe place.

Yet over the whole island the air of doubt and perplexity persisted. They were all waiting—waiting and hoping. Rignold had seen the departure of the little launch with McCurdy, Tim, and Dick aboard, and even that had puzzled him. It was certain that sane, sensible men, such as they knew Delamere and the others to be, must have had some definite scheme in mind when they watched that frail craft sail.

So that Rignold and his friends talked and discussed and tried to plan from

their point of view. In the end they made some kind of scheme, the success of which would depend largely on keeping on good terms with Delamere and at the same time not losing touch to some extent with Malchior.

It is probable that Malchior was in the most difficult position of all. The two parties of white men on Lotos could both play a waiting game, but those who had gathered under Malchior had never learned the art of patience after promises had been made to them. Nor could Malchior go on inventing fairy-stories for ever.

Rignold, acting on the plan he had conceived, sent a message to Malchior by one of the natives who had come down from the plateau. It was in the nature of a warning. The Big Captain was arranging a cunning scheme to trap Malchior and those who were with him, and then kill them all off.

Malchior was quite willing to believe it, and so were his followers. More, something had to be done, or Malchior's followers would drift back to the village, and the present time, with rumours concerning Malam floating round, was the ideal opportunity.

That night Delamere and Maynard heard the singing and chanting of the natives who had made a settlement on the plateau. Their own spies had brought word that those with Malchior had been re-pointing the little metal heads of their long spears and dipping them in the poison which Malchior had prepared. This news came not only to Delamere, but spread round the village, and those who still remained here began to be busy with their own weapons.

"We can't afford to leave Malam down here," Delamere said abruptly, as they discussed their own plans. "They're queer folk, the islanders. I'm not blaming them; they're no more than simple children, likely to be turned by any yarn Malchior has pitched them. But Malam's pretty sick, and I wish I knew a bit more than I do about doctoring. Anyway, it'll be safer to get him out of the way. I think the best plan would be to take him up to Janee's. I'll go and see about it now."

It took some little time to make all the arrangements, and it was dark when at last the little procession set cautiously out from the King's house. Malam was lying on a litter and was carried by four of his own bodyguard. Delamere, Maynard, and Joe accompanied them, and there were in addition some eight or nine islanders.

The journey was slow, but they reached Janee's quite safely, and the King's mother, who possessed, as Delamere knew, a wonderful knowledge of healing medicines, took charge of her wounded son.

For a time, as they sat in the large, airy main apartment in Janee's house, the peaceful quietness of the South Seas hung over the island. Even the crooning of the natives, which they had heard from time to time as they made their way here, had now died down.

It was quite probable that all the talk they had heard of the islanders preparing for battle would simply die down without any one raising a spear. The Lotos Islanders were anything but a warlike race, but, like all human children, they could be goaded to fight under the spur of fear or superstition.

Quite abruptly and sharply their quiet talk was broken by the echoing sound of a rifle-shot, or so the three of them judged it to be. Delamere and Maynard jumped up instantly and went to the window, which looked down towards the sea.

Again a lighter crack-crack reverberated and sank moaningly away among the trees.

"Revolvers!" Delamere said abruptly. "I think we'd better get back, Bob. We'll need to go cautiously. Either Rignold and his crowd have found out where our reserve of arms is stored, or else Rumboltz has returned. In any case, we'll get back. Are you ready, Joe?"

In less than five minutes the three of them were making their way down towards the village again. Delamere had taken all precautions possible so far as the careful storing of firearms was concerned, but one was at a distinct disadvantage on such a place as Lotos Island. And two men at all events were definitely determined to possess arms again.

These two were keeping a discreet watch on the movements of Delamere and his companions, and, as sometimes happens, they had a stroke of luck. Cory was quite close to Delamere's window when the latter was taking out an additional revolver for himself and his two companions. Within an hour after the little procession bearing Malam had left the King's house, Rignold and Cory possessed one rifle and two revolvers and a fair supply of ammunition.

For some time after that, Rignold and one or two others remained in comparative hiding. They were not out at this stage to take any risks, and the silence which settled for a time over the whole island puzzled them.

"There'll be trouble blowing up sooner or later," Rignold asserted, without any real grounds for his belief. "We've got to bide our time and make sure the coast is clear. What I'd like to see is the whole crowd mixed up in a first-class scrap and killing each other off, with Delamere and his lot all safely put out of the way."

It was not for mere amusement Rignold desired this development. Admittedly, he was not a man of any great cunning, but he had weighed up the situation from his own point of view, and had taken Cory into his confidence. Rumboltz would return all right, and in the fulness of time Rignold and Cory would leave Lotos. But Rignold knew enough about Rumboltz to know that there would be a certain amount of blame going for the part Rignold had played, or had failed to play, when Rumboltz had made his attempt to get full control of the island.

So that Rignold was not likely to get any great share of whatever loot was going. And he had heard the stories of the gold store in the Secret Place. If there were a terrific commotion down here in the village, it would be fairly simple for Rignold, Cory, and two others who had been taken into their confidence, to make their way to the Secret Place, and take away as best they could a fair share of the treasure.

They were not ambitious enough to attempt to get the lot. But they would get a good deal more than they were likely to receive at the hands of Valda Rumboltz. They could bury this in some spot which they would choose—and for a time, at all events, Lotos Island would have another little secret, known only to four of them.

It would be simple enough for men who were likely to spend more time in the islands in future to get over to Lotos some time on their own account and collect their share. It might not be a fortune, but, as Cory pointed out and Rignold agreed, it would be a prize worth playing for. Klingmann, another of the men still detained on the island, was down with the fever, and he and one or two others, who might have let Rumboltz into the secret, were carefully kept out of the present scheme.

So they lay and watched, puzzled and wondering over the real meaning of the heavy silence. It was broken at long last, however, and even then the place seemed to grow alive very quietly and gently. Down to the beach came a straggling crowd, several hundreds strong, and it was not until they had gathered in some sort of regular formation that they made any sound.

It began slowly at first, but presently the whole crowd were droning out one of their curious chants, and this seemed to be the accompaniment to some weird kind of dance. The whole company began to sway and move forward, and here and there a vivid flame held aloft showed up the gaudy raiment and the strange headgear with which some of the islanders were adorned.

At the head of the procession a little knot of men, each armed with a torch in one hand and a short club in the other, appeared to be the leaders, while



behind them came men with the long, pointed staves, doubtless poisoned at the end, which were used as spears. Once Rignold caught sight of the repulsive figure of Malchior.

The chanting went steadily on, though at times it died down till it was little more than a wailing moan, then broke out with renewed force as some member of the throng invented or recalled some new chorus.

“They’ll never start fighting!” Rignold had had experience of South Sea Islanders before. “They’ll go on with this game, singing about what wonderful fellows they are, till they can’t stand any more, and then they’ll lie down and sleep. Wonder where the rest of the islanders are—the King’s crowd, I mean?”

There was no sign of any interference from those islanders who had refused to follow Malchior. Rignold began to fear, just as Malchior was already fearing, that the sweeping march on the village would end in a general peace-meeting and another dance.

Rignold saw Malchior steal away from the main body and make towards the King’s house. He disappeared completely after a time, and Rignold judged that he was in the now empty apartments of Malam.

“After a bit of private loot, I suppose,” Rignold said. “Unless he thinks Malam is still there and he’s wanting to finish him off. But then—oh, I don’t know! He’s packed with cunning is that old fellow. I guess we ought to liven this show up, Cory. What we want is those hummingbirds to start scrapping. That’ll bring Delamere and his pals back, and the chances are that old Malchior will fix them then. Lend me that rifle!”

The next moment Rignold had fired, and the shot echoed and re-echoed among the trees.

“Let rip with your gun, Cory!” Rignold said. “We’ll make a bolt for it as soon as the fun begins!”

Cory fired, and then Rignold emptied the magazine of his rifle among the crowd. It had the effect Rignold expected almost immediately. Malchior had told the islanders that the white men would slay them with their terrible weapons, and already several had fallen. Just for a space the closely packed mass hesitated, and it was then that Rignold fired his last shots.

Panic seized the islanders then. Malchior, running from the King’s house at the first sound of the shots, was himself gripped with fear. Yet he struggled to creep back in the shadows of the palm-trees, and tried to turn his followers. They were scrambling madly to get back to the woods again, and Malchior’s voice was lost in the cries and shouts as the islanders plunged towards the

woods.

Away on the right, where the hill sloped more gently, another body of islanders were sitting almost as closely packed as Malchior's followers had been when they came down to the beach. They heard the singing, followed by the crack of the white men's weapons, and it may be a shudder of fear passed through them. But some of the King's men were there, and the Big Captain had told them how to act.

Scouts were sent out in twos and threes, and they brought word that it was the white men, enemies of the Big Captain, who were firing the guns.

There came a sudden cry. It was the call of the scouts for help, and, despite the efforts of their leaders to maintain that discipline of which Delamere had boasted, a body of a hundred or more rushed pell-mell to give help.

What had happened was simple enough. The scouts had tumbled accidentally across the camp occupied by the men whom Rignold had left. They promptly tried to drive the islanders away, and the alarm was raised. Before there was time to consider the right course, the five men who had been Delamere's prisoners were fighting for their lives against the natives.

In the dim light two escaped and fled farther round the island. Rignold and his three companions, coming warily on the scene as the fight was nearing its end, decided to retrace their steps swiftly.

"We're running into trouble!" Rignold began to feel a little uneasy on his own account now. "I guess our best plan is to get into hiding somewhere among the huts. Jumping snakes! But they're setting the whole village afire!"

Something of the sort certainly seemed to be happening. Malchior had managed to create some sort of diversion among his followers, and though a good many of them had made pell-mell for the plateau again, others had rallied and taken up the new song he had started.

"Burn! Burn! The white men have taken the King, and they will take your huts! Burn! Burn!"

There was a certain amount of cunning in this cry of the old witch-doctor's. He could not understand where Malam's men had gone, nor could he understand where the white men were hidden. To run away now without doing any damage would be to admit defeat.

"Burn! Burn!" To the men who carried the long torches it came as an outlet for their fear and panic. They ran from hut to hut and did their work thoroughly, though none dared approach the King's house. The huts in the

neighbourhood of the King's house were also spared—from what motive it would be difficult to say; but Rignold and his companion had reason to be thankful, since they found safe hiding here. Their own common sense told them that they could do nothing to interfere with the panic which gripped the islanders.

Even Delamere, with Maynard and Joe, was doubtful of his course when he saw the burning huts, and caught a glimpse of other torches as they appeared now and again higher up the wooded slopes.

“I doubt if we can do very much to help at all now,” he said to Maynard. “It's madness or panic which has gripped them, and all we can do is to wait till they quieten down. It's those rifle-shots I don't understand yet.”

The night of panic came to an end at last, and the sun's rays showed up the damage which had been done. On the beach several forms lay outstretched, but whether they had been slain by Rignold's bullets, or whether they had been killed by their own fellows, it was impossible to say yet.

Delamere, from his place in the woods, scanned the scene below him. He was in little better position than Rignold, still lying hidden in the grove near the King's house. For any white man with some knowledge of the islanders, there was but one motto for a time—Safety First! Give the panic time to wear itself out before taking risks.

“I think you two ought to go back to Malam!” Delamere said abruptly to Maynard. “Some one ought to be there in case this trouble spreads. I don't understand it—but I'm going to find out. I'll join you later.”

Both Maynard and Joe were inclined to protest at first, but in the end they could do no more than carry out Delamere's command. They left him presently and made their way back to Janee's house, while Delamere worked his way down to the very fringe of the palm-trees above the beach.

He realised as he progressed that the woods were still alive with islanders, and a false movement, a little alarm—and a chance spear might find its resting-place in Delamere himself. And he knew that those long, innocent-looking staves carried death in their tips.

Something moved just ahead of him, and Delamere knew that at last he had been seen. It was better now to let every one know that he was here.

“Ho, ho! It is I, the Big Captain, and I come to speak——”

His powerful voice echoed through the woods, but before he had ended his call, something made a sudden spring from his left. Delamere dodged the first

onslaught, but saw the gleam of light as something flashed in the sunshine which penetrated the fronds of the palms waving above. In that same instant Delamere saw the robes of the man, glimpsed the horrible face, and was conscious of the aim of that little dagger as it slashed downwards.

His own left arm shot out, and his fingers closed fiercely over the wrist of Malchior. But the witch-doctor, despite his age, was amazingly tough and sinewy. In turn he had gripped Delamere's right wrist, and the two swayed together, exerting every ounce of their strength in the effort to force the other backward. And from the bushes above them rose the faces of islanders, watching the grim struggle between the witch-doctor and the Big Captain.

# CHAPTER XIV

## A REUNION AT JANEY'S HOUSE

**F**OR fully three minutes the struggle was no more than a mere swaying, now this way, now that, each trying to throw the other backwards. Delamere had the advantage of height, but this was minimised by his position. And then Malchior's cunning came into play. He gave way before Delamere, moving backwards by inches only.

His object was sound enough. Presently he would pretend to fall slightly and in that moment the dagger would have its chance, and it would need but one little wound to settle the fight.

But Delamere had never once forgotten the dagger nor the possibility that it had been dipped in the same poison as the staves of the islanders. And then Malchior slipped a little. His strategy came off with more suddenness than he had anticipated, and he failed to bring the dagger upwards.

Delamere also went crashing downwards, but in the instant he felt himself going, all his strength was concentrated on turning the dagger away from him. He did not consider any question of its aim so long as he himself ran no risk of a wound from its poisoned tip.

The dagger was turned inwards even while they fell, and before Delamere realised the result a horrible, ghastly scream echoed through the woods. The dagger had plunged violently and fiercely into Malchior's throat, and Delamere realised that the end had come. Malchior was still trying to shriek out, but his voice was no more than a thin cry.

Through the undergrowth and from the trees the islanders began to come forth. They did not come too near Delamere, however, but stood among the flowers and the creepers and bushes, staring at him in stupid wonder. A little false move on Delamere's part now, and a dozen of the sharp-pointed spears would be hurtling across the space which divided him from them.

In his pockets Delamere had two revolvers, but he never dreamt of taking them out at this juncture. Instead, he held up a hand, as an orator might have done, and began to speak.

"I am the Big Captain!" he called out. "Let no man raise his hand against me, or he will fall, as Malchior has fallen. From the great White King over the sea I come to bring you those things which Joe Malam, the King, told you I should bring."

It was hard work. He had to choose his words simply, and a wrong assertion or an angry boast might so easily be the signal for one of Malchior's kinsmen to fling the first spear. Delamere's mind was working at full pressure while he spoke. If he could hit upon some simple proof of his power, or perform some feat which would impress them, it would turn the tide in his favour.

He was still speaking when he became conscious of a new sound. From somewhere far off came a droning hum, and a wild idea danced in Delamere's mind. He had his knowledge of the expedition upon which McCurdy and the boys had gone, and of what Prescott could do if he received the message, but it seemed scarcely possible so soon——

"Listen!" Delamere held up his hand again, then swept it round towards the sea. The humming grew louder and louder, and Delamere commanded the islanders to follow him. They obeyed and stood at the fringe of the wood, but would venture no farther. Over the sea came a monster bird, the like of which no islander had ever seen. For a brief space it seemed to ride on the sea, skimming swiftly along parallel with the shore, then swinging round and coming back past where the islanders stood again.

Now it rose and turned out to sea again, only to swing once again, still mounting higher, and flying back over the top of the island. Delamere was puzzled after a time from the fact that the great sea-plane seemed to be giving an exhibition of its powers and made no signals of any kind. It came back from the other side of the island, swooped down till it almost touched the sea, and then flew straight out for the Great Curtain.

Actually, on board the *Bluebird* they were trying to get a sound knowledge of what the situation was on the island, but it was not very easy. Then, as they went at a low altitude over the top of the island, both Tim and Dick recognised the two figures which stood some little distance away from Janee's house. They were shading their hands and trying to look up at the plane.

"My father—and Joe!" Dick Maynard said to Tim. "Can't be very much wrong if they're spending their time up there. But I wonder why the huts have been burned out? And the Skipper isn't there?"

The *Bluebird* swung out again towards the Great Curtain, and came to rest presently, while the launch, which was just emerging from the mist, headed

towards them. There was some discussion then as to what course it would be best to take.

“The best plan would be to anchor just off the near side of the island,” Tim suggested. “Then we could climb the cliffs and go round by Janee’s. Mr. Maynard and Joe are there, and they could tell us just what is the best thing to do.”

That was the course finally adopted, and the *Bluebird* rose again, but came to rest in quite a short time at the part just off the island which the boys had indicated. They were able to make the plane fairly secure here, and waited for some time until the slower-moving launch came up with them.

Prescott came with McCurdy, Dick, and Tim in the launch, while Murdoch went aboard the *Bluebird*. In the beginning, however, Prescott would not accompany McCurdy and the two boys to Janee’s house, but would remain by the cliffs to keep an eye on the *Bluebird* and the launch, and in order to act as a connecting link between the two parties.

McCurdy, Tim, and Dick climbed the cliffs at a point some considerable way farther round the island from the place where they had once seen the *Sleuth*. There was a little sandy beach at this stage, and it was here they left Prescott for the time being.

It took them somewhere about an hour before they were actually within sight of Janee’s house, and as they walked across towards it, some one came out and was evidently trying to recognise them.

“It’s my father!” Dick began to break into a run on the instant. “Come on, Tim! We’ll soon know just what’s been happening down below.”

McCurdy followed them more slowly, and by the time he came up they were already half-way through the explanations.

“And Mr. Delamere?” McCurdy asked. “Is he well?”

“I’m just telling the boys that he went off to find out what has really happened,” Maynard said. “There was some trouble on the island last night, but just what it is we don’t know yet. Hullo! It sounds as though they’d started the singing business again—and they’re not so far away, I imagine!”

There had been some faint sounds even while they had been talking, and it had grown stronger in the last minute or two. Now they could hear the old chanting, rising and falling in waves. At this distance it was pleasant and even soothing, but all of them knew that it might be a song of joy or one of hate. They didn’t seem to have very much variety in the way of tunes, as Tim

remarked.

“We’ll go round to the other side,” Maynard suggested. “We may be able to see something of them from there.”

The whole party moved round, and had apparently timed their arrival very well. They were just in time to see the head of a procession, as it appeared to be, streaming from the woods, a quarter of a mile or so away. As Maynard and his friends watched, they saw the spears that were brandished, and they judged, too, that this was a march of triumph.

“They’re coming this way!” Tim said. “Maybe they’re coming to greet the King—if they know he’s here. Or—— Who’s the chap they’re dragging along? He’s not a native.”

“It is a white man,” Maynard said, very slowly. “I don’t think—it might be Delamere, of course. You have all got revolvers? We had better get back into the house until we know just what it means. Go back, please! All of you! I’ll go to meet them, and will signal to you if help is needed.”

“Ay, we’ll go back,” McCurdy said slowly, for Maynard was already walking forward to meet the concourse of islanders who were now swarming towards the house.

“You’ve got your weapons?” he asked, as they went into the first apartment. “Best keep them handy, just in case of need, but don’t show them till things look desperate. I’m thinking—— How do you do, sir? I trust you’re feeling better?”

Into the room came another figure. Malam, the King of Lotos, had heard the singing and chanting, and had risen from the couch on which he lay, to find out what was the cause. He was still dressed in his sailor’s uniform, but his left arm was bound and in a sling across his chest. Even Tim and Dick were impressed by the change which had taken place in his appearance since last they had seen him.

The fever, which had gripped him after the wound, had taken heavy toll of Malam. He was smaller, so it seemed, and his eyes had sunk back into a face which had become drawn and thin. There is no doubt that but for Delamere’s firm commands and treatment, Malam would have joined those other kings of Lotos who now lay in the Secret Place.

Malam was fully conscious of this, and his gratitude and loyalty to Delamere had risen to a point when it was a religion with him.

“I shall soon be well,” Malam answered McCurdy. “But my people—they



sing of victory and that the sea-devils have been beaten. What has happened? Where is the Big Captain?"

"We were just wondering——" McCurdy began, but was interrupted by a shout of joy from Tim and Dick, who had gone to the side window and were watching the oncoming crowd.

"It isn't the Skipper at all," Dick cried. "It's Rignold and that other chap—Cory—they're dragging along. Rignold's in front—but there's Mr. Delamere—talking to my father. Everything's all right."

The leaders of the crowd were now within twenty or thirty yards of Janee's house, and it was possible to see more clearly the faces of the two white men who were apparently bound in some curious fashion with native rope about their arms and chests, and they were being pulled along very much as though they were dogs on leash.

Behind them, and slightly to one side of the surging crowd, two other white men were talking together as they walked along. From this distance they might have been utterly oblivious of everything except their own conversation. Delamere was explaining to Robert Maynard just what his own experiences had been since they had parted.

Tim and Dick went out from the house to meet them, but Malam was before them. As he stood there, Delamere and Maynard hastened their steps and hurried towards him.

Within the next few minutes a curious change came over the crowd. The singing and chanting ceased, for which Tim and Dick were thankful, and the men, women, and children sat down in little groups, but so close together that it was at first difficult to realise that the crowd was divided into small family parties.

The guards who had been in charge of Rignold and Cory withdrew to one side, and they, too, sat down with their prisoners, but still kept a tight hold on the ropes which bound the two men.

Malam was greeting Delamere, and, in his turn, Delamere was shaking Tim and Dick by the hand. They managed to explain briefly something of what had happened so far as they were concerned, but details had to be left till later.

The King was facing the islanders now, and his right arm was raised and his voice echoed forth. Despite his illness the power of his lungs had evidently not suffered any decrease. He spoke in their native language, but it was only a brief speech, and almost as soon as he had finished the crowd began to prepare to depart again. Malam turned to Delamere and explained what he had said to

them.

“The Big Captain has saved my life and driven away our enemies,” he said. “The great feast which we were to have held will still take place in a day or two from now. Janee told me of the harm that has been done in the village, and they will now go and make it right again, and gather fruit and catch fish for the feast. It shall all be done!”

“Good!” Delamere was smiling quite cheerfully as he turned again to McCurdy, Maynard, and the two boys. “He doesn’t know that an hour or so ago some of them were strongly tempted to stick one of those spears into me. Malchior is dead, by the way.”

He told them of his fight with the witch-doctor and of the manner in which it had ended. Of his struggle afterwards to maintain supremacy over Malchior’s followers he said very little beyond the fact that the coming of the *Bluebird* had played its part. They had eventually obeyed his commands to follow him to where the loyal islanders were still in hiding, waiting for his return.

“It all came about quite comfortably after that,” he told them. “After all, it was no use blaming anybody, even those who had been responsible for setting fire to the huts. Malchior was the chief instigator of that, anyway. Best thing was to get them all quite peaceable again, and that’s what happened. Just by chance we ran across Rignold and Cory, and I gave orders pretty quickly for them to be overpowered and made prisoners.”

“I’ve no doubt it’s the wisest course,” McCurdy said. “I gather from Mr. Prescott, who’s lying up the other side with his sea-plane, that we can expect more help in due course. But you’ll be seeing him yourself and having his full report.”

“Yes. Where is he exactly? I want to hear his full story. You managed to get the wireless message through all right then?”

“That’s a story I’ll tell you when there’s more time,” McCurdy answered. “Now about Mr. Prescott? Would it be better if we brought him along here and tried to show him what Lotos can do in the way of a square meal at times? The lads and I will go back——”

“We’ll go,” Tim interrupted. “You stay here, Captain McCurdy, and get somebody interested in that meal you’re talking about. Dick and I will give Mr. Prescott the ‘all clear’ and get him to come back with us.”

“Sure you’re not tired?” Delamere asked.

They assured him on that point, and within another five minutes Tim and Dick were on their way back to where they had left Mark Prescott. He was there all right, and they told him just what the position was now.

In a very short time it was arranged that Prescott and one of the mechanics should go back with Tim and Dick, while Waverton and the other mechanic stayed in the little camp on shore. The *Bluebird* would be brought in, and a certain amount of overhauling would be done in readiness for the next trip she might be called upon to make.

In Janee's house that night there was a joyous gathering, and there was no suggestion of desert-island fare about the meal which was set before Mark Prescott, though doubtless it would not quite compare with what he might have been having in Melbourne.

For the first time, too, Tim and Dick heard the details of the arrangements which Delamere had made with Prescott before the *Purple Heather* left Melbourne. There were other details as well, bearing on the fact that through Prescott the Commonwealth Government was unofficially interested in Delamere's expedition. The reasons for this, and the whole question of the South Sea Islands, was a somewhat complicated problem which at present, at all events, did not exactly interest Tim and Dick.

But they were rather interested to hear that the business of Rumboltz was also mixed up in the matter. The Government were anxious to know a good deal more about Rumboltz, and though Prescott's quest did not seem to be connected with him in any way when the *Bluebird* set out, it had been agreed to send the light cruiser, *Wasp*, after Prescott, to support or help him if necessary, and to learn the real truth about this mystery island of Lotos.

Prescott had kept in touch by wireless with the *Wasp* after he had started, and at this moment the cruiser was in possession of the fact that there really was a submarine, under Rumboltz's command, patrolling the Southern Seas. They also knew that Prescott had reached Lotos by now.

The discussion was a long one, and when at length it became more involved over such questions as the rights of Government and problems of legal procedure against Rumboltz, Tim and Dick decided that it was time for them to turn in. Rough beds had been made up for them in this house, and before they actually retired for the night they took a stroll together over the plateau.

"Well, Tim, I guess you've had a fair share of adventure since we chummed up together in Daresbury. But I fancy we've finished now with the real excitement and can start on a quiet holiday, just enjoying ourselves!"

“Unless Valda Rumboltz turns up with some new move in the game!” Tim said, half jokingly, because Rumboltz seemed a long way from them now. “But I should think he’s had about enough of the game now.”

“Oh, I don’t suppose he’ll worry us again,” Dick said. “He had his last shot at us when we were in the launch, but he’ll realise now that we’re in touch with Government people, and he won’t be taking any more risks.”

## CHAPTER XV

### BLOOD-BROTHERS OF THE KING

WHILE it was true that Valda Rumboltz had realised the fact that in some extraordinary way a Government sea-plane had saved the two youngsters from being made prisoners on the *Sleuth*, he saw nothing more in it than a wonderful piece of luck for the boys. The sea-plane would take them back to the mainland, and doubtless there would be some perplexity in official quarters over their story; but Rumboltz knew the official methods, and he judged that it would be weeks before they even began to investigate the truth of the boys' statements.

So the *Sleuth* kept on its course and made for Denvel Island. It was far bigger than either Mochdre or Lotos, and here beyond all doubt Rumboltz was sole ruler. The *Sleuth* lay here for a day and took on fresh provisions, arms, ammunition, and every man who might be needed. Even the launch was replaced, and within thirty-six hours the submarine was out again and making for Mochdre Island.

The stay here was of very short duration, but Rumboltz learned of the brief visit of the *Bluebird* and of the fact that McCurdy had got away. With him had gone Murdoch, the doctor.

"I'll settle with both of them later," Rumboltz said quietly, and gave no hint of the temper that was rising within him. "There won't be any kid-glove business on this journey, Quayle. As far as I can make out, the gold and treasure they talk about is kept somewhere in the neighbourhood of that obelisk affair stuck on the top of the hill. Probably Rignold, or Klingmann, or Cory, will have found out all about it by now, and we'll try and pick them up right away. They can keep the island, so far as I'm concerned—for the present. I'll get that later on!"

"It's just the gold you're wanting, Boss?" Quayle asked. "I'm with you in that. Let's handle the stuff—and we'll leave the bananas and copra for them."

"It's the gold I want," Rumboltz said slowly, and seemed to change as he spoke. "The gold—and—Delamere! I'll finish him this trip!"

Quayle did not answer. He had a considerable respect for Rumboltz's cleverness and cunning, but when he saw him as he stood now on the deck of the *Sleuth*, his eyes gleaming with a burning passion which was yet under control, and his voice charged with venomous hatred, Quayle was afraid of the man.

So the *Sleuth* forged its way across the dancing Southern Seas towards the island which had remained hidden from the world for so long. No other vessel did they sight during that voyage, but once, barely two days from Lotos, the look-out reported something which appeared to be no more than a speck in the sky.

Instantly Rumboltz gave orders, and the *Sleuth* submerged. The opinion of those who had seen it was that the speck was a flying machine and that it was coming in their direction. It raised many problems in the mind of Valda Rumboltz. Had the *Bluebird* gone to Lotos Island? If so, what was the outcome of the visit?

"Anyway, it's on its way back now!" Rumboltz was confident on that point. "Make every ounce you can, Quayle! We'll have the island to ourselves and lift the loot!"

He was right in his assumption that the *Bluebird* had left Lotos. Mark Prescott had spent one day with Delamere and his friends. Some of the wonders of the island had been shown to him, and he had been with McCurdy and Delamere over the wreck of the *Purple Heather*, and had given an expert opinion on the prospects of repairing her again and getting her afloat. It was not an impossibility, but it would require careful planning, and this naturally raised other problems. It would be a question for discussion in due course between the owners and the insurance people!

It was a busy day for every one on Lotos, but with the prospects of the great feast ahead, the islanders worked hard. Murdoch, the doctor, had joined the party. He had brought with him all his surgical instruments and drugs, and Delamere undertook to keep him busy for quite a long time if he cared to stay with them on Lotos. Dr. Murdoch promptly agreed.

On the second morning they all went to see the *Bluebird* off again. Only the original crew, Prescott, Waverton, and the two mechanics, were aboard this journey, and it was not anticipated that they would be away many days. In fact, it was possible that it would only be matter of two or three days at the outside.

"As soon as we have picked up the *Wasp* and told her the exact position, we shall come back," Prescott said. "But I undertook to let them have a full report as soon as possible, and I think this is the best way of doing it. I can re-

fuel from them as well.”

He waved his hand as he climbed into the great plane, and John Delamere himself led a cheer, partially drowned by the roar of the engines as the *Bluebird* swept away from them.

It was two days after the *Bluebird* left them that the great feast was held. It did not begin until the heat of the day had passed, and, despite a general desire and hope among the islanders that the prisoners—the white men who were the enemies of the Big Captain—should provide some extra entertainment by adorning the big fire, there was no danger of anything happening to Rignold and his fellows.

The beach had been cleared of the bodies which had fallen during Malchior's descent on the village, and there was now little doubt that some of them at all events had been the victims of rifle-fire. But the bodies of four white men had been discovered in the woods, slain apparently by the islanders. This still left six white prisoners, for the others had been gathered in during the past two days.

Grettrex was still an invalid and was scarcely able to walk, so weak was he from the fever following his wound. Klingmann had escaped the spears of the islanders, but he, too, was on Dr. Murdoch's list of cases. A comparatively slight scratch had turned septic, and Klingmann was no longer interested in anything but the prospects of saving his leg from amputation, which was apparently what Dr. Murdoch anticipated when he examined it.

Long before sundown the crowd had gathered on the beach, where the bonfires had been erected and where a special raised dais had been put up for the King and the white men who were his friends. Malchior had gone, but his place had been filled already.

A special place had been set aside, too, for Janee and her women. So far as could be gathered, practically every soul on the island would be present at tonight's festivities.

“This is going to be a real celebration!” Dick laughed, as they sat on the low stools in the semicircle about the King, by whose side Delamere was now sitting. “I've always wanted to see one of these jolly old feasts. And then there is this queer brotherhood business—blood-brothers of the King! Sounds all right, but I wonder what it is? The Skipper himself is puzzled about it, and was arguing that it shows that at different times—— What's this chap going to do now?”

The new witch-doctor, a tall, well-made man, though not very young, was

beginning to get busy. Although the term “witch-doctor” is used, simply because one instinctively thought of Malchior in that way, the actual position of the man was comparable to that of Medical Officer for Health. The present holder of the office, appointed immediately it was known that Malchior was dead, had not been Malchior’s assistant, but had to some extent run in mild opposition to him. He was in some way a kinsman of Janee’s and had learned much of his knowledge from her.

He was coming round among the white men now, accompanied by two assistants, one of whom bore a goblet, made of some curious metal which looked like dull brass or tarnished gold. He stopped in front of John Delamere first of all, but the two boys could not see exactly what he did, beyond the fact that Delamere held out his bare arm.

The performance, whatever it was, was repeated on Maynard, Dr. Murdoch, Captain McCurdy, and Joe, and then it came Tim’s turn.

A long, sharp instrument was suddenly and surprisingly jabbed into Tim’s forearm. Just for a moment Tim almost gasped with the sudden shock of the thing. As the instrument was withdrawn, a small bead of blood welled up on Tim’s arm, and the witch-doctor watched it for a second or two with the air of a surgeon judging the right moment for the next incision.

Satisfied apparently with what he had done, the witch-doctor took another instrument from the second assistant. This was simply a flat blade which removed quickly the small bead of blood. The first assistant held forward the great goblet, which was filled with a milky-looking fluid to within an inch and a half of the brim. Tim judged it to be one of the curious drinks made from coco-nut milk which he had already tasted.

The flat blade was plunged into this and turned quickly round, while the witch-doctor recited some incantation in his own tongue. Actually not more than ten or twelve seconds was occupied over the whole performance, and then Dick’s arm was being treated in similar fashion. Apparently the last of all to be treated was Malam himself.

“Well, if that’s the giddy game, I don’t think a great deal of it,” Dick whispered to Tim. “Still, if the Skipper and McCurdy think it’s so important, we’d better not pass any rude remarks! Oh, my hat! I believe we’ve got to sip it, Tim!”

As a matter of fact that was the next stage in the ceremony, and the goblet was handed to each in turn. Both Dick and Tim would most certainly have dodged the performance at this juncture, but Delamere and the others all took it quite seriously, and held the goblet to their lips for a moment before handing it



back to the witch-doctor. It was evident when it came to Tim that no one had done much more than merely let his lips touch the liquid in the goblet—and Tim did the same.

As soon as Dick had touched the goblet with his lips, Delamere stood up and called out in that powerful voice of his:

“Long live King Malam of Lotos Island, whose kinsman and blood-brother I now am, and all those who are with me. May the blood run cold within me if I do not serve him well!”

“Hear, hear!” Dick said cheerfully, and turned to Tim again. “After this performance, I reckon we’re entitled——”

He did not finish his jest. Malam had risen, and an uproar broke out among the crowd which drowned all efforts at conversation. Malam had given the signal, and the dancing and the singing broke out. Fresh fuel was dragged forward and thrown on the fires, and the flames shooting upwards shone on the gaudy-clothed islanders as they formed rings and began to dance with a frenzy which seemed to affect even those who withdrew to one side and formed other groups to watch the dancers.

“Seem to go mad when they start this singing business,” Tim managed to make his voice heard as the row settled down to some sort of regular rhythm. “Hullo, Mr. Delamere! We didn’t jib at the blood-brotherhood business, did we?”

“No, but just dab some of this stuff on your arm where our friend stuck his knife into you,” Delamere said cheerfully. “I’ll do it! We won’t advertise the fact, but I managed to find out beforehand all about the performance, and I gather that it is regarded as quite a sound test. Often enough a man will die after it, which proves, of course, that he wasn’t a loyal kinsman. That’s the island theory, but my theory is that one stands quite a fair chance of getting blood-poisoning after a performance of that sort, and Murdoch agrees. Very useful having a doctor on the premises. He’s given us something which will prevent any risk of blood-poisoning. We don’t want to interfere with island customs just yet—but we’ll take our own precautions!”

They laughed and stood together for a time watching the strangely grotesque scene before them. The leaping flames, and the strange shadows on the sparkling beach as the twisting, turning islanders danced and sang to the gentle accompaniment, as it seemed, of the murmuring surf, all made a picture which would live in their memories so long as they endured.

“What was that?” Tim turned suddenly and asked the question of

Delamere. "Did you hear a cry?"

"No; I heard nothing except the row going on here," Delamere said. "Did you hear something?"

"I had an idea that I heard some one calling for help," Tim said doubtfully. "I thought it came——"

An islander came rushing from the grove behind them. They had turned for a minute to look behind them, and the moment he saw the native Delamere jumped from the back of the low platform and went to meet the man. He was evidently one of the guards who had been keeping watch over the huts where the white prisoners now lived.

"O Big Captain!" The man pulled himself up as he saw Delamere, and began to gasp out his message in the curious clipped English so many of the islanders knew and understood. "Come quickly! The sea-devils have come again, and they have let their brothers go free. Come quickly, Big Captain!"

"Stay with me!" Delamere told the islander. "We will go to the King first and tell him what has happened. Afterwards we will go back with you."

They returned to the platform, and Delamere very quietly told those there of the report the guard had brought. Whatever happened at this juncture, or whatever might be in store for them, it was essential that there should be no repetition of the panic which had seized some of the islanders only a few nights ago.

The singing and the dancing still went on, but on the platform a council of war was held. Now and again a messenger would go among the dancing figures and call out a name. In this way a small scouting party was gathered and organised, and, after arranging different signals, they were divided into smaller sections and sent out in different directions.

Dick and Tim went with Dr. Murdoch to the hut where the prisoners had been kept, and here they discovered two or three of the guards lying unconscious on the ground. A quick examination by Murdoch was sufficient to assure them that the men were not dead, but had been stunned by heavy blows on the head.

Yet despite the careful search that was made nothing definite was discovered during the few brief hours before dawn came. The revelry on the beach had come to a natural end, and the islanders had dispersed, and doubtless for most of them the coming day would be spent in rest.

Delamere and McCurdy scanned the sea when dawn came, but there was

no sign of any vessel.

“Some of us ought to go up to Janee’s house and keep a watch from there,” Delamere suggested, and on returning to the King’s house they discussed further plans.

In the end, Delamere, Tim, Dick, and Joe made the journey to the plateau, while Maynard, McCurdy, and Dr. Murdoch remained with Malam. The scouts were still out, but no signal had come from them.

The party going to the plateau had almost reached Janee’s house when a long, shrill whistle sounded from somewhere in the woods. It was a signal from the scouts to indicate that something had been seen. Delamere would have run in the direction from which the whistle came, but at that moment they saw four men going swiftly across the plateau in the direction of the obelisk.

“Wait—and watch!” Delamere had promptly dropped down so that he lay partially hidden, and his companions promptly followed his example.

Four other men now appeared from the cliffs away to the left of Janee’s house from the point where Delamere and his friends were lying. Just at first it was difficult to make out who they were, and then, as the figures became silhouetted against the sky-line, Tim gave a little gasp.

“You recognise the first figure?” Delamere asked quietly. “Rumboltz has come back—and he’s evidently anticipating a walk-over this journey!”

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE PARTNERS WIN THROUGH

**W**ITHIN the next few minutes all doubt as to the position of affairs had vanished. The *Sleuth* at this present moment was moored a little way out from the spot where she had last stayed before her dash from the island.

She had evidently arrived while the festivities were on last night. Presumably, too, some of the men had been landed and had made quiet investigation. It was this party which had attacked the guards kept on the prisoners, and Rignold, Cory, and the others had been released. Some time had been occupied while the scouts returned to the *Sleuth* to report to Rumboltz, and, for reasons best known to himself, he had apparently decided to make his bid for whatever treasure the island contained at the earliest moment.

Obviously, too, he did not anticipate anything in the nature of opposition to his plans, inasmuch as they had all walked quite openly across the plateau to the obelisk. Delamere judged, too, that the first party to cross had forced the native fastenings which kept the heavy entrance door tightly closed. All of them eventually disappeared inside the obelisk, but whether they kept any sort of guard on watch it was impossible to say.

Delamere made his own arrangements, and the scouts who had given the first warning were brought in. Joe was dispatched with two of them to make his way back to Maynard as quickly as possible and bring up reinforcements. It might be that the trouble would begin before they could get here, but Delamere would postpone the inevitable fight until the last moment. And meantime, if it were Rumboltz's intention to transfer everything valuable from the Secret Place to the *Sleuth*, he was likely to be occupied for a good many hours!

It was just after Joe had left them that there came a curious sound—a low, humming murmur it was at first, but it increased rapidly. Tim turned round from where he was lying and looked over the trees to the sea.

“The *Bluebird* is back—flying low,” he called softly to John Delamere. “She’s out of sight now—but it was our plane all right!”

The sound of the engine suddenly ceased, and they judged that the *Bluebird* had come to rest, but from where they were now they could not see her. Still, it was as Delamere said, another factor in their favour, though they could not leave their present posts to go and welcome Prescott and his companions.

The time passed slowly, and there was no further sign from the entrance to the Secret Place. Evidently Rumboltz was making a full exploration. Probably an hour and a half had gone by when some one crept quietly alongside Delamere and lay by him for a few moments without speaking a word.

“What is the position now, sir?” It was McCurdy who had stolen up so cautiously, and Delamere explained why they were still waiting and to a certain extent under cover.

“Good!” McCurdy appeared to be pleased with the news. “Mr. Prescott has landed, and reports that the *Wasp* should be up in a few hours now. We had your message through Bratt, and he is coming along now with Dr. Murdoch and a considerable party, which will lie close handy and wait for signals from you. Mr. Maynard, with a small party, will work round by the beach towards the cliffs.”

“That’s right!” Delamere nodded. “And Prescott? What is he proposing to do?”

“The *Bluebird* is ready to take off and give the *Sleuth* an ultimatum at any moment. She knows exactly where the submarine is lying, and guessed that the trouble had begun. I think Mr. Prescott means business, sir!”

Another half-hour passed and still there was no sign from the obelisk. Evidently Rumboltz and his men were not finding the task quite so simple as they had anticipated.

“Here they come!” McCurdy was the first to see some one moving in the shadow of the obelisk. “They’ve brought something with them, too!”

Four men slowly emerged from the entrance way to the Secret Place, and they were struggling to carry one of the cases which had been packed with bar gold long years ago. Whether it was still full or not it was difficult to say, but the carriers obviously found their task none too easy.

After a brief rest the four headed across from the obelisk, not in a straight line which would have brought them comparatively near those who lay in hiding just below the plateau, but across towards the little woods which crowned the edge on the far side.

“I’d give anything to have a shot at that big brute who was a mate of mine once—Quayle’s his name,” McCurdy said grimly. “But as it is—— Do I give the signal to warn the others, Mr. Delamere?”

“Yes—now!” Delamere said, and rose. McCurdy raised his revolver, and three shots rang out in swift succession. In different parts of the island men were waiting anxiously for that signal, and were preparing for action before the last shot had died away.

“We’ll get them just inside the wood,” Delamere said. “Ready, boys? Right across! Ah! Prescott hasn’t been long in getting up!”

The hum of the *Bluebird* sounded above them, and before the little party, consisting of Delamere, McCurdy, Tim, Dick, and some three or four natives, had crossed the plateau, the great sea-plane was circling round in what seemed almost dangerous proximity to the plateau.

Right ahead of them they could see Rumboltz’s party still struggling slowly along towards the wood which ran down somewhat steeply towards the sea. As they hurried forward they heard a sudden cry, and then came the shouts of the natives and the sound of two or three swift revolver shots.

“They’re in it!” McCurdy cried. “Come along, sir! Steady, boys! Don’t get ahead of me!”

They were right at the edge of the wood now, but all they could distinguish at first was a mass of men, whites and islanders, inextricably mixed up, and everybody fighting as much with their voices as with their weapons. And from above came the humming of the *Bluebird*.

Dick caught sight of his father apparently having a wrestling match with one of the men from the *Sleuth*, while half a dozen natives were dancing round, swinging their clubs in readiness for the chance to get in a blow. Without any further argument or consideration, Dick plunged forward to join in this particular fight, while Tim found himself alongside Murdoch, who was learning the science of fighting afresh.

There was little chance of revolvers in this kind of mix-up, even if one had desired to use them. The short clubs of the islanders were infinitely more effective, and they were not by any means slow in using them when the opportunity came. The boxes which the men had been carrying had been dropped quickly and were still lying among the undergrowth.

Delamere surveyed the scene before he made any attempt to join in. It was already evident that Maynard’s party, now reinforced by Delamere’s lot, were gaining the upper hand, and the natives had grasped what their task was

excellently. Already they were dragging away two or three men who had been swiftly bound with the stout ropes with which the islanders had come prepared.

A shot suddenly rang out, and instinctively Delamere ducked and jumped behind a tree. As he turned again to peer in the direction from which he judged the shot had come, he had a swift picture of McCurdy suddenly flinging himself behind another tree, and almost in the next instant, so it seemed, the little captain was rolling over. But he was clinging desperately to the man who had sent him down, and Delamere realised that Rumboltz had taken cover and was biding his time—until the chance came to settle his account with Delamere.

But now McCurdy and Rumboltz were struggling with the fury of two wild animals, till Rumboltz with a sudden jerk managed to get his hand which held the revolver quite free. He raised it in his effort to make certain that when his finger felt the trigger again the bullet would find its mark. And it was then that Delamere jumped in.

The revolver was never fired. It was whipped from the grasp of Rumboltz in the very instant he was changing his grip to get to the trigger, and Delamere was joining in the fight as soon as the weapon had been pushed away. Round them two or three natives had gathered, but Rumboltz was fighting madly and with the strength of two normal men.

McCurdy broke away, but was preparing to plunge into the fight the moment he had recovered his breath. As he stood back, two dark forms jumped in swiftly, and McCurdy had a glimpse of swinging clubs, heard the unpleasant sound as they brought them down on the massive head now exposed to them—and then McCurdy relaxed as he saw Rumboltz slipping helplessly out of Delamere's arms. The uncrowned king of the South Seas lay very still among the undergrowth, and as Delamere and McCurdy stood looking down on him, they knew that Rumboltz had fought his last fight.

Maynard was calling out, and it seemed as though his voice broke a strange silence. Even the islanders had become quiet and were awaiting orders, as they clung grimly on to the ropes which held their prisoners. There were only four of them, but Rumboltz and another man lay where they had fallen, and doubtless two or three others had managed to make their escape. The fight was over, and Delamere gave his orders.

Some two hours later the whole party of white men were gathered in the King's house near the beach again. Mark Prescott had brought down the *Bluebird* again, and had paid them a visit, pointing out to them the new craft which was now lying off Lotos. He explained to Delamere that he would

return after he had reported to the officer in command of the *Wasp* just what the situation now was.

It was well on in the afternoon when Prescott eventually returned, and this time there was a naval officer with him, who greeted them all cheerfully after quite a formal presentation by Prescott.

“Glad to meet you, Mr. Delamere,” Commander Vincent said, when the first greetings were over. “My friend, Prescott, will tell you all about us, I’ve no doubt. I’m merely here to inform you that we have taken charge of the submarine, the *Sleuth*, and that a full inquiry will be made into her conduct. I’m inclined to think that we have found the solution of one or two mysteries which have puzzled the authorities in the past two or three years. You have some of her men prisoners, I understand?”

“We have,” Delamere told him. “But I’m afraid the chief of them all will never answer to any tribunal in Melbourne. You shall have all the information concerning Valda Rumboltz and the manner in which he met his end as soon as you wish. As to the other prisoners——”

“I think we’d better take charge of them immediately,” Vincent said. “They will be safer aboard the *Wasp*, I imagine. What I should like to understand about this man, Rumboltz, is this——”

There was much talk after that, some of which, it must be admitted, did not interest either Tim or Dick, though Delamere, Maynard, and even McCurdy seemed to think it highly interesting. They enjoyed far more their trip to the *Wasp* and the dinner aboard her that same evening, and even then there was talk again of protectorates under the Crown, and of the rights of treasure-finders.

Yet on the following day there was a ceremony on Lotos Island, right by the obelisk, which marked the entrance to the Secret Place, and the Union Jack was hoisted on the flag-pole which sailors from the *Wasp* had set up. Malam, the King of Lotos, under the direction of Delamere, swore allegiance to Britain, and the islanders were startled and thrilled by the bugles which blew. But it was for some such ceremony as this that the first Malam had waited long years, and had brought up his son to expect.

The boxes in the wood were duly recovered, and these, with other boxes, after a proper inspection of their contents, were eventually transferred to the *Wasp*. They were useless on the island of Lotos. To Commander Vincent was presented by Malam, through John Delamere, a golden sovereign of the reign of Queen Victoria. It had been found in a torn jacket which had been discovered on one of the later searches on the *Purple Heather*. Even Dick



scarcely recognised his own coat, and it was only by chance that the sovereign, after all its queer adventures, became again the token of Malam's loyalty to the ruler across the seas.

How in the fulness of time it came back to Dick as a memento of his adventures, is merely an anecdote which Commander Vincent can tell. But Delamere was still the Big Captain and overlord of Lotos Island, and he made a solemn promise, before he went aboard the *Wasp* after some days, that he would return to Lotos. Robert Maynard, Joe Bratt, Dick, and Tim went with Delamere, but Captain McCurdy had agreed to stay behind, and with him Dr. Murdoch also elected to remain till such time as Delamere and his friends returned again. There was still the problem of the *Purple Heather* to be settled.

Of that voyage aboard the *Wasp* and of their stay in Australia, little need be said here. It was a holiday for Tim and Dick, though Delamere and Maynard had much legal and Government business to occupy their time.

But it was finished at last, presumably to the satisfaction of Delamere and all concerned. Both Delamere and Maynard were anxious to make the voyage to England before any trips to the South Seas again.

"We shall come back again?" Tim asked, when he heard all the arrangements for the voyage to England. "I'll like it, of course, but there's something about the South Seas——"

"Oh, you'll be coming back, never fear!" Delamere assured him. "You'll never settle down in Daresbury again, I'm afraid, though it's just possible I shall have to do so. I think you and Dick had better start in partnership, and we'll fix up the details of what you're entitled to, so far as Lotos is concerned."

But they were too full of the mere joy of living to worry about business propositions just then; and it was not till some two months later, when Tim and Maynard walked from the White House through Cranmere Woods, in order to go into Daresbury and visit Andrew Gambier to let him know that his nephew was still alive and well, that Dick raised the question.

"We'll have that partnership fixed up, Tim," he said. "Do you remember how we started our last partnership? Isn't that the very cave into which you dragged me that afternoon?"

He pointed through the trees to where the cubby-hole which had once been Tim's whole world of adventure could just be discerned, or at least the ledge which led to it could be seen.

"By Jove, yes!" Tim stopped and stared at the place. "Grettex still on Lotos Island, being cured by Dr. Murdoch; Rignold and Klingmann trying to

explain that they really had nothing to do with Valda Rumboltz—and Rumboltz himself buried on Lotos. It's been a stiff chase, Dick, and here we are back in the same old spot. We might settle down—— Oh, but we couldn't! Let's start another partnership on this very spot.”

“Right, partner! I'm in it!” Dick put out his hand. “You've been a wonderful pal, Tim! And we'll go on being partners. We'll go back to the South Seas and Lotos Island—which isn't a lost island any more—and we'll have our own steamer—— But come on! We won't talk too much about it just yet. I can smell the scents of Lotos even now, and I'm afraid I'll want to take the first boat out again, before we've had a chance to see something of home. Come on, partner!”

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *The Secret of Lotos Island* by Michael Poole.]