

Poison Island eBook

Poison Island by Arthur Quiller-Couch

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

Poison Island eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	9
Page 1.....	10
Page 2.....	11
Page 3.....	12
Page 4.....	14
Page 5.....	16
Page 6.....	18
Page 7.....	20
Page 8.....	22
Page 9.....	24
Page 10.....	26
Page 11.....	28
Page 12.....	30
Page 13.....	32
Page 14.....	34
Page 15.....	36
Page 16.....	38
Page 17.....	40
Page 18.....	42
Page 19.....	44
Page 20.....	45
Page 21.....	47
Page 22.....	49

Page 23.....	51
Page 24.....	53
Page 25.....	55
Page 26.....	57
Page 27.....	58
Page 28.....	60
Page 29.....	62
Page 30.....	64
Page 31.....	66
Page 32.....	68
Page 33.....	70
Page 34.....	71
Page 35.....	72
Page 36.....	74
Page 37.....	76
Page 38.....	77
Page 39.....	79
Page 40.....	81
Page 41.....	83
Page 42.....	85
Page 43.....	87
Page 44.....	89
Page 45.....	90
Page 46.....	91
Page 47.....	93
Page 48.....	95

Page 49.....	97
Page 50.....	99
Page 51.....	101
Page 52.....	103
Page 53.....	105
Page 54.....	107
Page 55.....	109
Page 56.....	111
Page 57.....	113
Page 58.....	115
Page 59.....	117
Page 60.....	119
Page 61.....	121
Page 62.....	123
Page 63.....	124
Page 64.....	125
Page 65.....	127
Page 66.....	129
Page 67.....	131
Page 68.....	132
Page 69.....	134
Page 70.....	136
Page 71.....	138
Page 72.....	140
Page 73.....	142
Page 74.....	144

Page 75.....	146
Page 76.....	148
Page 77.....	150
Page 78.....	151
Page 79.....	152
Page 80.....	154
Page 81.....	155
Page 82.....	156
Page 83.....	157
Page 84.....	158
Page 85.....	159
Page 86.....	161
Page 87.....	163
Page 88.....	164
Page 89.....	165
Page 90.....	166
Page 91.....	168
Page 92.....	169
Page 93.....	171
Page 94.....	173
Page 95.....	175
Page 96.....	177
Page 97.....	179
Page 98.....	180
Page 99.....	181
Page 100.....	182

Page 101.....	184
Page 102.....	186
Page 103.....	188
Page 104.....	190
Page 105.....	192
Page 106.....	194
Page 107.....	196
Page 108.....	198
Page 109.....	200
Page 110.....	202
Page 111.....	204
Page 112.....	206
Page 113.....	207
Page 114.....	208
Page 115.....	209
Page 116.....	211
Page 117.....	212
Page 118.....	213
Page 119.....	214
Page 120.....	216
Page 121.....	218
Page 122.....	220
Page 123.....	222
Page 124.....	224
Page 125.....	226
Page 126.....	228

Page 127.....	230
Page 128.....	232
Page 129.....	234
Page 130.....	236
Page 131.....	238
Page 132.....	240
Page 133.....	242
Page 134.....	244
Page 135.....	246
Page 136.....	248
Page 137.....	249
Page 138.....	251
Page 139.....	253
Page 140.....	255
Page 141.....	257
Page 142.....	259
Page 143.....	261
Page 144.....	263
Page 145.....	265
Page 146.....	267
Page 147.....	269
Page 148.....	271
Page 149.....	273
Page 150.....	275
Page 151.....	276
Page 152.....	278

Page 153.....	280
Page 154.....	281
Page 155.....	283
Page 156.....	285
Page 157.....	287
Page 158.....	288
Page 159.....	290
Page 160.....	292

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Start of eBook	1
HOW I FIRST MET WITH CAPTAIN COFFIN.	1
CHAPTER II.	5
CHAPTER III.	7
CHAPTER IV.	11
CHAPTER V.	15
CHAPTER VI.	20
CHAPTER VII.	23
CHAPTER VIII.	28
CHAPTER IX.	32
CHAPTER X.	35
CHAPTER XI.	39
CHAPTER XII.	43
CHAPTER XIII.	49
CHAPTER XIV.	54
CHAPTER XV.	59
CHAPTER XVI.	64
CHAPTER XVII.	70
CHAPTER XVIII.	74
CHAPTER XIX.	79
CHAPTER XX.	86
CHAPTER XXI.	92
CHAPTER XXII.	96
CHAPTER XXIII.	102
CHAPTER XXIV.	105
CHAPTER XXV.	110
CHAPTER XXVI.	115
CHAPTER XXVII.	120
CHAPTER XXVIII.	125
CHAPTER XXIX.	130
CHAPTER XXX.	133
CHAPTER XXXI.	137
CHAPTER XXXII.	142
CHAPTER XXXIII.	149
CHAPTER XXXIV.	156
THE END.	160

Page 1

HOW I FIRST MET WITH CAPTAIN COFFIN.

It was in the dusk of a July evening of the year 1813 (July 27, to be precise) that on my way back from the mail-coach office, Falmouth, to Mr. Stimcoe's Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen, No. 7, Delamere Terrace, I first met Captain Coffin as he came, drunk and cursing, up the Market Strand, with a rabble of children at his heels. I have reason to remember the date and hour of this encounter, not only for its remarkable consequences, but because it befell on the very day and within an hour or two of my matriculation at Stimcoe's. That afternoon I had arrived at Falmouth by Royal Mail, in charge of Miss Plinlimmon, my father's housekeeper; and now but ten minutes ago I had seen off that excellent lady and waved farewell to her—not without a sinking of the heart—on her return journey to Minden Cottage, which was my home.

My name is Harry Brooks, and my age on this remembered evening was fourteen and something over. My father, Major James Brooks, late of the 4th (King's Own) Regiment, had married twice, and at the time of his retirement from active service was for the second time a widower. Blindness—contracted by exposure and long marches over the snows of Galicia—had put an end to a career by no means undistinguished. In his last fight, at Corunna, he had not only earned a mention in despatches from his brigadier-general, Lord William Bentinck, but by his alertness in handling his half-regiment at a critical moment, and refusing its right to an outflanking line of French, had been privileged to win almost the last word of praise uttered by his idolized commander. My father heard, and faced about, but his eyes were already failing him; they missed the friendly smile with which Sir John Moore turned, and cantered off along the brigade, to encourage the 50th and 42nd regiments, and to receive, a few minutes later, the fatal cannon-shot.

Every one has heard what miseries the returning transports endured in the bitter gale of January, 1809. The *Londonderry*, in which my father sailed, did indeed escape wreck, but at the cost of a week's beating about the mouth of the Channel. He was, by rights, an invalid, having taken a wound in the kneecap from a spent bullet, one of the last fired in the battle; but in the common peril he bore a hand with the best. For three days and two nights he never shifted his clothing, which the gale alternately soaked and froze. It was frozen stiff as a board when the *Londonderry* made the entrance of Plymouth Sound; and he was borne ashore in a rheumatic fever. From this, and from his wound, the doctors restored him at length, but meanwhile his eyesight had perished.

Page 2

His misfortunes did not end here. My step-sister Isabel—a beautiful girl of seventeen, the only child of his first marriage—had met him at Plymouth, nursed him to convalescence, and brought him home to Minden Cottage, to the garden which henceforward he tilled, but saw only through memory. Since then she had married a young officer in the 52nd Regiment, a Lieutenant Archibald Plinlimmon; but, her husband having to depart at once for the Peninsula, she had remained with her father and tended him as before, until death took her—as it had taken her mother—in childbirth. The babe did not survive her; and, to complete the sad story, her husband fell a few weeks later before Badajoz, while assaulting the Picurina Gate with fifty axemen of the Light Division.

Beneath these blows of fate my father did indeed bow his head, yet bravely. From the day Isabel died his shoulders took a sensible stoop; but this was the sole evidence of the mortal wound he carried, unless you count that from the same day he put aside his “Aeneid,” and taught me no more from it, but spent his hours for the most part in meditation, often with a Bible open on his knee—although his eyes could not read it. Sally, our cook, told me one day that when the foolish midwife came and laid the child in his arms, not telling him that it was dead, he felt it over and broke forth in a terrible cry—his first and last protest.

In me—the only child of his second marriage, as Isabel had been the only child of his first—he appeared to have lost, and of a sudden, all interest. While Isabel lived there had been reason for this, or excuse at least, for he had loved her mother passionately, whereas from mine he had separated within a day or two after marriage, having married her only because he was obliged—or conceived himself obliged—by honour. Into this story I shall not go. It was a sad one, and, strange to say, sadly creditable to both. I do not remember my mother. She died, having taken some pains to hide even my existence from her husband, who, nevertheless, conscientiously took up the burden. A man more strongly conscientious never lived; and his sudden neglect of me had nothing to do with caprice, but came—as I am now assured—of some lesion of memory under the shock of my sister’s death. As an unregenerate youngster I thought little of it at the time, beyond rejoicing to be free of my daily lesson in Virgil.

I can see my father now, seated within the summer-house by the filbert-tree at the end of the orchard—his favourite haunt—or standing in the doorway and drawing himself painfully erect, a giant of a man, to inhale the scent of his flowers or listen to his bees, or the voice of the stream which bounded our small domain. I see him framed there, his head almost touching the lintel, his hands gripping the posts like a blind Samson’s, all too strong for the flimsy trelliswork. He wore a brown holland suit in summer, in colder weather a fustian one of like colour, and at first glance you might mistake him for a Quaker. His snow-white hair was gathered close beside the temples, back from a face of ineffable simplicity and goodness—the face of a man at peace with God and all the world, yet marked with scars—scars of bygone passions, cross-hatched and almost effaced by deeper scars of calamity. As Miss Plinlimmon wrote in her album—

Page 3

"Few men so deep as Major Brooks
Have drained affliction's cup.
Alas! if one may trust his looks,
I fear he's breaking up!"

This Miss Plinlimmon, a maiden aunt of the young officer who had been slain at Badajoz, kept house for us after my sister's death. She was a lady of good Welsh family, who after many years of genteel poverty had come into a legacy of seven thousand pounds from an East Indian uncle; and my father—a simple liver, content with his half-pay—had much ado in his blindness to keep watch and war upon the luxuries she untiringly strove to smuggle upon him. For the rest, Miss Plinlimmon wore corkscrew curls, talked sentimentally, worshipped the manly form (in the abstract) with the manly virtues, and possessed (quite unknown to herself) the heart of a lion.

Upon this unsuspected courage, and upon the strength of her affection for me, she had drawn on the day when she stood up to my father—of whom, by the way, she was desperately afraid—and told him that his neglect of me was a sin and a shame and a scandal. "And a good education," she wound up feebly, "would render Harry so much more of a companion to you."

My father rubbed his head vaguely. "Yes, yes, you are right. I have been neglecting the boy. But pray end as honestly as you began, and do not pretend to be consulting my future when you are really pleading for his. To begin with, I don't want a companion; next, I should not immediately make a companion of Harry by sending him away to school; and, lastly, you know as well as I, that long before he finished his schooling I should be in my grave."

"Well, then, consider what a classical education would do for Harry! I feel sure that had I—pardon the supposition—been born a man, and made conversant with the best thoughts of the ancients—Socrates, for example—"

"What about him?" my father demanded.

"So wise, as I have always been given to understand, yet in his own age misunderstood, by his wife especially! And, to crown all, unless I err, drowned in a butt of hemlock!"

"Dear madam, pardon me; but how many of these accidents to Socrates are you ascribing to his classical education?"

"But it comes out in so many ways," Miss Plinlimmon persisted; "and it does make such a difference! There's a *je ne sais quoi*. You can tell it even in the way they handle a knife and fork!"

That evening, after supper, Miss Plinlimmon declined her customary game of cards with me, on the pretence that she felt tired, and sat for a long while fumbling with a newspaper, which I recognized for a week-old copy of the “Falmouth Packet.” At length she rose abruptly, and, crossing over to the table where I sat playing dominoes (right hand against left), thrust the paper before me, and pointed with a trembling finger.

“There, Harry! What would you say to that?”

I brushed my dominoes aside, and read—

Page 4

“The Reverend Philip Stimcoe, B.A., (Oxon.), of Copenhagen Academy, 7. Delamere Terrace, begs to inform the Nobility, Clergy, and Gentry of Falmouth and the neighbourhood that he has Vacancies for a limited number of Pupils of good Social Standing. Education classical, on the lines of the best Public Schools, combined with Home Comforts under the personal supervision of Mrs. Stimcoe (niece of the late Hon. Sir Alexander O’Brien, R.N., Admiral of the White, and K.C.B.). Backward and delicate boys a speciality. Separate beds. Commodious playground in a climate unrivalled for pulmonary ailments. Greenwich time kept.”

I did not criticise the advertisement. It sufficed me to read my release in it; and in the same instant I knew how lonely the last few months had been, and felt myself an ingrate. I that had longed unspeakably, if but half consciously, for the world beyond Minden Cottage—a world in which I could play the man—welcomed my liberty by laying my head on my arms and breaking into unmanly sobs.

I will pass over a blissful week of preparation, including a journey by van to Torpoint and by ferry across to Plymouth, where Miss Plinlimmon bought me boots, shirts, collars, under-garments, a valise, a low-crowned beaver hat for Sunday wear, and for week-days a cap shaped like a concertina; where I was measured for two suits after a pattern marked “Boy’s Clarence, Gentlemanly,” and where I expended two-and-sixpence of my pocket-money on a piratical jack-knife and a book of patriotic songs—two articles indispensable, it seemed to me, to full-blooded manhood; and I will come to the day when the Royal Mail pulled up before Minden Cottage with a merry clash of bits and swingle-bars, and, the scarlet-coated guard having received my box from Sally the cook, and hoisted it aboard in a jiffy, Miss Plinlimmon and I climbed up to a seat behind the coachman. My father stood at the door, and shook hands with me at parting.

“Good luck, lad,” said he; “and remember our motto: *Nil nisi recte!* Good luck have thou with thine honour. And, by the way, here’s half a sovereign for you.”

“Cl’k!” from the coachman, shortening up his enormous bunch of reins; *ta-ra-ra!* from the guard’s horn close behind my ear; and we were off!

Oh, believe me, there never was such a ride! As we swept by the second mile stone I stole a look at Miss Plinlimmon. She sat in an ecstasy, with closed eyes. She was, as she put it, indulging in mental composition.

Verses composed while Riding by the Royal Mail.

“I’ve sailed at eve o’er Plymouth Sound
(For me it was a rare excursion)
Oblivious of the risk of being drown’d,
Or even of a more temporary immersion.

"I dream'd myself the Lady of the Lake,
Or an Oriental one (within limits) on the Bosphorus;
We left a trail of glory in our wake,
Which the intelligent boatman ascribed to phosphorus.

Page 5

“Yet agreeable as I found it o’er the ocean
To glide within my bounding shallop,
I incline to think that for the poetry of motion
One may even more confidently recommend the Tantivy Gallop.”

CHAPTER II.

I AM ENTERED AT COPENHAGEN ACADEMY.

Agreeable, too, as I found it to be whirled between the hedgerows behind five splendid horses; to catch the ostlers run out with the relays; to receive blue glimpses of the Channel to southward; to dive across dingles and past farm-gates under which the cocks and hens flattened themselves in their haste to give us room; to gaze back over the luggage and along the road, and assure myself that the rival coach (the Self-Defence) was not overtaking us—yet Falmouth, when we reached it, was best of all; Falmouth, with its narrow streets and crowd of sailors, postmen, ‘longshoremen, porters with wheelbarrows, and passengers hurrying to and from the packets, its smells of pitch and oakum and canvas, its shops full of seamen’s outfits and instruments and marine curiosities, its upper windows where parrots screamed in cages, its alleys and quay-doors giving peeps of the splendid harbour, thronged—to quote Miss Plinlimmon again —“with varieties of gallant craft, between which the trained nautical eye may perchance distinguish, but mine doesn’t.”

The residential part of Falmouth rises in neat terraces above the waterside, and of these Delamere Terrace was by no means the least respectable. The brass doorplate of No. 7 —“Copenhagen Academy for the Sons of Gentlemen. Principal, the Rev. Philip Stimcoe, B.A. (Oxon.)”—shone immaculate; and its window-blinds did Mrs. Stimcoe credit, as Miss Plinlimmon remarked before ringing the bell.

Mrs. Stimcoe herself opened the door to us, in a full lace cap and a maroon-coloured gown of state. She was a gaunt, hard-eyed woman, tall as a grenadier, remarkable for a long upper lip decorated with two moles. She excused her condescension on the ground that the butler was out, taking the pupils for a walk; and conducted us to the parlour, where Mr. Stimcoe sat in an atmosphere which smelt faintly of sherry.

Mr. Stimcoe rose and greeted us with a shaky hand. He was a thin, spectacled man, with a pendulous nose and cheeks disfigured by a purplish cutaneous disorder (which his wife, later on, attributed to his having slept between damp sheets while the honoured guest of a nobleman, whose name I forget). He wore a seedy clerical suit.

While shaking hands he observed that I was taller than he had expected; and this, absurdly enough, is all I remember of the interview, except that the room had two empty bookcases, one on either side of the chimney-breast; that the fading of the wallpaper

above the mantelpiece had left a patch recording where a clock had lately stood (I conjectured that it must be at Greenwich, undergoing repairs); that Mrs. Stimcoe

Page 6

produced a decanter of sherry—a wine which Miss Plinlimmon abominated—and poured her out a glassful, with the remark that it had been twice round the world; that Miss Plinlimmon supposed vaguely “the same happened to a lot of things in a seaport like Falmouth;” and that somehow this led us on to Mr. Stimcoe’s delicate health, and this again to the subject of damp sheets, and this finally to Mrs. Stimcoe’s suggesting that Miss Plinlimmon might perhaps like to have a look at my bedroom.

The bedroom assigned to me opened out of Mrs. Stimcoe’s own. (“It will give him a sense of protection. A child feels the first few nights away from home.”) Though small, it was neat, and, for a boy’s wants, amply furnished; nay, it contained at least one article of supererogation, in the shape of a razor-case on the dressing-table. Mrs. Stimcoe swept this into her pocket with a turn of the hand, and explained frankly that her husband, like most scholars, was absent-minded. Here she passed two fingers slowly across her forehead. “Even in his walks, or while dressing, his brain wanders among the deathless compositions of Greece and Rome, turning them into English metres—all cakes especially”—she must have meant alcaics—“and that makes him leave things about.”

I had fresh and even more remarkable evidence of Mr. Stimcoe’s absent-mindedness two minutes later, when, the sheets having been duly inspected, we descended to the parlour again; for, happening to reach the doorway some paces ahead of the two ladies, I surprised him in the act of drinking down Miss Plinlimmon’s sherry.

The interview was scarcely resumed before a mortuary silence fell on the room, and I became aware that somehow my presence impeded the discussion of business.

“I think perhaps that Harry would like to run out upon the terrace and see the view from his new home,” suggested Mrs. Stimcoe, with obvious tact.

I escaped, and went in search of the commodious playground, which I supposed to lie in the rear of the house; but, reaching a back yard, I suddenly found myself face to face with three small boys, one staggering with the weight of a pail, the two others bearing a full washtub between them; and with surprise saw them set down their burdens at a distance and come tip-toeing towards me in a single file, with theatrical gestures of secrecy.

“Hallo!” said I.

“Hist! Be dark as the grave!” answered the leader, in a stage-whisper. He was a freckly, narrow-chested child, and needed washing. “You’re the new boy,” he announced, as though he had tracked me down in that criminal secret.

“Yes,” I owned. “Who are you?”

“We are the Blood-stained Brotherhood of the Pampas, now upon the trail!”

“Look here,” said I, staring down at him, “that’s nonsense!”

“Oh, very well,” he answered promptly; “then we’re the ‘Backward Sons of Gentlemen’—that’s down in the prospectus—and we’re fetching water for Mother Stimcoe, because the turncock cut off the company’s water this morning! See? But you won’t blow the gaff on the old girl, will you?”

Page 7

"Are you all there is, you three?" I asked, after considering them a moment.

"We're all the boarders. My name's Ted Bates—they call me Doggy Bates—and my father's a captain out in India; and these are Bob Pilkington and Scotty Maclean. You may call him Redhead, being too big to punch; and, talking of that, you'll have to fight Bully Stokes."

"Is he a day-boy?" I asked.

"He's cock of Rogerses up the hill, and he wants it badly. Stimcoes and Rogerses are hated rivals. If you can whack Bully Stokes for us—"

"But Mrs. Stimcoe told me that you were taking a walk with the butler," I interrupted.

Master Bates winked.

"Would you like to see him?"

He beckoned me to an open window, and we gazed through it upon a bare back kitchen, and upon an extremely corpulent man in an armchair, slumbering, with a yellow bandanna handkerchief over his head to protect it from the flies. Master Bates whipped out a pea-shooter, and blew a pea on to the exposed lobe of the sleeper's ear.

"D—n!" roared the corpulent one, leaping up in wrath. But we were in hiding behind the yard-wall before he could pull the bandanna from his face.

"He's the bailiff," explained Master Bates. "He's in possession. Oh, you'll get quite friendly with him in time. Down in the town they call him Mother Stimcoe's lodger, he comes so often. But, I say, don't go and blow the gaff on the old girl."

On our way to the coach-office that evening I felt—as the saying is—my heart in my mouth. Miss Plinlimmon spoke sympathetically of Mr. Stimcoe's state of health, and with delicacy of his absent-mindedness, "so natural in a scholar." I discovered long afterwards that Mr. Stimcoe, having retired to cash a note for her, had brought back a strong smell of brandy and eighteen-pence less than the strict amount of her change. I knew in my heart that my new schoolmaster and his wife were a pair of frauds, and yet I choked down the impulse to speak. Perhaps Master Bates's loyalty kept me on my mettle.

The dear soul and I bade one another farewell, she not without tears. The coach bore her away; and I walked back through the crowded streets with my spirits down in my boots, and my fists thrust deep into the pockets of my small-clothes.

In this dejected mood I reached the Market Strand just as Captain Coffin came up it from the Plume of Feathers public-house, cursing and striking out with his stick at a mob of small boys.

CHAPTER III.

A STREET FIGHT, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

He emerged upon the street which crosses the head of Market Strand, and, dropping his arms, stood for a moment as if in doubt of his bearings. He was flagrantly drunk, but not aggressively. He reminded me of a purblind owl that, blundering into daylight, is set upon and mobbed by a crowd of small birds.

Page 8

The 'longshoremen and loafers grinned and winked at one another, but forbore to interfere. Plainly the spectacle was a familiar one.

The man was not altogether repulsive; pitiable, rather; a small, lean fellow, with a grey-white face drawn into wrinkles about the jaw, and eyes that wandered timidly. He wore a suit of good sea-cloth—soiled, indeed, but neither ragged nor threadbare—and a blue and yellow spotted neckerchief, the bow of which had worked around towards his right ear. His hat, perched a-cock over his left eye, had made acquaintance with the tavern sawdust. Next to his drunkenness, perhaps, the most remarkable thing about him was his stick—of ebony, very curiously carved in rings from knob to ferrule, where it ended in an iron spike; an ugly weapon, of which his tormentors stood in dread, and small blame to them.

While he stood hesitating, they swarmed close and began to bay him afresh.

“Captain Coffin, Captain Coffin!” “Who killed the Portugee?” “Who hid the treasure and got so drunk he couldn’t find it?” “Where’s your ship, Cap’n Danny?” These were some of the taunts flung; and as the urchins danced about him, yelling them, the passion blazed up again in his red-rimmed eyes.

Amongst the crowd capered Ted Bates. “Hallo, Brooks!” he shouted, and, catching at another boy’s elbow, pointed towards me. Beyond noting that the other boy had a bullet-shaped head with ears that stood out from it at something like right angles, I had time to take very little stock of him; for just then, us Captain Coffin turned about to smite, a stone came flying and struck him smartly on the funny-bone. His hand opened with the pain of it, but the stick hung by a loop to his wrist, and, gripping it again, he charged among his tormentors, lashing out to right and left.

So savagely he charged that I looked for nothing short of murder; and just then, while I stood at gaze, a boy stepped up to me—the same that Ted Bates had plucked by the arm.

“Look here!” said he, frowning, with his legs a-straddle. “Doggy Bates tells me that you told him you could whack me with one hand behind you.”

I replied that I had told Doggy Bates nothing of the sort.

“That’s all right,” said he. “Then you take it back?”

He had the air of one sure of his logic, but his under lip—not to mention his ears—protruded in a way that struck me as offensive, and I replied—

“That depends.”

“My name’s Stokes,” said he, still in the same reasonable tone. “And you’ll have to take coward’s blow.”

“Oh, indeed!” said I.

“It’s the rule,” said he, and gave it me with a light, back-handed smack across the bridge of the nose; whereupon I hit him on the point of the chin, and, unconsciously imitating Captain Coffin’s method of charging a crowd, lowered my head and butted him violently in the stomach.

I make no doubt that my brain was tired and giddy with the day’s experiences, but to this moment I cannot understand why we two suddenly found ourselves the focus of interest in a crowd which had wasted none on Captain Coffin.

Page 9

But so it was. In less time than it takes to write, a ring surrounded us—a ring of men staring and offering bets. The lamp at the street-corner shone on their faces; and close under the light of it Master Stokes and I were hammering one another.

We were fighting by rule, too. Some one—I cannot say who—had taken up the affair, and was imposing the right ceremonial upon us. It may have been the cheerful, blue-jerseyed Irishman, to whose knee I returned at the end of each round to be freshened up around the face and neck with a dripping boat-sponge. He had an extraordinarily wide mouth, and it kept speaking encouragement and good advice to me. I feel sure he was a good fellow, but have never set eyes on him from that hour to this.

Bully Stokes and I must have fought a good many rounds, for towards the end we were both panting hard, and our hands hung on every blow. But I remember yet more vividly the strangeness of it all, and the uncanny sensation that the fight itself, the street-lamp, the crowd, and the dim houses around were unreal as a dream: that, and the unnatural hardness of my opponent's face, which seemed the one unmalleable part of him.

A dreadful thought possessed me that if he could only contrive to hit me with his face all would be over. My own was badly pounded; for we fought—or, at any rate, I fought—without the smallest science; it was blow for blow, plain give-and-take, from the start. But what distressed me was the extreme tenderness of my knuckles; and what chiefly irritated me was the behaviour of Doggy Bates, dancing about and screaming, “Go it, Stimcoes! Stimcoes for ever!” Five times the onlookers flung him out by the scruff of his neck; and five times he worked himself back, and screamed it between their legs.

In the end this enthusiasm proved the undoing of all his delight. Towards the end of an intolerably long round, finding that my arms began to hang like lead, I had rushed in and closed; and the two of us went to ground together. Then I lay panting, and my opponent under me—the pair of us too weary for the moment to strike a blow; and then, as breath came back, I was aware of a sudden hush in the din. A hand took me by the shirt-collar, dragged me to my feet, and swung me round, and I stared, blinking, into the face of Mr. Stimcoe.

“Dishgrashful!” said Mr. Stimcoe. He was accompanied by a constable, to whom he appealed for confirmation, pointing to my face. “Left immy charge only this evening, Perf’ly dishgrashful!”

“Boys will be boys, sir,” said the constable.

“M’ good fellow “—Mr. Stimcoe comprehended the crowd with an unsteady wave of his hand—“that don’t ’pply ’case of men. *Ne tu pu’ri tempsherish annosh*; tha’s Juvenal.”

“Then my advice is, sir—take the boy home and give him a wash.”

“He can’t,” came a taunting voice from the crowd. “Cos why? The company ’ve cut off his water.”

Page 10

Mr. Stimcoe gazed around in sorrow rather than in anger. He cleared his throat for a public speech; but was forestalled by the constable's dispersing the throng with a "Clear along, now, like good fellows!"

The wide-mouthed man helped me into my jacket, shook hands with me, and said I had no science, but the devil's own pluck-and-lights. Then he, too, faded away into the night; and I found myself alongside of Doggy Bates, marching up the street after Mr. Stimcoe, who declaimed, as he went, upon the vulgarity of street-fighting.

By-and-by it became apparent that in the soothing flow of his eloquence he had forgotten us; and Doggy Bates, who understood his preceptor's habits to a hair, checked me with a knowing squeeze of the arm, and began, of set purpose, to lag in his steps. Mr. Stimcoe strode on, still audibly denouncing and exhorting.

"It was all my fault!" Master Bates pulled up and studied my mauled face by the light of a street-lamp. "The beggar heard me shouting his own name, silly fool that I was!"

I begged him not to be distressed on my account.

"What's the use of half a fight?" he groaned again. "My word, though, won't Stimcoe catch it from the missus! She sent him out to get change for your aunt's notes—'fees payable in advance.' I know the game—to pay off the bailey; and he's been soaking in a public-house ever since. Hallo!"

We turned together at the sound of footsteps approaching after us up the street. They broke into a run, then appeared to falter; and, peering into the dark interval between us and the next lamp, I discerned Captain Coffin. He had come to a halt, and stood there mysteriously beckoning.

"You—I want you!" he called huskily. "Not the other boy! You!"

I obeyed, having a reputation to keep up in the eyes of Doggy Bates; but my courage was oozing as I walked towards the old man, and I came to a sudden stop about five yards from him.

"Closer!" he beckoned. "Good boy, don't be afraid. What's your name, good boy?"

"Harry Brooks, sir."

"Call me 'sir,' do you? Well, and you're right. I could ride in my coach-and-six if I chose; and some day you may see it. How would you like to ride in your coach-and-six, Harry Brooks?"

"I should like it finely, sir," said I, humouring him.



“Yes, yes, I’ll wager you would. Well, now—come closer. Mum’s the word, eh? I like you, Harry Brooks; and the boys in this town “—he broke off and cursed horribly—“they’re not fit to carry slops to a bear, not one of ’em. But you’re different. And, see here: any time you’re in trouble, just pay a call on me. Understand? Mind you, I make no promises.” Here, to my exceeding fright, he reached out a hand, and, clutching me by the arm, drew me close, so that his breath poured hot on my ear, and I sickened at its reek of brandy. “It’s *money*, boy—*money*, I tell you!”

Page 11

He dropped my arm, and, falling back a pace, looked nervously about him.

“Between you and me and the gatepost, eh?” he asked.

His hand went down and tapped his pocket sily, and with that he turned and shuffled away down the street. I stared after him into the foggy darkness, listening to the tap of his stick upon the cobbles.

CHAPTER IV.

CAPTAIN COFFIN STUDIES NAVIGATION.

Events soon to be narrated made my sojourn in tutelage of Mr. Stimcoe a brief one, and I will pass it lightly over.

The school consisted of four boarders and six backward sons of gentlemen resident in the town, and assembled daily in a large outhouse furnished with desks of a peculiar pattern, known to us as “scobs.” Mr. Stimcoe, who had received his education as a “querister” at Winchester (and afterwards as a “servitor” at Pembroke College, Oxford), habitually employed and taught us to employ the esoteric slang—or “notions,” as he called it—of that great public school; so that in “preces,” “morning lines,” “book-chambers,” and what-not we had the names if not the things, and a vague and quite illusory sense of high connection, on the strength of which, and of our freedom from what Mrs. Stimcoe called “the commercial taint,” we made bold to despise the more prosperous Rogerses up the hill.

Upon commerce in the concrete—that is to say, upon the butchers, bakers, and other honest tradesmen of Falmouth—Mrs. Stimcoe waged a predatory war, and waged it without quarter. She had a genius for opening accounts, and something more than genius for keeping her creditors at bay. She never wheedled nor begged them for time; she never compromised nor parleyed, nor condescended to yield an inch to their claims for decent human treatment. She relied simply upon browbeating and the efficacy of the straight-spoken lie. A more dauntless, unblushing, majestic liar never stood up in petticoats.

She was a byword in Falmouth; yet, strange to say, her victims kept a sneaking fondness for her, a soft spot in their hearts; while as sporting onlookers we boys took something like a fearful pride in the Warrior, as we called her. It was not in her nature to encourage any such weakness, or to use it. She would not have thanked us for it. But we had this amount of excuse: that she fed us liberally when she could browbeat the butcher; and if at times we went short, she shared our privation. Also, there must have been some good in the woman, to stand so unflinchingly by Stimcoe. Stimcoe’s books had gone into storage at the pawnbroker’s; but in his bare “study,” where he heard our

construing of Caesar and Homer, stood a screen, and behind it an eighteen-gallon cask. A green baize tablecloth covered the cask from sight, and partially muffled the sound of its running tap when Stimcoe withdrew behind the screen, to consult (as he put it) his lexicon.

Page 12

His one assistant, who figured in the prospectus as “Teacher of English, the Mathematics, and Navigation,” was a retired packet-captain, Branscome by name, but known among us as Captain Gamey, by reason of an injured leg. He had taken the hurt—a splintered hip-bone—while fighting his ship against a French privateer off Guadeloupe, and it had retired him from the service of my lords the Postmaster-General upon a very small pension, and with a sword of honour subscribed for by the merchants of the City of London, whose mails he had gallantly saved. These resources being barely sufficient to maintain him, still less to permit his helping a widowed sister whom he had partly maintained during his days of service, he eked them out by school mastering; and a dreadful trade he must have found it. In person he was slight and wiry, of a clear, ruddy complexion, with grey hair, and a grave simplicity of manner. He wore a tightly buttoned, blue uniform coat, threadbare and frayed, but scrupulously brushed, noticeably clean linen, and white duck trousers in all weathers. He walked with the support of a malacca cane, dragging his wounded leg after him; and had a trick of talking to himself as he went.

I need scarcely say that we mimicked him; but in school he kept far better discipline than Stimcoe, for, with all his oddity, we knew him to be a brave man. Such mathematics as we needed he taught capably enough and very patiently. The “navigation,” so far as we were concerned, was a mere flourish of the prospectus; and his qualifications as a teacher of English began and ended with an enthusiasm for Dr. Johnson’s “Rasselas.”

Such was Captain Branscome: and, such as he was, he kept the school running on days when Stimcoe was merely drunk and incapable. He ever treated Mrs. Stimcoe with the finest courtesy, and, alone among her creditors, was rewarded with that lady’s respect.

I knew, to be sure—we all knew—that she must be in arrears with Captain Branscome’s pay; but we were unprepared for the morning when, on the stroke of the church clock—our Greenwich time—he walked up to the door, resolutely handed Mrs. Stimcoe a letter, and as resolutely walked away again. Stimcoe had been maudlin drunk for a week and could not appear. His wife heroically stepped into the breach, and gave us (as a geography lesson) some account of her uncle the admiral and his career—“distinguished, but wandering,” as she summarized it.

I remember little of this lesson save that it dispensed—wisely, no doubt—with the use of the terrestrial globe; that it included a description of the admiral’s country seat in Roscommon, and an account of a ball given by him to celebrate Mrs. Stimcoe’s arrival at a marriageable age, with a list of the notabilities assembled; and that it ended in her rapping Doggy Bates over the head with a ruler, for biting his nails. From that moment anarchy reigned.

It reigned for a week. I have wondered since how our six day-boys managed to refrain from carrying home a tale which must have brought their parents down upon us *en masse*. Great is schoolboy honour— great, and more than a trifle quaint. In any case, the parents must have been singularly unobservant or singularly slow to reason upon what they observed; for we sent their backward sons home to them each night in a mask of ink.

Page 13

Saturday came, and brought the usual half-holiday. We boarders celebrated it by a raid upon the back yard of Rogerses—Bully Stokes being temporarily incapacitated by chicken-pox—and possessed ourselves, after a gallant fight, of Rogerses' football. Superior numbers drove us back to our own door, where—at the invocation of all the householders along Delamere Terrace—the constable intervened; but we retained the spoil.

At the shut of dusk, as we kicked the football in triumph about our own back yard, Mrs. Stimcoe sought me out with a letter to be conveyed to Captain Branscome. I took it and ran.

The lamplighter, going his rounds, met me at the corner of Killigrew Street and directed me to the alley in which the captain's lodgings lay. The alley was dark, but a little within the entrance my eyes caught the glimmer of a highly polished brass door-knocker, and upon this I rapped at a venture.

Captain Branscome opened to me. The house had no passage. Its front door opened directly upon a whitewashed room, with a round table in the centre, covered with charts. On the table, too, stood a lamp, the light of which dazzled me for a moment. On the walls hung the captain's sword of honour (above the mantelpiece), a couple of bookshelves, well stored, and a panel with a ship upon it—a brig in full sail—carved in high relief and painted. My eyes, however, were not for these, but for a man who sat at the table, poring over the charts, and lifted his head nervously to blink at me. It was Captain Coffin.

While I stared at him Captain Branscome took the letter from me. It contained some pieces of silver, as I knew from its weight and the feel of it—five shillings, as I judged, or perhaps seven-and-sixpence. As his hand weighed it I saw a sudden relief on his face, and realized how grey and pinched it had been when he opened the door to me.

He peised the envelope in his hand for a moment, then broke the seal very deliberately, took out the coins, and, as if weighing them in his palm, turned back to the table and laid Mrs. Stimcoe's letter close under the lamp while he searched for his gold-rimmed spectacles. (There was a tradition at Stimcoe's, by the way, that the London merchants, finding a small surplus of subscriptions in hand after purchasing the sword of honour, had presented him with these spectacles as a make-weight, and that he valued them no less.)

"Brooks," said he, laying down the letter and pushing the spectacles high on his forehead while he gazed at me, "I want to ask you a question in confidence. Had Mrs. Stimcoe any difficulty in finding this money?"



“Well, sir,” said I, “I oughtn’t perhaps to know it, but she pawned Stim—Mr. Stimcoe’s Cicero this morning, the six volumes with a shield on the covers, that he got as a prize at Oxford.”

“Good Lord!” said Captain Branscome, slowly. As if in absence of mind, he stepped to a side-cupboard and looked within. It was bare but for a plate and an apple. He took up the apple, and was about to offer it to me, but set it back slowly on the plate, and locked the cupboard again. “Good Lord!” he repeated quietly, and, linking his hands under his coat-tails, strode twice backwards and forwards across the room.

Page 14

Captain Coffin looked up from his charts and stared at him, and I, too, stared, waiting in the semi-darkness beyond the lamp's circle.

"Good Lord!" said Captain Branscome for the third time. "And it's Saturday, too! You'll excuse me a moment."

With that he caught up the letter, and made a dart up the wooden staircase, which led straight from a corner of the room through a square hole in the ceiling to his upper chamber.

"Money again!" said Captain Coffin, turning his eyes upon me and blinking. "Nothing like money!"

He picked up a pair of compasses, spread them out on the paper of figures before him, and looked up again with a sly, silly smile.

"You won't guess what I'm doing?" he challenged.

"No."

"I'm studyin' navigation. Cap'n Branscome's larnin' it to me. Some people has luck an' some has heads; an' with a head on my shoulders same as I had at your age, I'd be Prime Minister an' Lord Mayor of Lunnon rolled into one, by crum!" He reached across for Captain Branscome's sextant, and held it between his shaking hands. "*He* can do it; hundreds o' men—thick-headed men in the ord'nary way—can do it; take a vessel out o' Falmouth here, as you might say, and hold her 'crost the Atlantic, as you might put it; whip her along for thirty days, we'll say; an' then, 'To-morrow, if the wind holds, an' about six in the mornin',' they'll say, 'there'll be an island with a two-three palm-trees on a hill an' a spit o' sand bearing nor'-by-west. Bring 'em in line,' they'll say, 'an' then you may fetch my shaving-water'—and all the while no more'n ordinary men, same as you and me. Whereby I allow it must come in time, though my head don't seem to get no grip on it."

Captain Coffin stared for a moment at a sheet of paper on which he had been scribbling figures, and passed it over to me, with a sigh.

"There! What d'you make of it?"

At a glance I saw that nothing could be made of it. The figures crossed one another, and ran askew; here and there they trailed off into mere illegibility. In the left-hand bottom corner I saw a 3 set under a 10, and beneath it the result—17—underlined, which, as a sum, left much to be desired, whether you took it in addition, subtraction, multiplication, or division.

"And yet," he went on plaintively, "there's hundreds can do it—even ord'nary men."



He reached out a hand and gripped me by the elbow; and again his brandy-laden breath sickened me as he drew me close.

“S’pose, now, *you* was to do this for me? You *could*, you know. And there’s money in it —lashin’s o’ money!”

He winked at me, glanced around the room, and with an indescribable air of slyness dived a hand into his breast-pocket.

Page 15

"It's here," he nodded, drawing out a small parcel wrapped about in what at first glance appeared to me an oilskin bag, tied about the neck with a tarry string. "Here. And enough to set you an' me up for life." His fingers fumbled with the string for two or three seconds, but presently faltered. "You come to me to-morrow," he went on, with another mysterious wink, "and I'll show you something. Up the hill, past Market Strand, till you come to a signboard, 'G. Goodfellow. Funerals Furnished'—first turning to the right down the court, and knock three times."

Here he whipped the parcel back into his pocket, picked up his compasses, and made transparent pretence to be occupied in measuring distances as Captain Branscome came down the stairs from the garret.

Captain Branscome gave no sign of observing his confusion, but signalled to me to step outside with him into the alley, where he pressed an envelope into my hand. By the weight of it, I knew on the instant that he was returning Mrs. Stimcoe's money,

"And tell her," said he, "that I will come on Monday morning at nine o'clock as usual."

"Yes, sir."

I turned to go. I could not see his face in the gloom of the alley, but I had caught one glimpse of it by the lamplight within, and knew what had detained him upstairs. Honest man, he was starving, and had been praying up there to be delivered from temptation.

"Brooks," said he, as I turned, "they tell me your father was once a major in the Army. Is he, by chance, the same Major Brooks—Major James Brooks, of the King's Own—I had the honour to bring home in the *Londonderry*, after Corunna?"

"That must have been my father, sir."

"A good man and a brave one. I am glad to hear he is recovered."

I told him in a word or two of my father's health and of his blindness.

"And he lives not far from here?" I remembered afterwards that his voice shook upon the question.

I described Minden Cottage and its position on the road towards Plymouth. He cut me short hurriedly, and remarked, with a nervous laugh, that he must be getting back to his pupil. Whereat I, too, laughed.

"Do you think it wrong of me, boy?" he asked abruptly.

"Wrong, sir?"



“He insists upon coming; and he pays me. He will never learn anything. By the way, Brooks, I have been inhospitable. An apple, for instance?”

I declared untruthfully that I never ate apples; and perhaps the lie was pardonable, since by it I escaped eating Captain Branscome’s Sunday dinner.

CHAPTER V.

THE WHALEBOAT.

A barber’s pole protruded beside the ope leading to Captain Coffin’s lodgings. It was painted in spirals of scarlet and blue, and at the end of it a cage containing a grey parrot dangled over the footway.

Page 16

“Drunk again!” screamed the parrot, as I hesitated before the entrance, for the directing-marks just here were so numerous as to be perplexing. To the right of the alley the barber had affixed his signboard, close above the base of his pole; to the left a flanking slopshop dangled a row of cast-off suits, while immediately overhead was nailed a board painted over with ornate flourishes and the legend—

“G. Goodfellow. Carpenter and House-Decorator, &c.
Repairs Neatly Executed. Instruction in the Violin.
Funerals at the Shortest Notice. Shipping Supplied.”

“Drunk again!” repeated the parrot. “Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me, kiss me! Oh, you nasty image! Kiss me, kiss me! Who killed the Portugee?”

“He don’t mean you,” explained the barber, reassuringly, emerging at that moment from his shop with a pannikin of water for the parrot’s cage, which he lowered very deftly by means of a halliard reeved through a block at the end of the pole. “He means old Coffin. Nice bird, hey?”

He slipped a hand through the cage-door, and caressed him, scratching his head.

“If you please, sir,” said I, “it’s Captain Coffin I’m looking for.”

“Drunk again!” screamed the bird. “Damn my giblets, drunk again!”

“He don’t like Coffin, and that’s a fact,” said the barber.

“He don’t appear to, sir,” I agreed.

“You’ll find the old fellow down the yard. That is, if you really want him.” The barber eyed me doubtfully. “He’s sober enough, just now; been swearin off liquor for a week. I dare say you know his temper’s uncertain at such times.”

I did not know it, but was too far committed to retreat.

“Well, you’ll find him down the yard—green door to the right, with the brass knocker. He’s out at the back, hammering at his ship, but he’ll hear you fast enough: he’s wonderful quick of hearing.”

A man, even though he possessed a solid brass knocker, had need to be quick of hearing in that alley. Without, street-hawkers were bawling and carts rattling on the cobbled thoroughfare; from the entrance the parrot vociferated after me as I went down the passage beneath an open window whence an invisible violin repeated the opening phrase of “Come, cheer up, my lads!” plaintively and persistently; while from the far end, somewhere between it and the harbour side, an irregular hammering punctuated the music.



I knocked, and the hammering ceased. The rest of the din ceased not, nor abated. In about a minute the green door opened—a cautious inch or two at first, then wide enough to reveal Captain Coffin. He wore a dirty white jumper over his upper garments, and held a formidable mallet. I observed that either his face was unnaturally white or the rims of his eyes were unnaturally red, and that sawdust besprinkled his hair and collar. I recalled the tavern sawdust which had bepowdered his hat on the night of our first meeting, and jumped to a wrong conclusion.

Page 17

"Eh? It's Brooks—the boy Brooks! Glad to see you, Brooks! Come inside."

"Thank you, sir," said I, feeling a strong impulse to bolt as he shook me by the hand, so hot was his and so dry, and so feverishly it gripped me.

"You're sure no one tracked ye here?" he asked, as he closed the door behind us.

"There was a barber, sir, at the head of the passage. I stopped to ask him the way."

"*He's* all right, or would be but for that cursed bird of his. How a man can keep such a bird—" Captain Coffin broke off. "I had a two-three nails in my mouth when you knocked. Nearly made me swallow 'em, you did. They was copper nails, too."

I suppose I must have stared at this, for he paused and peered at me, drawing me over to the window, through which—so thickly grimed it was—a very little light dribbled from the courtyard into the room. Yet the room itself was clean, almost spick and span, with a seaman-like tidiness in all its arrangements—a small room, crowded with foreign odds-and-ends, among which I remember a walking-stick even more singular than the one Captain Coffin carried on his walks abroad (it was white in colour, with lines of small grey indentations, and he afterwards told me it was a shark's backbone); a corner-cupboard, too, painted over with green-and-yellow tulips.

"Copper nails, I tell you. Nothing but the best'll do for your friend Coffin." He leaned back, still eyeing me, and tapped me twice on the chest. "You heard me say that? 'Your friend' was my words."

"Thank you, sir."

"But you made me jump, you did—me being that way given when off the liquor." He hesitated a moment, with a glance over his shoulder at the tulip-painted cupboard. "Brooks," he went on earnestly, "you and me being met on a matter of business, and the same needin' steadiness—head and hand, my boy, if ever business did—what d'ye say to a tot of rum apiece?"

Without waiting for my answer, he hobbled off to the cupboard, and had set two glasses on the table and brimmed them with neat spirit before I had finished protesting. The bottle-neck trembled on the rims of the glasses and struck out a sort of chime as he paused.

"You won't?" he asked, gulping down his own portion; and the liquor must have been potent, for it brought a sudden water to his eyes. "Well, so be it—if you've kept off it at your age. But at mine"—he drank off the second glassful and wiped his mouth—"I've had experiences, Brooks. When you've heard 'em, you wouldn't be surprised, not if it took a dozen to steady me."

He filled again, and came close to me, holding the glass, yet so tremulously that the rum spilled over his fingers.

Page 18

“Ingots, lad—golden ingots! Bars and wedges of solid gold! Gems, too, and cathederal plate, with crucifixions and priests’ vestments stiff with pearls and rubies as if they was frozen. I’ve seen ‘em lyin’ tossed in a heap like mullet in a ground-net. Ay, and blazin’ on the beach, with the gulls screamin’ over ‘em and flappin’, and the sea all around. I seen it with these eyes, boy” He stood back and shivered. “And behind o’ that, the Death! But it comes equal to all, the Death. Not if a man had learned every trick the devil can teach could he lay his course clear o’ that. Could he, now?”

His words, his uncouth gestures, which were almost spasms, and the changes in his face—from cupidity to terror, and from terror again to a kind of wistful hope—fairly frightened me, and I stammered stupidly that death was the common lot, and there couldn’t be a doubt of it; that or something of the sort. But what I said does not matter. He was not listening, and before I had done he drained and set down the glass and gripped my arm again.

“I seen all that—ay, an’ felt it!” He drew away and stretched out both hands, crooking his fingers like talons. “Ay, an’ I seen *him!*”

“Him?” I echoed. “But you were talking of Death, sir.”

“You may call him that. There’s men lyin’ around in the sand— Did ever you hear, boy, of a poison that kills a man and keeps him fresh as paint?”

“No, sir.”

He nodded. “No, I reckon you never did. Fresh as paint it keeps ‘em, and white as a figure-head. The first heap as ever I dug, believin’ it to be the treasure—my reckoning was out by a foot or two—I came on one o’ them. Three foot beneath the sand I came on him, an’ the gulls sheevoing all the while over my head. *They* knew. And the sea and the dreadful loneliness around us all the while. There was three of us, Brooks—I mention no names, you understand—three of us, and *him*. Three to one. Yet he got the better of us all—as he got the better of the first lot, and *they* must ha’ been a dozen. Four of them we uncovered afore we struck the edge of the treasure—uncovered ‘em and covered ‘em up again pretty quick, I can tell you. Fresh as paint they were, in a manner o’ speaking, just as though they’d died yesterday; whereas by Bill’s account they must ha’ lain there for more’n a year. And the faces on ‘em white and shinin’—”

Here Captain Coffin shivered, and, glancing about him, poured out another go of rum.

“You wouldn’t blame me for wantin’ it, Brooks—not if you’d seen ‘em. That was on the Keys, as they’re called—half a dozen banks to no’tard of the island, and maybe from half a mile to three-quarters off the shore, which shoals thereabout—sand, all the lot of ‘em, and nothin’ but sand; sand and sea-birds, and—what I told you. But the bulk lies in

the island itself, in two caches; and where the bigger cache lies *he* don't know, and nobody knows but only Dan Coffin."

Page 19

Captain Coffin winked, touched his breast, and wagged his forefinger at me impressively.

“That makes twice,” he went on. “Twice that devil has got the better of every one. But the third time’s lucky, they say. He may be dead afore this; he’ll be getting an oldish man, anyway, and life on that cursed island can’t be good for his health. We won’t go in a crowd this time, neither; not a dozen, nor yet four of us, but only you an’ me, Brooks. It’s the safer way—the only safe way—an’ there’ll be the fatter sharin’s. Now you know—hey?—why Branscome’s givin’ me lessons in navigation.”

He chuckled, and was moving off mysteriously to a back doorway behind the dresser, but halted and came back to the table beside which I stood, making no motion to follow him.

“Look ye here, Brooks,” said he. “If there’s anything you don’t get the hang of—anything that takes ye aback, so to speak, in what I’m tellin’ you—you just hitch on an’ trust to old Dan Coffin; to old Dan, as’ll do for you more than ever your godfathers an’ godmothers did at your baptism. You’ll pick up a full breeze as you go on. Man, the treasure’s there! Man, I’ve handled it, or enough of it to keep you in a coach-an’-six, with nothing to do but loll on cushions for the rest o’ your days, an’ pick your teeth at the crowd. And look ye here.” He waved a hand around the room. “I’m old Danny Coffin, ain’t I? poor old drunken Danny Coffin, eh? Yet cast an eye about ye. Nice fittin’s, ben’t they? Hitch down my coat off the peg there; feel the cloth of it; take it between finger and thumb. Ay, I don’t live upon air, nor keep house an’ fixtures upon nothin’ at all. There—if you want more proof!” He dived a hand into his trouser-pocket, and held out a golden coin under my nose. “There! that very dollar came from the island, and I’m offerin’ you the fellows to it by the thousand. Why? says you. Because, says I, you’re a good lad, and I’ve took a fancy to see you in Parlyment. That’s why. An’ it’s no return I’m askin’ you, but just to believe!”

He made for the back door again, and opened it, letting in the sunlight; but the sunlight fell in two slanting rays, one on either side of a dark object which all but filled the entrance, blocking out my view of the back court beyond. It was the stern of a tall boat.

The boat, in fact, filled the small back court, leaving an alley-way scarcely more than two feet wide along either party-wall. She rested on the stocks, about three-parts finished, in shape very like a whaleboat, and in measurement—so Captain Coffin informed me, with a proprietary wave of the hand—some twenty-nix feet over all, with a beam of nine feet six inches amidships. And even to a boy’s eye she showed herself a pretty model, though (as I say) unfinished, with a foot and more of her ribs standing up bare and awaiting the top strakes.

Page 20

"Designed her myself, Brooks. Eh, but your friend Dan'l Coffin has an eye for the shape of a boat, though no hand at pencilling, nor what you might call the cabinet-making part of the job. There's a young carpenter lives up the court here—a cleverish fellow. I got him to help me over the niceties, you understand; but on my lines, lad. Climb up and cast your eye over the well I've put in her. That's for the treasure; and there'll be side-lockers round the stern-sheets, and a locker forward big enough to hold a man. The fellow don't guess their meanin', an' I don't let him guess. He thinks they're for air-compartments, to keep her buoyant; says she'll need more ballast than I've allowed her, and wants to know what sense there is in buildin' a boat so floatey. *We'll* ballast her, Brooks; all in good time. *We'll* ship her aboard the Kingston packet, bein' of a size that she'll carry comfortable as deck-cargo; and soon as we get to Kingstown we'll—"

"Avast there, cap'n!" interrupted a cheerful voice; and I glanced up, to see a sandy-haired youth with an extremely good-natured face nodding at us across the coping of the party-wall. "Avast there! Busy with visitors, eh? No? Well, I've been thinkin' it over, and I'll take sixpence an hour."

"I don't give a ha'penny over fippence," answered Captain Coffin, patently taken aback by the interruption.

"Fivepence, then, as a pro-temporary accommodation," said the youth, and, throwing a leg over the wall, heaved himself over and into the back yard. "But it's taking advantage of me; and you know that if I weren't in love and in a hurry it wouldn't happen."

"You can take fippence, or go to the devil!" said Captain Coffin. "By the way, Brooks, this is my assistant, Mr. George Goodfellow."

CHAPTER VI.

MY FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE CHART.

"Good day," said Mr. George Goodfellow, nodding affably. "I hope I see you well."

"Pretty well, thank you, sir," I answered.

"And where might you come from, makin' so bold?"

I told him that I was a boarder at Mr. Stimcoe's.

"Then," said Mr. Goodfellow, taking off his coat and extracting a pencil and a two-foot rule from a pocket at the back of his small-clothes, "I'm sorry for you. What a female!" He chose out a long and flexible plank from a stack laid lengthwise in the alley-way along the base of the wall, lifted it, set it on three trestles, and began to measure and mark it off. "She's calculated to destroy one's belief in human nature, that's what she

is! Fairly knocks the guilt off. Sometimes I can't hardly realize that she and Martha belong to the same sex. Martha is my young woman."

"Yes, sir?"

"Yes. At present she's living in Plymouth, assistant in a ham-and-beef shop, as you turn down to the Barbican. That's her conscientiousness, instead of sitting at home and living on her parents. Don't tell me that women—by which I mean some women—ain't the equals of men.

Page 21

"Because," continued Mr. Goodfellow, after a pause, "I know better. Ever been to Plymouth?"

"Yes, sir."

"Live there?"

"No, sir."

He seemed to be disappointed.

"You go past the bottom of Treville Street, and there the shop is, slap in front of you. You can't miss it, because it has a plaster-of-Paris cow in the window, and the proprietor's called Mudge. I go to Plymouth every week on purpose to see her."

"By coach, sir?" I asked, suddenly interested, and eager to compare notes with him on the Royal Mail and its rivals, the Self-Defence and Highflyer.

"Coach? Not a bit of it. Shank's mare, my boy, every step of the way; and Martha's worth it. That's the best of bein' in love; it makes you want to do things. By the way," he asked "you ain't thinkin' to learn the violin, by any chance?"

"No, sir."

"No," he said reflectively. "You wouldn't—not at Stimcoe's. Not, mind you, that I believe in coddling. Nobody ever coddled Nelson, and yet what happened?" He shut one eye, put his pencil to it for an imaginary telescope, and took a nautical survey of the back premises.

"That rain-shute's out of order," he said, addressing Captain Coffin. "Give me a shilling to put it right for you, and you'll save yourself a lot of trouble."

"That's the landlord's affair," answered Captain Coffin, "and I'm not paying you fippence an' hour to talk.

"But, sir," I put in, "if you walk to Plymouth you must pass the house where I live—a low-roofed house about three miles this side of St. Germans village, with a thatch on it, and windows opening right on the road, and 'Minden Cottage' painted over the door."

"Know it? Bless my soul, to be sure I know it! Why, the last time but one I passed that way, taking note that one of the window-hinges was out of gear, I knocked and asked leave to repair it. A lady with side-curles opened the door, and after the job was done took me into the parlour an' gave me a jugful of cider over and above the sixpence charged. I believe she'd have made it a shillin', too, only when I told her she lived in a very pretty house, and asked if she owned it or rented it, she turned very stiff in her

manner. Touchy as tinder she was; and if that comes of being a lady, I'm glad my Martha's more sociable."

"That was Plinny—Miss Plinlimmon, I mean. You didn't catch sight of my father—Major Brooks?"

"No, I didn't. But I stopped to pass the time o' day with the landlord of the Seven Stars Inn, a mile along the road, and there I heard about 'en. So you're Major Brooks's son? Well, then, by all accounts you've got a thunderin' good father. Old English gentleman, straight is a ramrod—pays his way, fears God and honours the King—such was the landlord's words; and he told me the cottage, as you call it, was rented at twenty-five pounds a year, with a walled garden an' a paddock thrown in, which I call dirt cheap."

Page 22

"I don't see that it's any business of yours what my father pays for his house!" said I, my flush of pleasure changing to one of annoyance.

I glanced round for Captain Coffin's support, but he had walked indoors, no doubt in despair of Mr. Goodfellow's loquacity.

"No?" queried Mr. Goodfellow. "No, I dare say not; but you just wait till you fall in love. It's a most curious feelin'. First of all it makes you want to pull off your coat and turn a hand to anything, from breakin' stones to playing the fiddle—it don't matter what, so long as you sweat an' feel you're earnin' money. Why, just take a look at my business card!" He stepped to his coat, pulled one from his pocket, and glanced over it proudly: 'George Goodfellow, Carpenter and Decorater—Cabinet Making in all its Branches—Repairs neatly executed—Funerals and Shipping supplied—Practical Valuer, and for Probate—Fire Office claims prepared and adjusted—Good Berths booked on all the Packets, and guaranteed by personal inspection—Boats built and designed—Instruction in the Violin—Old instruments cleaned and repaired, or taken in exchange—Rowboat for hire.' "There, put it in your pocket and take it away with you. I've plenty more in my desk."

"That's what it feels like, bein' in love," continued Mr. Goodfellow. "And, next thing, it makes you take a termenjus interest in houses—houses an' furnicher an' the price o' things—right down to butter, as you might say. I never see a house, now—leastways, a house that takes my fancy—but I want to be measuring it an' planning out the furnicher, an' the rent, an' where to stow the firewood, an' sitting down cosy in it along with Martha—in the mind's eyes, as you may say—one on each side o' the fire, an' making two ends meet. I pity any man that ends a bachelor." He glanced towards the house. "By the way, how do you get along with Coffin?"

"He—he seems very kind."

"Tis'n his way with boys as a rule." Mr. Goodfellow tapped his forehead with the end of his two-foot rule. "Upper story," he announced.

"You think so?"

"Sure of it. Cracked as a bell. Not," said Mr. Goodfellow, picking up a saw and making ready to cut the plank lengthwise to his measurements—"not that there's any harm in the man, until he gets foul of the drink. The tale is he gets his money out o' Government—a sort of pension. Was mixed up in the Spithead Mutiny, by one account, an' turned informer; but there's another tale he earned it by some hanky-panky over in Lisbon, when the Royal Family there packed up traps from the Brazils; and that's the story I favour, for (between you and me) I've seen Portugal money in his possession."

So, indeed, had I. But Captain Coffin himself cut short the talk at this point by appearing and announcing from the back doorstep that he had a treat for me if I would come inside.

Page 23

The treat consisted in a dish of tea—a luxury in those times, rarely afforded even at Minden Cottage—and a pot of guava-jelly, with Cornish cream and a loaf of white, wheaten bread. Such bread, I need scarcely say, with wheat at 140 shillings a quarter, or thereabouts, never graced the table of Copenhagen Academy. But the dulcet, peculiar taste of guava-jelly is what I associate in memory with that delectable meal; and to this day I cannot taste the flavour of guava but I find myself back in Captain Coffin's sitting-room, cutting a third slice from the wheaten loaf, with the corals and shells of mother-of-pearl winking at me from among the china on the dresser, and Captain Coffin seated opposite, with the silver rings in his ears, and his eyes very white in the dusk and distinct within their inflamed rims.

"Nothing like tea," he was saying—"nothing like tea to pull a man round from the drink and cock him back like a trigger."

His right hand was at his breast as he spoke. It came out swiftly, as upon a sudden impulse. His left hand closed upon it and partly covered it for a moment; then the two hands spread apart and disclosed an oilskin case.

"Brooks!" he whispered hoarsely. "Brooks, look at this!"

His fingers plucked at the oilskin wrapper, uncovered it, unfolded an inner parcel of parchment, and, trembling, spread it out on the table.

I leaned closer, and I saw a chart of the Island of Mortallone in the Bay of Honduras dated MDCCLXXVII. From the scale on the chart, the island was some eight to ten miles long in the north-south direction, and perhaps eight miles broad at the widest point. At the north end of the island, around a promontory called Gable Point, there were five small islands called The Keys. To the south was a wide inlet with a ship seemingly in the act of sailing towards it. The eastward edge of this inlet was labelled Cape Fea and just around from this, in an easterly direction was a small cove called Try-Again Inlet. In the sea to the west of the island was drawn a mythical sea-monster.

Twice, while I leaned across and stared at it, Captain Coffin's fingers all but closed over the parchment to hide it from me. The afternoon light was falling dim, and I stood up to walk around the edge of the table for a better look. As I pushed back my chair he clutched his treasure away, and hid it away again in the breast of his jumper, at the same moment falling back and passing a hand over his damp forehead.

"No, no, Brooks! You mustn't think—Only you took me sudden. But my promise I've passed, and my promise I'll stand by. Come to-morrow, lad."

Outside in the back yard I could hear Mr. Goodfellow, the slave of love, sawing for dear life and Martha.



CHAPTER VII.

ENTER THE RETURNED PRISONER.

Strange to say, although I paid six or eight visits after this to Captain Coffin, and by invitation, and watched his whaleboat building, and ate more of his delectable guava-jelly, I saw nothing more of the chart for several months.

Page 24

On each occasion he treated me kindly, and made no secret of his having chosen me for his favourite and particular friend; but somehow, without any words, he contrived to set up an understanding that further talk about the chart and the treasure must wait until the boat should be ready for launching. In truth, I believe, a kind of superstitious terror restricted him. He trusted me, yet was afraid of overt signs of trust. You may put it that during this while he was testing, watching me. I can only answer that I had no suspicion of being watched, and that in discussing the boat's fittings with me—her tanks, wells, and general storage capacity—he took it for granted that I followed and understood her purpose. If indeed he was testing me, in my innocence I took the best way to reassure him; for I honestly looked upon the whole business as moonshine, and made no doubt that he was cracked as a fiddle.

Christmas came, and the holidays with it. As Miss Plinlimmon sang—

“Welcome, Christmas! Welcome, Yule!
It brings the schoolboy home from school.
[N.B.—Vulgarly pronounced ‘schule’ in the West of England.]
Puddings and mistletoe and holly,
With other contrivances for banishing melancholy:
Boar’s head, for instance—of which I have never partaken,
But the name has associations denied to ordinary bacon.”

Dear soul, she had been waiting at the door—so Sally, the cook, informed me—for about an hour, listening for the coach, and greeted me with a tremulous joy between laughter and tears. Before leading me to my father, however, she warned me that I should find him changed; and changed he was, less perhaps in appearance than in the perceptible withdrawal of his mind from all earthly concerns. He seldom spoke, but sat all day immobile, with the lids of his blind eyes half lowered, so that it was hard to tell whether he brooded or merely dozed. On Christmas Day he excused himself from walking to church with us, and upon top of his excuse looked up with a sudden happy smile—as though his eyes really saw us—and quoted Waller’s famous lines:

“The soul’s dark cottage, battered and decay’d,
Lets in new light through chinks that time hath made. . . .”

To me it seemed rather that, as its home broke up, the soul withdrew little by little, and contracted itself like the pupil of an eye, to shrink to a pinpoint and vanish in the full admitted ray.

This our last Christmas at Minden Cottage was a quiet yet a singularly happy one. It was good to be at home, yet the end of the holidays and the return to Stimcoe’s cast no anticipatory gloom on my spirits. To tell the truth, I had a sneaking affection for Stimcoe’s; and to Miss Plinlimmon’s cross-examination upon its internal economies I opposed a careless manly assurance as hardly fraudulent as Mr. Stimcoe’s brazen

doorplate or his lady's front-window curtains. The careful mending of my linen, too—for Mrs. Stimcoe with all her faults was a needlewoman—helped to disarm suspicion. When we talked of my studies I sang the praises of Captain Branscome, and told of his past heroism and his sword of honour.

Page 25

“Branscome? Branscome, of the *Londonderry*?” said my father. “Ay, to be sure, I remember Branscome—a Godfearing fellow and a good seaman. You may take him back my compliments, Harry—my compliments and remembrances—and say that if Heaven permitted us to meet again in this world, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to crack a bottle with him.”

I duly reported this to Captain Branscome, and was taken aback by his reception of it. He began in a sudden flurry to ask a dozen questions concerning my father.

“He keeps good health, I trust? It would be an honour to call and chat with the Major. At what hour would he be most accessible to visitors?”

I stared, for in truth he seemed ready to take me at my word and start off at once, and at my patent surprise he grew yet more nervous and confused.

“I have kept a regard for your father, Brooks—a veneration, I might almost call it. Sailors and soldiers, if I may say it, are not apt to think too well of one another; but the Major from the first fulfilled my conception of all a soldier should be—a gentleman fearless and modest, a true Christian hero. Minden Cottage, you say? And fronting the road a little this side of St. Germans? Tell me, pray—and excuse the impertinence—what household does he keep?”

It is hard to write down Captain Branscome’s questions on paper, and divest them, as his gentle face and hesitating kindly manner divested them, of all offensiveness. I did not resent them at the time or consider them impertinent. But they were certainly close and minute, and I had reason before long to recall every detail of his catechism.

Captain Coffin, on the other hand, welcomed me back to Falmouth with a carelessness which disappointed if it did not nettle me. He fetched out the tea and guava-jelly, to be sure, but appeared to take no interest in my doings during the holidays, and was uncommunicative on his own. This seemed the stranger because he had important news to tell me. During my absence he and Mr. Goodfellow between them had finished the whaleboat.

The truth was—though I did not at once perceive it—that upon its completion the old man had begun to drink hard. Drink invariably made him morose, suspicious. His real goodwill to me had not changed, as I was to learn. He had paid a visit to Captain Branscome, and give him special instructions to teach me the art of navigation, the intricacies of which eluded his own fuddled brain. But for the present he could only talk of trivialities, and especially of the barber’s parrot, for which he had conceived a ferocious hate.

“I’ll wring his neck, I will!” he kept repeating. “I’ll wring his neck one o’ these days, blast me if I don’t!”

I took my leave that evening in no wise eager to repeat the visit; and, in fact, I repeated it but twice—and each time to find him in the same sullen humour—between then and May 11, the day when the *Wellingboro'* transport cast anchor in Falmouth roads with two hundred and fifty returned prisoners of war.

Page 26

She had sailed from Bordeaux on April 20, in company with five other transports bound for Plymouth, and her putting into Falmouth to repair her steering-gear came as a surprise to the town, which at once hung out all its bunting and prepared to welcome her poor passengers home to England with open arm. A sorry crew they looked, ragged, wild eyed, and emaciated, as the boats brought them ashore at the Market Stairs to the strains of the Falmouth Artillery Band. The homes of the most of them lay far away, but England was England; and a many wept and the crowd wept with them at sight of their tatters, for I doubt if they mustered a complete suit of good English cloth between them.

Stimcoe, I need scarcely say, had given us a whole holiday; and Stimcoe's and Rogerses met in amity for once, and cheered in the throng that carried the home-comers shoulder high to the Town Hall, where the Mayor had arrayed a public banquet. There were speeches at the banquet, and alcoholic liquors, both affecting in operation upon his Worship's guests. Poor fellows, they came to it after long abstinence, with stomachs sadly out of training; and the streets of Falmouth that evening were a panoramic commentary upon the danger of indiscriminating kindness.

Now at about five o'clock I happened to be standing at the edge of the Market Stairs, watching the efforts of a boat's crew to take a dozen of these inebriates on board for the transport, when I heard my name called, and turned to see Mr. George Goodfellow beckoning to me from the doorway of the Plume of Feathers public-house.

"It's Coffin," he explained. "The old fool's sitting in the taproom as drunk as an owl, and I was reckonin' that you an' me between us might get him home quiet before the house fills up an' mischief begins; for by the looks of it there'll be Newgate-let-loose in Falmouth streets to-night."

I answered that this was very thoughtful of him; and so it was, and, moreover, providential that he had dropped in at the Plume of Feathers for two-pennyworth of cider to celebrate the day.

We found Captain Coffin seated in a corner of the taproom settle, puffing at an empty pipe and staring at vacancy. "Drunk as an owl" described his condition to a nicety; for at a certain stage in his drinking all the world became mirk midnight to him, and he would grope his way home through the traffic at high noon in profound, pathetic belief that darkness and slumber wrapped the streets; on which occasions the dialogue between him and the barber's parrot might be counted on to touch high comedy. I knew this, and knew also that in the next stage he would recover his eyesight, and at the same time turn dangerously quarrelsome. If Mr. Goodfellow and I could start him home quietly, he would have reason to thank us to-morrow.

Page 27

We were bending over him to persuade him—at first, with small success, for he continued to stare and mutter as our voices coaxed without penetrating his muddled intelligence—when a party of 'longshoremen staggered into the taproom, escorting one of the returned prisoners, a thin, sandy-haired, foxy-looking man, with narrow eyes and a neck remarkable for its attenuation and the number and depth of its wrinkles. This neck showed above the greasy collar of a red infantry coat, from which the badges and buttons had long since vanished; and for the rest the fellow wore a pair of dirty white drill trousers of French cut, French shoes, and a round japanned hat; but, so far as a glance could discover, neither shirt nor underclothing. When the 'longshoremen called for drink he laughed with a kind of happy shiver, as though rubbing his body round the inside of his clothes, cast a quick glance at us in our dim corner, and declared for rum, adding that the Mayor of Falmouth was a well-meaning old swab, but his liquor wouldn't warm the vitals of a baby in clouts.

As he announced this I fancied that our persuasions began to have effect on Captain Coffin, for his eyes blinked as in a strong light, and he seemed to pull himself together with a shudder; but a moment later he relapsed again and sat staring.

"Hallo!" said one of the 'longshoremen. "Who's that you're a-coaxin' of, you two? Old Coffin, eh? Well, take the old shammick home, an' thank 'ee. We're tired of 'en here."

As I looked up to answer I saw the returned prisoner give a start, turn slowly about, and peer at us. He seemed to be badly scared, too, for an instant; for I heard a sudden, sharp click in his throat—

"E-e-eh? Coffin, is it? Danny Coffin? Oh, good Lord!"

He came towards our corner, still peering, and, as he peered, crouching to that he spread his palms on his knees.

"Coffin? Danny Coffin?" he repeated, in a voice that, as it lost its wondering quaver, grew tense and wicked and wheedling.

Captain Coffin's face twitched, and it seemed to me that his eyes, though rigid, expanded a little. But they stared into the stranger's face without seeing him.

The fellow crouched a bit lower, and still lower, as he drew close and thrust his face gradually within a yard of the old man's.

"Shipmate Danny—messmate Danny—tip us a stave! The old stave, Danny!—

"And amongst the Keys o' Mortallone!"

As his voice lifted to it in a hoarse melancholy minor (times and again since that moment the tune has put me in mind of sea-birds crying over a waste shore), I saw the

shiver run across Captain Coffin's face and neck, and with that his sight came back to him, and he bounced upright from the settle, with a horrible scream, his hands fencing, clawing at air.

The prisoner dropped back with a laugh. Mr. Goodfellow, at a choking sound, put out a hand to loosen Captain Coffin's neckcloth; but the old man beat him off.

Page 28

“Not you! Not you! Harry!”

He gripped me by the arm, and, ducking his head, fairly charged me past the 'longshoremen and out through the doorway into the street. As we gained it I heard the stranger in the taproom behind me break into a high, cackling laugh.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HUNTED AND THE HUNTER.

All the drunkenness had gone out of Captain Danny. Gripping my arm, he steered me rapidly through the knots of loafers, up Market Strand into the crowded Fore Street, across it and up the hill towards open country, taking the ascent with long strides which forced me now and again into a run. Twice or thrice I glanced up at his face, for I was scared, and badly scared. His mouth worked, and I observed small beads of sweat on his shaven upper lip; but he kept his eyes fastened straight ahead, and paid no heed to me.

At the head of the street the town melted off into a suburb of scattered houses, modest domiciles of twenty-five pounds or thirty pounds rentals, detached, each with its garden and narrow garden-door, for Falmouth in those days boasted few carriage-folk. He paused once hereabouts, in the roadway between two walls, and stood listening, while his right hand trembled on his stick; but presently gripped my arm again and hurried me forward, nor halted until we reached the summit, and the open country lay before us, with the Channel and its long horizon on our left. Here, in a cornfield on the very knap of the hill, and some two hundred yards back from the road, stood the shell of an old windmill, overlooking the sea— deserted, ruinous, without sails, a building many hundreds of years older than the oldest house in Falmouth, serving now but as a landmark for fishermen, and on Sundays a rendezvous for courting couples. At the stile leading into the cornfield, Captain Coffin released me, climbed over, hurried up the footpath to the windmill, and, having satisfied himself that the building was empty, motioned me to seat myself on the side where its long shadow pointed down across a bank of nettles, and beyond the edge of the green young barley sheeting the slope towards the harbour.

“Brooks,” he began—but his voice rattled like a dried pea in a pod, and he had to moisten his under-lip with his tongue before he could proceed—“Brooks, are you in any way a superstitious kind o’ boy?”

“That depends, sir,” said I, diplomatically.

“After all these years, too,” he groaned, “an’ agen’ all likelihood o’ natur’. But you saw him—hey? You heard what he said, an’ that cussed song, too? Sang it, he did; slapped

it out at the top of his voice in a public tavern. I tell you, Brooks—knowin' what *he* knows—a man must have all hell runnin' cold in him to sing them words aloud an' not care who heard."

"Why, he sang but a line of it," said I, "and that harmless enough, though dismal."

Page 29

"Is that so, lad—is that so?" Captain Danny put out a hand like a bird's claw and hooked me by the cuff. "Wasn' there nothing in it about Execution Dock; nothing about ripe medlars—'medlars a-rottin' on the tree'? No?"—for I shook my head. "Well, then, I could be sworn I heard him singin' them words for minutes, an' me sittin' all the while wi' the horrors on me afore I dared look in his damned face. An' you tell me he piped but a line of it?" His eyes searched mine anxiously. "Brooks," he went on, in a voice almost coaxing, "I'd give five hundred pound at this moment if you could look me in the face an' tell me the whole scare was nothing but fancy—that *he* wasn't there!"

His grasp relaxed as I shook my head again. Despair grew in his eyes, and he pulled back his hand.

"I'll put it to you another way," said he, after seeming to reflect for a while. "Suppose there was a couple o' men mixed up in an ugly job—by which I don't mean to say there was any real harm in the business; leastways not to start with; but, as it went on, these two men were forced to do something that brought them within reach o' the law. We'll put it that, when the thing was done, the one o' this pair felt it heavy upon his mind, but t'other didn' care no more than a brass button; an' the one that took it serious—as you might say—lost sight o' the other for years, an' meantime picked up with a little religion, an' made oath with hisself that all the profits o' the job (for there were profits) should come into innocent hands— You catch on to this?"

I nodded.

"Well, then"—he leant forward, his palm resting amid a bed of nettles. He did not appear to feel their sting, although, while he spoke, I saw the bark of his hand whiten slowly with blisters— "well, then, you can't go for to argue with me that the A'mighty would go for to strike the chap that repented by means o' the chap that didn'. Tisn' reasonable nor religious to think such a thing—is it now?"

"He might punish the one first," said I, judicially, "and keep the other—the wicked man—for a worse punishment in the end. A great deal," I added, "might depend on what sort of crime they'd committed. If 'twas a murder, now—"

"Murder?" He caught me up sharply, and his eyes turned from watching me, to throw a quick glance back along the footpath, then fastened themselves on the horizon. "Who's a-talkin' of any such thing?"

"I was putting a case, sir—putting it as bad as possible. 'Murder will out,' they say; but with smaller crimes it may be different."

"Murder?" He sprang up and began to pace to and fro. "How came that in your head, eh?" He threw me a furtive sidelong look, and halted before me mopping his forehead. "I'll tell you what, though: Murder there'll be if you don't help me give that devil the slip."

“But, sir, he never offered to follow you.”

Page 30

"Because he reckoned I couldn' run—or wouldn', as I've never run from him yet. But with you in the secret I must give him leg-bail, no matter what it costs me. And, see here, Brooks: you're clever for your age, an' I want your advice. In the first place, I daren't go home; that's where he'll be watchin' for me sooner or later. Next, our plans ain't laid for startin' straight off—here as we be—an' givin' him the go-by. Third an' last, I daren't go carryin' the secret about with me; he might happen on me any moment, an' I'm not in trainin'. The drink's done for me, boy, whereas *he*'ve been farin' hard an' livin' clean." Captain Coffin, with his hands deep in his pockets, stared down at the transport at anchor below, and bent his brows. "I can't turn it over to you, neither," he mused. "That might ha' done well enough if he hadn' seen you in my company; but now we can't trust to it."

He took another dozen paces forth and back, and halted before me again.

"Brooks," he said, "how about your father?"

"The very man, sir," I answered; "that is, if you would trust him."

"Cap'n Branscome tells me he's one in a thousand. I thought first o' Branscome, but there's folks as know about my goin' to him for navigation lessons; an' if Glass got hold o' that, 'twould be a hot scent."

"Glass?" I echoed.

"That's his d—d name, lad—Aaron Glass; though he've passed under others, and plenty of 'em, in his time. Well, now, if I can slip out o' Falmouth unbeknowns to him, an' win to your father—on the Plymouth road, I've heard you say and a little this side of St. Germans—"

"You might walk over to Penryn and pick up the night coach."

Captain Coffin shook his head as he turned out his pockets.

"One shilling, lad, an' two ha'pennies. It won't carry me. An' I daren' go home to refit; an' I daren' send *you*."

"I could take a message to Captain Branscome," I suggested; "an' he might fetch you the money, if you tell him where to look for it."

"That's an idea," decided Captain Coffin, after a moment's thought. He unbuttoned his waistcoat, dived a hand within the breast of his shirt, and pulled forth a key looped through with a tarry string. This string he severed with his pocket-knife. "Run you down to the cap'n's lodgings," said he, handing me the key, "an' tell him to go straight an' unlock the cupboard in the cornder—the one wi' the toolips painted over the door. You know it? Well, say that on the second shelf he'll find a small bagful o' money—he



needn't stay to count it—an' 'pon the same shelf, right back in the cornder, a roll o' papers. Tell him to keep the papers till he hears from me, but the bag he's to give to you, an' you're to bring it along quick— *with* the key. Mind, you're not to go with him on any account; an' if you should run against this Glass on your way, give him a wide berth—go

Page 31

straight home to Stimcoe's—do *anything* but lay him on to my trail by comin' back to tell me. Understand? There, now, hark to the town clock chimin' below there! Six o'clock it is—four bells. If you're not back agen by seven I shall know what's happened an' take steps accordin'. An' *you'll* know that I'm on my way to your father by another tack. 'What tack?' says you. 'Never you mind,' says I. If the worst comes to the worst, old Dan Coffin has a shot left in his locker."

I took the key and ran. The alley where Captain Branscome lodged lay a gunshot on this side of the Market Strand; and while I ran I kept— as the saying is—my eyes skinned for a sight of the enemy. The coast, however, was clear.

But at Captain Branscome's door a wholly unexpected disappointment awaited me. It was locked, and I had not hammered on its shining brass knocker before a neighbouring housewife put forth her head from a window in the gathering dusk, and informed me that the captain was not at home. He had gone out early in the afternoon, and left his doorkey with her, saying that he was off on a visit, and would not return before to-morrow afternoon at earliest. For a moment I was tempted to disobey Captain Danny's injunctions, and fetch the money myself, or at least make a bold attempt for it; but, recollecting how earnestly he had charged me, and how cheerfully at the last he had assured me that he had still a shot in his locker, I turned and mounted the hill again, albeit dejectedly.

The moon was rising as I climbed over the stile into the footpath, and, recognizing my footstep, the old man came forward to meet me, out of the shadow on the western side of the windmill, to which he had shifted his watch.

My ill-success, depressing enough to me, he took very cheerfully.

"I was afraid," said he, "you might be foolin' off for the money on your own account. Gone on a visit, has he? Well, you can hand him the key to-morrow, with my message. An' now I'll tell you my next notion. The St. Mawes packet"—this was the facetious name given to a small cutter which plied in those days between Falmouth and the small village of St. Mawes across the harbour—"the St. Mawes packet is due to start at seven-thirty. I won't risk boardin' her at Market Strand, but pick up a boat at Arwennack, an' row out to hail her as she's crossin'. She'll pick me up easy, wi' this wind; but if she don't, I'll get the waterman to pull me right across. Bogue, the landlord of The Lugger over there, knows me well enough to lend me ten shillin', an' wi' that I can follow the road through Tregony to St. Austell, an' hire a lift maybe."

I could not but applaud the plan. The route he proposed cut off a corner, led straight to Minden Cottage, and was at the same time the one on which he was least likely to be tracked. We descended the hill together, keeping to the dark side of the road. At the

foot of the hill we parted, with the understanding that I was to run straight home to Stimcoe's, and explain my absence at locking-up—or, as Mr. Stimcoe preferred to term it, “names-calling”—as best I might.

Page 32

Thereupon I did an incredibly foolish thing, which, as it proved, defeated all our plans and gave rise to unnumbered woes. I was already late for names-calling; but for this I cared little. Stimcoe had not the courage to flog me; the day had been a holiday, and of a sort to excuse indiscipline; and, anyway, one might as well suffer for a sheep as for a lamb. The St. Mawes packet would be lying alongside the Market Strand. The moon was up—a round, full moon—and directly over St. Mawes, so that her rays fell, as near as might be, in the line of the cutter's course, which, with a steady breeze down the harbour, would be a straight one. From the edge of Market Strand I might be able to spy Captain Coffin's boat as he boarded. Let me, without extenuating, be brief over my act of folly. Instead of making at once for Stimcoe's, I bent my steps towards Market Strand. The St. Mawes packet lay there, and I stood on the edge of the quay, watching her preparations for casting off—the skipper clearing the gangway and politely helping aboard, between the warning notes of his whistle, belated marketers who came running with their bundles.

While I stood there, a man sauntered out and stood for a moment on the threshold of the Plume of Feathers. It was the man Aaron Glass, and, recognizing him, I (that had been standing directly under the light of the quay-lamp) drew back from the edge into the darkness. I had done better, perhaps, to stand where I was. How long he had been observing me—if, indeed, he had observed me—I could not tell. But, as I drew back, he advanced and strolled nonchalantly past me, at five yards distance, down to the quay-steps.

"All aboard for St. Mawes!" called the skipper, drawing in his plank.

"All but one, captain!" answered Glass, and, disdaining it, without removing his hands from his pockets, put a foot upon the bulwark and sprang lightly on to her deck.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAOS IN THE CAPTAIN'S LODGINGS.

I leave you to guess what were my feelings as foot by foot the packet's quarter fell away wider of the quay. If, as the skipper thrust off, I had found presence of mind to jump for her, who knows what mischief might have been prevented? I could at least—whatever the consequences—have called a warning to Captain Coffin to give his enemy a wide-berth. But I was unnerved; the impulse came too late; and as the foresail filled and she picked up steerage way, I stood helpless under the lamp at the quay-head—stood and stared after her, alone with the sense of my incredible folly.

Somewhere out yonder Captain Coffin was waiting in his shore-boat. I listened, minute after minute, on the chance of hearing his hail. A heavy bank of cloud had overcast the moon, and the packet melted from sight in a blur of darkness. Worst of all—worse even

than the sting of self-reproach—was the prospect of returning to Stimcoe's and wearing through the night, while out there in the darkness the two men would meet, and all that followed their meeting must happen unseen by me.

Page 33

This ordeal appeared so dreadful to me in prospect that I began to cast about among all manner of impracticable plans for escaping it. Of these the most promising—although I had no money—was to give the Stimcoes leg-bail and run home; the most alluring, too, since it offered to deaden the torment of uncertainty by keeping me employed, mind and body. I must follow the coach-road. In imagination I measured back the distance. If George Goodfellow walked to Plymouth and back once a week, why might not I succeed in walking to Minden Cottage? Home was home. I should get counsel and comfort there; counsel from my father and comfort most assuredly from Plinny. I needed both, and in Falmouth just now there was none of either. Even Captain Branscome, who might have helped me—

At this point a sudden thought fetched me up with a jerk. The enemy, by pursuing after Captain Danny, had at least left me a clear coast. I was safe for a while against his spying, and consequently the embargo was off. I had no need to wait for morning. I could go myself to the old man's lodgings, unlock the corner cupboard, and bring away the roll of papers.

I dived my hand into my breech-pocket for the forgotten key. It was small, and of a curious, intricate pattern. Almost before my fingers closed upon it my mind was made up. Stimcoe's—that is, if I decided to return to Stimcoe's—might wait. I might yet decide to break ship—as Captain Danny would have put it—and make a push for home; but that decision, too, must wait. Meanwhile, here was an urgent errand, and a clear coast for it; here was occupation and inexpressible relief. It's an ill wind that blows nobody some good.

I set off at a run. On my way I met and passed half a dozen gangs of hilarious ex-prisoners and equally hilarious townsmen escorting them to the waterside, where the coxswains of the transport's boats were by this time blowing impatient calls on their whistles. But the upper end of the street was well-nigh deserted. A dingy oil lantern overhung the pavement a few yards from the ope, and above the ope the barber's parrot hung silent, with a shawl flung over its cage. I dived into the dark passage, and, stumbling my way to Captain Danny's door, found that it gave easily to my hand.

For a moment I paused on the threshold, striving to remember where he kept his tinder-box and matches. But the room was small. I knew the geography of it, and could easily—I told myself—grope my way to the corner, find the cupboard, and, feeling for the keyhole, insert the key. I was about to essay this when the thought occurred to me that, as Captain Danny had left the door on the latch, so very likely with equal foresight he had placed his tinder-box handy—on the table, it might be. I put out my hand in the direction where, as I recollected, the table stood. It reached into empty darkness. I took another step and groped for the table with both hands. Still darkness, nothing but darkness! I took yet another step and struck my foot against a hard object on the floor; and, as I bent to examine this, something sharp and exceeding painful thrust itself into my groin—a table-leg, upturned.

Page 34

Recovering myself, I passed a hand over it. Yes, undoubtedly it was a table-leg and the table lay topsy-turvy. But how came it so? Who had upset it, and why? I took another step, sideways, and my boot struck against something light, and, by its sound, hollow and metallic. Stooping very cautiously—for by this time I had taken alarm and was holding my breath—I passed a hand lightly over the floor. My fingers encountered the object I had kicked aside. It was a tinder-box. I clutched it softly, and as softly drew myself upright again. Could I dare to strike a light? The overturned table: What could be the meaning of it? It could not have been overturned by Captain Coffin? By whom then? Some one must have visited the lodgings in his absence.

Some one, for aught I knew, was in the room at this moment!— Some one, back there against the wall, waiting only for me to strike a light! I declare that at the thought I came near to screaming aloud, casting the tinder-box from me and rushing out blindly into the court.

I dare say that I stood for a couple of minutes, motionless, listening not with my ears only but with every hair of my head. Nevertheless, my wits must have been working somehow; for my first action, when I plucked up nerve enough for it, was an entirely sensible one. I set the tinder-box on the floor between my heels, felt for the table, and righted it; then, picking up the box again, set it on the table and twisted off the lid. I found flint and steel at once, dipped my fingers into the box to make sure of the tinder and the brimstone matches, and so, after another pause to listen, essayed to strike out the spark.

This, for a pair of trembling hands, proved no easy business, and at first promised to be a hopeless one. But the worst moment arrived when, the spark struck, I stooped to blow it upon the tinder, the glow of which must light up my own face while it revealed to me nothing of the surrounding darkness. Still, it had to be done; and, keeping a tight hold on what little remained of my courage, I thrust in the match and ignited it.

While the brimstone caught fire and bubbled I drew myself erect to face the worst. But for what met my eyes as the flame caught hold of the stick, even the overturned table had not prepared me.

The furniture of the room lay pell-mell, as though a cyclone had swept through it. The very pictures hung askew. Of the drawers in the dresser some had been pulled out bodily, others stood half open, and all had been ransacked; while the fragments of china strewn along the shelves or scattered across the floor could only be accounted for by some blind ferocity of destruction—a madman, for instance, let loose upon it, and striking at random with a stick. As the match burned low in my fingers I looked around hastily for a candle, scanning the dresser, the mantel-shelf, the hugger-mugger of linen, crockery, wall-ornaments, lying in a trail along the floor. But no candle could I discover; so I lit a second match from the first and turned towards the sacred cupboard in the corner.

Page 35

The cupboard was gone!

I held the match aloft, and stared at the angle of the wall; stared stupidly, at first unable to believe. Yes, the cupboard was gone! Nothing remained but the mahogany bracket which had supported it. I gazed around, the match burning lower and lower in my hand till it scorched my fingers. The pain of it awakened me, and, dropping the charred end, I stumbled out into the passage, almost falling on the way as my feet entangled themselves in Captain Coffin's best table-cloth.

A moment later I was rapping at Mr. George Goodfellow's door. I knew that he sometimes sat up late to practice his violin-playing; and in my confusion of terror I heeded neither that the house was silent nor that the window over his doorway showed a blank and unlit face to the night. I knocked and knocked again, pausing to call his name urgently, at first in hoarse whispers, by-and-by desperately, lifting my voice as loudly as I dared.

At length a voice answered; but it came from the end of the passage next, the street, and it was not Mr. Goodfellow's.

"D—n my giblets!" it said, in a kind of muffled scream. "Drunk again! Oh, you nasty image!"

It was the barber's accursed parrot. I could hear it tearing with its beak at the bars of its cage, as if struggling to pull off the cloth which covered it.

A window creaked on its hinges, some way up the court.

"Hallo! Who's there?" demanded a gruff voice.

I took to my heels, and made a dash up the passage for the street. The cage, as I passed under it, swayed violently with the parrot's struggles for free speech.

"Drunk again!" it yelled. "Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me—here's a pretty time o' night to disturb a lady!"

No longer had I any thought of braving the night and the perils of the road, but pressed my elbows tight against my ribs and raced straight for Stimcoe's.

CHAPTER X.

NEWS.

By great good fortune, Mr. Stimcoe had been drinking the health of the returned prisoners until his own was temporarily affected. In fact, as I reached Delamere



Terrace, panting and excogitating the likeliest excuse to offer Mrs. Stimcoe, the door of No. 7 opened, and the lady herself emerged upon the night, with a shawl swathed carelessly over her masculine neck and shoulders.

I drew up and ducked aside to avoid recognition, but she halted under the lamp and called to me, in no very severe voice—

“Harry!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“You are late, and I have been needing you. Mr. Stimcoe is suffering from an attack.”

“Indeed, ma’am?” said I. “Shall I run for Dr. Spargo?”

She stood for a moment considering. “No,” she decided; “I had better fetch Dr. Spargo myself. Being more familiar with the symptoms, I can describe them to him.”

Page 36

More familiar with the symptoms, poor woman, she undoubtedly was, though I was familiar enough; and so, for the matter of that, was the doctor, whose ledger must have registered at least a dozen similar “attacks.” But I understood at once her true reason for not entrusting me with the errand. It would require all her courage, all her magnificent impudence, to browbeat Dr. Spargo into coming, for I doubt if the Stimcoes had ever paid him a stiver.

“But you can be very useful,” she went on, in a tone unusually gentle. “You will find Mr. Stimcoe in his bedroom—at least, I hope so, for he suffers from a hallucination that some person or persons unknown have incarcerated him in a French war-prison, such being the effect of to-day’s—er—proceedings upon his highly strung nature. The illusion being granted, one can hardly be surprised at his resenting it.”

I nodded, and promised to do my best.

“You are a very good boy, Harry,” said Mrs. Stimcoe—a verdict so different from that which I had arrived expecting, or with any right to expect, that I stood for some twenty seconds gaping after her as she pulled her shawl closer and went on her heroic way.

I found Mr. Stimcoe in *deshabille*, on the first-floor landing, under the derisive surveillance of Masters Doggy Bates, Bob Pilkington, and Scotty Maclean, whose graceless mirth echoed down to me from the stair-rail immediately overhead. Ignoring my preceptor’s invitation to bide a wee and take a cup of kindness yet for auld lang syne, I ran up and knocked their heads together, kicked them into the dormitory, turned the key on their reproaches, and—these preliminaries over—descended to grapple with the situation.

Mr. Stimcoe, in night garments, was conducting a dialogue in which he figured alternately as the tyrant and the victim of oppression. In the character of Napoleon Bonaparte he had filled a footbath with cold water, and was commanding the Rev. Philip Stimcoe to strip—as he put it—to the teeth, and immerse himself forthwith. As the Rev. Philip Stimcoe, patriot and martyr, he was obstinately, and with even more passion, refusing to do anything of the kind, and for the equally cogent reasons that he was a Protestant of the Protestants and that the water had cockroaches in it.

“Of course,” said Mr. Stimcoe to me, “if you present yourself as Alexander of Russia, there is no more to be said, always provided”—and here he removed his nightcap and made me a profound bow—“that your credentials are satisfactory.”

Apparently they were. At any rate, I prevailed on him to return to his room, when he took my arm, and, seating himself on the bedside, recited to me the paradigms of the more anomalous Greek verbs with great volubility for twenty minutes on end—that is to say, until Mrs. Stimcoe returned with the doctor safely tucked under her wing.

At sight of me seated in charge of the patient, Dr. Spargo—a mild little man—lifted his eyebrows.

Page 37

“Surely, madam—” he began in a scandalized tone.

“This is Harry Brooks.” Mrs. Stimcoe introduced me loftily. “If you wish him to retire, be kind enough to say so, and have done with it. Our boarders, I may say, have the run of the house—it is part of Mr. Stimcoe’s system. But Harry has too much delicacy to remain where he feels himself *de trop*. Harry, you have my leave to withdraw.”

I obeyed, aware that the doctor—who had pushed his spectacles high upon his forehead—was following my retreat with bewildered gaze. As I expected, no sooner had I regained the dormitory than my fellow-boarders—forgetting their sore heads, or, at any rate, forgiving—began to pester me with a hundred questions. I had to repeat the punishment on Doggy Bates before they suffered me to lie down in quiet.

But the interlude, in itself discomposing, had composed my nerves for the while. I expected no sleep; had, indeed, an hour ago, deemed it impossible I should sleep that night. Yet, in fact, my head was scarcely on the pillow before I slept, and slept like a top.

The town clock awoke me, striking four. To the far louder sound of Scotty Maclean’s snoring, in the bed next to mine, I was case-hardened. I lay for a second or two counting the strokes, then sprang out of bed, and, running to the window, drew wide the curtain. The world was awake, the sun already clear above the hills over St. Just pool, and all the harbour twinkling with its rays. My eyes searched the stretch of water between me and St. Mawes, as though for flotsam—anything to give me news, or a hint of news. For many minutes I stood staring—needless to say, in vain—and so, the morning being chilly, crept back to bed with the shivers on me.

Two hours later, in the midst of my dressing, I looked out of the window again, and I saw the St. Mawes packet reaching across towards Falmouth merrily, quite as if nothing had happened. Yet something—I told myself—*must* have happened.

The Copenhagen Academy enjoyed a holiday that day, for Captain Branscome failed to present himself, and Mr. Stimcoe lay under the influence of sedatives. At eleven in the morning he awoke, and began to discuss the character of Talleyrand at the pitch of his voice. Its echoes reached me where I sat disconsolate in the deserted schoolroom, and I went upstairs to the bedroom door to offer my services. Doggy Bates, Pilkington, and Scotty Maclean had hied them immediately after breakfast to the harbour, to beg, borrow, or steal a boat and fish for mackerel; and Mrs. Stimcoe, worn out with watching, set down my faithful presence to motives of which I was shamefully innocent. In point of fact, I had lurked at home because I could not bear company. I preferred the deserted schoolroom, though Heaven knows what I would not have given for the dull distraction of work—an hour of Rule of Three with Captain Branscome, or Caesar’s Commentaries with Mr. Stimcoe. But Mr. Stimcoe lay upstairs chattering, and Captain Branscome appeared to be taking a protracted holiday. It hardly occurred to me to wonder why.

Page 38

It was borne in upon me later that during this interval of anarchy in the Stimcoe establishment—it lasted two days, and may have lasted longer for aught I know—I wasted little wonder on the continued absence of Captain Branscome. I was indeed kept anxious by my own fears, which did not decrease as the hours dragged by. From the window of Mr. Stimcoe's sickroom I watched the St. Mawes packet plying to and fro. I had a mind to steal down to the Market Strand and interrogate her skipper. I had a mind—and laid more than one plan for it—to follow up my first impulse of bolting for home, to discover if Captain Coffin had arrived there. But Mrs. Stimcoe, misinterpreting my eagerness to be employed, had by this time enlisted me into full service in the sickroom. After the first hint of surprised gratitude, she betrayed no feeling at all, but bound me severely to my task. We took the watching turn and turn about, in spells of three hours' duration. I was held committed, and could not desert without a brand on my conscience. The disgusting feature of this is that I was almost glad of it, at the same time longing to run, and feeling that this, in a way, exonerated me.

At about seven o'clock on the evening of the second day, while I sat by Mr. Stimcoe's bedside, there came a knock at the front door, and, looking out of the window—for Mrs. Stimcoe had gone to bully another sedative out of the doctor, and there was no one in the house to admit a visitor—I saw Captain Branscome below me on the doorstep.

"Hallo!" said I, as cheerfully as I might, for Mr. Stimcoe was awake and listening.

"Is—is that Harry Brooks?" asked Captain Branscome, stepping back and feeling for his gold-rimmed glasses. But by some chance he was not wearing them. After fumbling for a moment, he gazed up towards the window, blinking. Folk who habitually wear glasses look unnatural without them. Captain Branscome's face looked unnatural somehow. It was pale, and for the moment it seemed to me to be almost a face of fright; but a moment later I set down its pallor to weariness.

"Mrs. Stimcoe has gone off to the doctor," said I, "and Mr. Stimcoe is sick, and I am up here nursing him. There is no one to open, but you can give me a message."

"I just came up to make sure you were all right."

"If you mean Stim—Mr. Stimcoe, he's better, though the doctor says he won't be able to leave his bed for days. How did you come to hear about it?"

"I've heard nothing about Mr. Stimcoe," answered Captain Branscome, after a hesitating pause. "I've been away—on a holiday. Nothing wrong with you at all?" he asked.

I could not understand Captain Branscome. Why on earth should he be troubling himself about my state of health?

"Nothing happened to upset you?" he asked.

I looked down at him sharply. As a matter of fact, and as the reader knows, a great deal had happened to upset me, but that any hint of it should have reached Captain Branscome was in the highest degree unlikely, and in any case I could not discuss it with him from an upstairs window and in my patient's hearing. So I contented myself with asking him where he had spent his holiday.

Page 39

The question appeared to confuse him. He averted his eyes and, gazing out over the harbour, muttered—or seemed to mutter, for I could not catch the answer distinctly—that he had been visiting some friends; and so for a moment or two we waited at a deadlock. Indeed, there is no knowing how long it might have lasted—for Captain Branscome made no sign of turning again and facing me—but, happening just then to glance along the terrace, I caught sight of Mrs. Stimcoe returning with long, masculine strides.

She held an open letter in her hand, and was perusing it as she came.

“It’s for you,” she announced, coming to a standstill under the window and speaking up to me after a curt nod towards Captain Branscome—“from Miss Plinlimmon; and you’d best come down and hear what it says, for it’s serious.”

I should here explain that Mr. and Mrs. Stimcoe made a practice of reading all letters received or despatched by us. It was a part of the system.

“I picked it up at the post-office on my way,” she explained, as I presented myself at the front door and put out a hand for the letter. “Look here, Harry: I know you to be a brave boy. You must pull yourself together, and be as brave as ever you can. Your father—”

“What about my father?” I asked, taking the letter and staring into her face. “Has anything happened? is he—is he dead?”

Mrs. Stimcoe lifted her hand and lowered it again, at the same moment bowing her head with a meaning I could not mistake. I gazed dizzily at Captain Branscome, and the look on his face told me—I cannot tell you how—that he knew what the letter had to tell, and had been expecting it. The handwriting was indeed Miss Plinlimmon’s, although it ran across the paper in an agitated scrawl most unlike her usual neat Italian penmanship.

“My dearest Harry,

“You must come home to me at once, and by the first coach. I cannot tell you what has happened save this—that you must not look to see your father alive. We dwell in the midst of alarms which A. Selkirk preferred to the solitude of Juan Fernandez; but in this I differ from him totally, and so will you when you hear what we have gone through. Come at once, Harry, with the bravest heart you can summon, Such is the earnest prayer of:”

“Your sincere friend in affliction,”
“Amelia Plinlimmon.”

“P.S.—Pray ask Mrs. Stimcoe to be kind enough to advance the fare if your pocket-money will not suffice.”



“And I doubt if there’s two shillings in the house!” commented Mrs. Stimcoe, candid for once, “and God knows what I can pawn!”

Captain Branscome plunged his hand into his pocket and drew out a guinea. Captain Branscome—who, to the knowledge of both of us, never had a shilling in his pocket—stood there nervously proffering me a guinea!

CHAPTER XI.

Page 40

THE CRIME IN THE SUMMER-HOUSE.

Mrs. Stimcoe, having begged Captain Branscome to take watch for a while over the invalid, and having helped me to pack a few clothes in a handbag, herself accompanied me to the coach-office, where we found the Royal Mail on the point of starting. The outside passengers, four in number, had already taken their seats—two on the box beside the coachman, and two on the seat immediately behind; and by the light of the lamp overhanging the entry I perceived that their heads were together in close conversation, in which the coachman himself from time to time took a share, slewing round to listen or interject a word and anon breaking off to direct the stowage of a parcel or call an order to the stable-boys. Mrs. Stimcoe had stepped into the office to book my place, and while I waited for her, watching the preparations for departure, my curiosity led me forward to take a look at the horses. There, under the lamp, the coachman caught sight of me.

“Whe-ew!” I heard him whistle. “Here’s the boy himself! Going along wi’ us, sonny?” he asked, looking down on me and speaking down in a voice which seemed to me unnaturally gentle—for I remembered him as a gruff fellow and irascible. The outside passengers at once broke off their talk to lean over and take stock of me; and this again struck me as queer.

“Jim!” called the coachman (Jim was the guard). “Jim!”

“Ay, ay!” answered Jim, from the back of the roof, where he was arranging the mail-bags.

“Here’s an outside extry.” He lowered his voice, so that I caught only these words: “The youngster . . . Minden Cottage . . . I reckoned they’d be sending—”

“Hey?”

Jim the guard bent over for a look at me, and scrambled down by the steps of his dickey, just as Mrs. Stimcoe emerged from the office. She was pale and agitated, and stood for a moment gazing about her distractedly, when Jim blundered against her, whereat she put out a hand and spoke to him. I saw Jim fall back a step and touch his hat. He was listening, with a very serious face. I could not hear what she said.

“Cert’nly, ma’m’,” he answered. “Cert’nly, under the circumstances, you may depend on me.”

He mounted the coach again, and, climbing forward whispered in the back of the coachman’s ear. The passengers bent their heads to listen. They nodded; the coachman nodded too, and stretched down a hand.

“Can you climb, sonny, or shall we fetch the steps for you? There, I reckoned you was more of a man than to need ’em!”

Mrs. Stimcoe detained me for a moment to fold me in a masculine hug. But her bosom might have been encased in an iron corselet for all the tenderness it conveyed. “God bless you, Harry Brooks, and try to be a man!” Her embrace relaxed, and with a dry-sounding sob she let me go as I caught the coachman’s hand and was swung up to my seat; and with that we were off and up the cobble-paved street at a rattle.

Page 41

I do not know the names of my fellow-passengers. Now and then one would bend forward and whisper to his neighbour, who answered with a grunt or a motion of his head; but for the most part, and for mile after mile, we all sat silent, listening only to the horses' gallop, the chime of the swingle-bars, the hum of the night wind in our ears. The motion and the strong breeze together lulled me little by little into a doze. My neighbour on the right wore around his shoulders a woollen shawl, against which after a while I found my cheek resting, and begged his pardon. He entreated me not to mention it, but to make myself comfortable; and thereupon I must have fallen fast asleep. I awoke as the coach came to a standstill. Were we pulling up to change teams? No; we were on the dark high-road, between hedges. Straight ahead of us blazed two carriage-lamps; and a man's voice was hailing. I recognized the voice at once. It belonged to a Mr. Jack Rogers, a rory-tory young squire and justice of the peace of our neighbourhood, and the lamps must be those of his famous light tilbury.

"Hallo!" he was shouting. "Royal Mail, ahoy!"

"Royal Mail it is!" shouted back the coachman and Jim the guard together.

"Got the boy Brooks aboard?"

"Ay, ay Mr. Rogers! D'ye want him?"

"No; you'll take him along quicker. My mare's fagged, and I drove along in case the letter missed fire." He came forward at a foot's pace, and pulled up under the light of our lamps. "Hallo! is that you, Harry Brooks?" He peered up at me out of the night.

"Yes, sir," I answered, my teeth chattering between apprehension and the chill of the night. I longed desperately to ask what had happened at home, but the words would not come.

"Right you are, my lad; and the first thing when you get home, tell Miss Plinlimmon from me to fill you up with vittles and a glass of hot brandy-and-water. Give her that message, with Jack Rogers's compliments, and tell her that I'm on the road making inquiries, and may get so far as Truro. By the way"—he turned to Jim the guard—"you haven't met anything that looked suspicious, eh?"

"Nothing on the road at all," answered Jim.

"Well, so-long! Mustn't delay his Majesty's mails or waste time of my own. Good night, Harry Brooks, and remember to give my message! Good night, gentlemen all!"

He flicked at his mare. Our coachman gathered up his reins, and away we went once more at a gallop towards the dawn. The dawn lay cold about Minden Cottage as we came in sight of it; and at first, noting that all the blinds were drawn, I thought the household must be asleep. Then I remembered, and shivered as I rose from my seat,

cramped and stiff from the long journey, and so numb that Jim the guard had to lift me down to the porch. Miss Plinlimmon, red-eyed and tremulous, opened the door to me, embraced me, and led me to the little parlour.

Page 42

"Is—is my father dead?" I asked, staring vacantly around the room, and upon the table where she had set out a breakfast. She bent over the urn for a moment, and then, coming to me, took my hand and drew me to the sofa.

"You must be brave, Harry."

"But what has happened? And how did it happen? Was—was it sudden? Please tell me, Plinny!"

She stroked my hand and shivered slightly, turning her face away towards the window.

"We found him in the summer-house, dear. He was lying face downward, across the step of the doorway, and at first we supposed he had fallen forward in a fit. Ann made the discovery, and came running to me in the kitchen, when she had only time to cry out the news before she was overtaken with hysterics. I left her to them," went on Miss Plinlimmon, simply, "and ran out to the summer-house, when by-and-by, having pulled herself together, she followed me. By this time it had fallen dusk—nay, it was almost dark, which accounts for one not seeing at once what dreadful thing had happened. Your poor father, Harry—as you know—used often to sit in the summer-house until quite a late hour, but he had never before dallied quite so late, and in the end I had sent Ann out to remind him that supper was waiting. Well, as you may suppose, he was heavy to lift; and we two women being alone in the house, I told Ann to run up to the vicarage or to Miss Belcher's, and get word sent for a doctor, and also to bring a couple of men, if possible, to carry him into the house. I had scarcely bidden her to do this when she cried out, screaming, that her hand was damp, and with blood. 'You silly woman!' said I, though trembling myself from head to foot. But when we fetched a candle, we saw blood running down the step, and your father—my poor Harry!—lying in a pool of it—a veritable pool of it. Ah, Harry, Harry!" exclaimed Miss Plinlimmon, relapsing into that literary manner which was second nature with her, "such a moment occurring in the pages of fiction, may stimulate a sympathetic thrill not entirely disagreeable to the reader, but in real life I wouldn't go through it again if you offered me a fortune."

"Plinny," I cried—"Plinny, what is this you are telling me about blood?"

"Your poor father, Harry—But be sure their sins will find them out! Mr. Rogers is setting the runners on track—he is most kind. Already he has had two hundred handbills printed. We are offering a hundred pounds reward—more if necessary—and the whole country is up—"

"Plinny dear"—I tried to steady my voice as I stood and faced her— "are you trying to tell me that—that my father has been murdered?"

She bowed her head and cast her apron over it, sobbing.

“Excuse me, Harry—but in such moments!—And they have found the cashbox. It had been battered open, presumably by a stone, and flung into the brook a hundred yards below Miss Belcher’s lodge-gate.”

Page 43

"The cashbox?" My brain whirled.

"The key was in your father's pocket. He had fetched the box from his room, it appears, about two hours before, and carried it out to the summer-house. I cannot tell you with what purpose he carried it out there, but it was quite contrary to his routine."

She poured out a cup of tea, and passed it to me with shaking hands. She pressed me to eat, and all the time she kept talking, sometimes lucidly, sometimes quite incoherently; and I listened in a kind of dream. My father had been well-nigh a stranger to me, and I divined that I should never sorrow for his loss as those sorrow who have genuinely loved. But his death, and the manner of it, shocked me dreadfully, and from the shock my brain kept harking away to Captain Coffin and his pursuer. Could they have reached Minden Cottage? And, if so, had their visit any connection with this crime? Captain Danny had started for Minden Cottage. . . . Had he arrived? And, if so —

I heard Miss Plinlimmon asking: "Would you care to see him—that is, dear, if you feel strong enough? His expression is wonderfully tranquil."

She led me upstairs and opened the door for me. A sheet covered my father from feet to chin, and above it his head lay back on the pillow, his features, clear-cut and aquiline, keeping that massive repose which, though it might seem to be deeper now in the shade of the darkened room, had always cowed me while he lived. It seemed to me that my father's death, though I ought to feel it more keenly, made strangely little difference to *him*.

"You will need sleep," said Plinny, who had been waiting for me on the landing.

I told her that she might get my bed ready, but I would first take a turn in the garden. I tiptoed downstairs. The floor of the summer-house had been washed. The vane on its conical roof sparkled in the sunlight. I stood before it, attempting to picture the tragedy of which, here in the clear morning, it told nothing to help me. My thoughts were still running on Captain Coffin and the French prisoner. Plinny—for I had questioned her cautiously—plainly knew nothing of any such man. They might, however, have entered by the side-gate. I stepped back under the apple-tree by the flagstaff, measuring with my eye the distance between this side-gate and the summer-house. As I did so, my foot struck against something in the tall grass under the tree, and I stooped and picked it up—a pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses!

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLOODSTAIN ON THE STILE.

My father, in erecting a flagstaff before his summer-house, had chosen to plant it on a granite millstone, or rather, had sunk its base through the stone's central hole, which Miss Plinlimmon regularly filled with salt to keep the wood from rotting. Upon this mossed and weather-worn bench I sat myself down to examine my find.

Page 44

Yet it needed no examination to tell me that the eyeglasses were Captain Branscome's. I recognized the delicate cable pattern of their gold rims, glinting in the sunlight. I recognized the ring and the frayed scrap of black ribbon attached to it. I remembered the guinea with which Captain Branscome had paid my fare on the coach. I remembered Miss Plinlimmon's account of the stolen cashbox.

The more my suspicions grew, the more they were incredible. That Captain Branscome, of all men in the world, should be guilty of such a crime! And yet, with this damning evidence in my hand, I could not but recall a dozen trifles—mere straws, to be sure—all pointing towards him. He had been here in my father's garden: that I might take as proven. With what object? And if that object were an innocent one, why had he not told me of his intention to visit Minden Cottage? I remembered how straitly he had cross-examined me, a while ago, on the topography of the cottage, on my father's household and his habits. Again, if his visit had been an innocent one, why, last evening, had he said nothing of it? Why, when I questioned him about his holiday, had he answered me so confusedly? Yet again, I recalled his demeanour when Mrs. Stimcoe handed me the letter, and the impression it gave me—so puzzling at the moment—that he had foreknowledge of the news. If this incredible thing were true—if Captain Branscome were the criminal—the puzzle ceased to be a puzzle; the guinea and the broken cashbox were only too fatally accounted for.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the guinea, in spite even of the eyeglass there in my hand, I could not bring myself to believe. What? Captain Branscome, the simple-minded, the heroic? Captain Branscome, of the threadbare coat and the sword of honour? Poor he was, no doubt—bitterly poor—poor almost to starvation at times. To what might not a man be driven by poverty in this degree? And here was evidence for judge and jury.

I glanced around me, and, folding the eyeglasses together in a fumbling haste, slipped them into my breeches-pocket. From my seat beneath the flagstaff I looked straight into the doorway of the summer-house; but a creeper obscured its rustic window, dimming the light within; and a terror seized me that some one was concealed there, watching me—a terror not unlike that which had held me in Captain Coffin's lodgings.

While I stood there, summoning up courage to invade the summer-house and make sure, my brain harked back to Captain Coffin and the man Aaron Glass. Captain Coffin had taken leave of me in a fever to reach Minden Cottage. That was close on sixty hours ago—three nights and two days. Why, in that ample time, had he not arrived, and what had become of him? Plinny had seen no such man.

I fetched a tight grip on my courage, walked across to the doorway, and peered into the summer-house. It was empty, and I stepped inside—superstitiously avoiding, as I did so, to tread on the spot where my father's body had lain.

Page 45

Ann the cook—so Plinny told me—had found his chair overset behind him, but no other sign of a struggle. He had been stabbed in front, high on the left breast and a little below the collar-bone, and must have toppled forward at once across the step, and died where he fell. The chair had been righted and set in place, perhaps by Ann when she washed down the step. A well-defined line across the floor showed where the cleaning had begun, and behind it the scanty furniture of the place had not been disturbed. At the back, in one corner stood an old drum, with dust and droppings of leaf-mould in the wrinkles of its sagged parchment, and dust upon the drumsticks thrust within its frayed strapping; in the corner opposite an old military chest which held the bunting for the flagstaff—a Union flag, a couple of ensigns, and half a dozen odd square-signals and pennants. I stooped over this, and as I did so I observed that there were finger-marks on the dust at the edge of the lid; but, lifting it, found the flags inside neatly rolled and stowed in order. On the table lay my father's Bible and his pocket Virgil, the latter open and laid face downwards. I picked it up, and the next moment came near to dropping it again with a shiver, for a dry smear of blood crossed the two pages.

Here, not to complicate mysteries, let me tell at once what Ann told me later—that she had found the book lying in the blood-dabbled grass before the step, when it must have fallen from my father's hand, and had replaced it upon the table. But for the moment, surmising another clue, I stared at the page—a page of the seventh “Aeneid”—and at the stain which, as if to underline them, started beneath the words—

“Hic domus, haec patria est. Genitor mihi talia namque
(Nunc repeto) Anchises fatorum arcana reliquit.”

I set down the book as I had found it, stepped forth again into the sunshine. The scouring of the step had left a moist puddle below it, where the ground, no doubt, had been dry and hard on the evening of the murder. At the edge of this puddle the turf twinkled with clean dew—close, well-trimmed turf sloping gently to the stream which formed the real boundary of the garden; but Miss Belcher, the neighbouring land-owner, a person of great wealth and the most eccentric good-nature, had allowed my father to build a wall on the far side, for privacy, and had granted him an entrance through it to her park—a narrow wooden door to which a miniature bridge gave access across the stream.

There were thus three ways of approaching the summer-house; (1) by the path which wound through the garden from the house, (2) across the turf from the side-gate, which opened out of a lane, or woodcutters' road, running at right angles from the turnpike and alongside the garden fence towards the park; and (3) from the park itself, across the little bridge. From the bridge a straight line to the summer-house would lie behind the angle of sight of any one seated within; so that a visitor, stepping with caution, might present himself at the doorway without any warning.

Page 46

You may say that, my father being blind, it need not have entered into my calculations whether his assailant had approached in full view of the doorway or from the rear. But the assailant—let us suppose for a moment—was some one ignorant of my father's blindness. This granted, as it was at least possible, he would be likeliest to steal upon the summer-house from the rear. I cannot say more than that, standing there by the doorway, I felt the approach from the streamside to be most dangerous, and therefore the likeliest.

In a few minutes, as I well knew, Plinny would be coming in search of me, to persuade me back to the house to breakfast and bed. I stepped down to the streamside, where the beehives stood in a row on the brink, paused for a moment to listen to the hum within them, and note that the bees were making ready to swarm, crossed the bridge, and tried the rusty hasp of the door. It yielded stiffly; but as I pulled the door inwards it brushed aside a mass of spider's web, white and matted, that could not be less than a month old. Also it brushed a clump of ivy overgrowing the lintel, and shook down about half an ounce of powdery dust into my hair and eyes. I scarcely troubled to look through. Clearly, the door had not been opened for many weeks—possibly not since my last holidays.

I recrossed the bridge and inspected the side-gate. This opened, as I have said, upon a lane never used but by the woodmen on Miss Belcher's estate, and by them very seldom. It entered the park by a stone bridge across the stream and by a ruinous gate, the gaps of which had been patched with furze faggots. The roadway itself was carpeted with last year's leaves from a coppice across the lane—leaves which the winter's rains had beaten into a black compost; and almost facing the side-gate was a stile whence a tangled footpath led into the coppice.

I had stepped out into the lane, and was staring over the stile into the green gloom of the coppice, when I heard Plinny's voice calling to me from the house, and I had half turned to hail in answer when my eyes fell on the upper bar of the stile.

Across the edge of it ran a dark brown smear—a smear which I recognized for dried blood.

"Harry! Harry dear!"

"Plinny!" I raced back through the garden, and almost fell into her arms as she came along the path between the currant-bushes in search of me. "Plinny—oh, Plinny!" I gasped.

"My dear child, what has happened?"

Before I could answer there came wafted to our ears from eastward a sound of distant shouting, and almost simultaneously, from the high-road near at hand, the trit-trot of

hoofs approaching at great speed from westward, and the “Who-oo!” of a man’s voice, lusty on the morning air.

“That will be Mr. Jack Rogers,” said Plinny. “He brings us news, for certain! Yes; he is reining up.”

We ran through the house together, and reached the front door in time to witness a most extraordinary scene.

Page 47

Mr. Jack Rogers's tilbury had run past the house and come to a halt a short gunshot beyond, where it stood driverless—for Mr. Jack Rogers had dismounted, and was gesticulating with both arms to stop a man racing down the road to meet him. A moment later, as this runner came on, a second hove in sight over the rise of the road behind him—a short figure, so stout and round that in the distance it resembled not so much a man as a ball rolling in pursuit.

"Hi! Stop, you there!" shouted Mr. Rogers; but the first runner might have been deaf, for all the attention he paid.

"Good Lord!" said I, catching my breath; "it's Mr. George Goodfellow!"

"In the King's name!" Mr. Rogers shouted, making a dash to intercept him. And a moment later the two had collided, and were rolling in the dust together.

I ran towards them, with Plinny—brave soul!—at my heels, and arrived to find Mr. Rogers, hatless and exceedingly dishevelled, kneeling with both hands around the neck of his prostrate antagonist, and holding his face down in the dust.

"You'd best stand up and come along quietly," Mr. Rogers adjured him.

"Gug-gug—how the devil c-can I stand up if you won't lul-lul-let me?" protested Mr. Goodfellow, reasonably enough.

"Very well, then." Mr. Rogers relaxed his grip. "Stand up! But you're my prisoner, so let's have no more nonsense!"

"I'd like to know what's taken ye to pitch into a man like this?" demanded Mr. Goodfellow in a tone of great umbrage, as he shook the dust out of his coat and hair. "A fellow I never seen before, not to my knowledge! Why—hallo!" said he, looking up and catching sight of me.

"Hallo!" said I.

"Hallo!" said Mr. Rogers, in his turn. "Do you two know each other?"

"Why, of course we do!" said Mr. Goodfellow.

"I don't know where 'of course' comes in." Mr. Rogers eyed him with stern suspicion. "Why were you running away from the constable?"

Mr. Goodfellow glanced towards the stout, round man, who by this time had drawn near, mopping, as he came, a face as red as the red waistcoat he wore.



"Him a constable? Why, I took him for a loonatic! They put the loonatics into them coloured weskits, don't they?"

"Nothing of the sort. You're thinking of the warders," Mr. Rogers answered.

"Oh? Then I made a mistake," said Mr. Goodfellow, cheerfully.

"Look here, my friend, if you're thinking to play this off as a joke you'll find it no joking matter. Madam"—he turned to Miss Plinlimmon—"is this the man who called at the cottage two days ago."

"Yes," answered Plinny; "and once before, as I remember."

"And on each occasion did you observe something strange in his manner?"

"Very strange indeed. He kept asking questions about the house and garden, and the position of the rooms and about poor Major Brooks, and what rent he paid, and if he was well-to-do. And he took out a measure from his pocket and began to calculate—"

Page 48

"Quite so." Mr. Rogers turned next to the constable. "Hosken," he asked, "you have been making inquiries about this man?"

"I have, sir; all along the road, so far as Torpoint Ferry."

"And you learnt enough to justify you in arresting him?"

"Ample, y'r worship. There wasn't a public-house along the road but thought his behaviour highly peculiar. He's a well-known character, an' the questions he asks you would be surprised. He plies between Falmouth and Plymouth, sir, once a week regular. So, actin' on information that he might be expected along early this morning, I concealed myself in the hedge, sir, the best part of two miles back—"

"You didn't," interrupted Mr. Goodfellow. "I saw your red stomach between the bushes thirty yards before ever I came to it, and wondered what mischief you was up to. I'm wondering still."

"At any rate, you are detained, sir, upon suspicion," said Mr. Rogers sharply, "and will come with us to the cottage and submit to be searched."

"Brooks," asked Mr. Goodfellow feebly, "what's wrong with 'em? And what are you doing here?"

"Mr. Rogers," I broke in, "I know this man. His name is Goodfellow; he lives at Falmouth; and you are wrong, quite wrong, in suspecting him. But what is more, Mr. Rogers, you are wasting time. There's blood on the stile down the lane. Whoever broke into the garden must have escaped that way—by the path through the plantation —"

"Eh?" Mr. Rogers jumped at me and caught me by the arm. "Why the devil—you'll excuse me, Miss Plinlimmon—but why on earth, child, if you have news, couldn't you have told it at once? Blood on the stile, you say? What stile?"

"The stile down the lane, sir," I answered, pointing. "And I couldn't tell you before because you didn't give me time."

"Show us the way, quick! And you, Hosken, catch hold of the mare and lead her round to Miss Belcher's stables. Or, stay—she's dead beat. You can help me slip her out of the shafts and tether her by the gate yonder. That's right, man; but don't tie her up too tight. Give her room to bite a bit of grass, and she'll wait here quiet as a lamb."

"What about the prisoner, sir?" asked the stolid Hosken.

"D—n the prisoner!" answered Mr. Rogers, testily, in the act of unharnessing. "Slip the handcuffs on him. And you, Miss Plinlimmon, will return to the cottage, if you please."

"I'd like to come, too, if I may," put in Mr. Goodfellow.

"Eh?" Mr. Rogers, in the act of rolling up one of the traces, stared at him with frank admiration. "Well, you're a sportsman, anyhow. Catch hold of his arm, Hosken, and run him along with us. Yes, sir, though I say it as a justice of the peace, be d—d to you, but I like your spirit. And with the gallows staring you in the face, too!"

"Gallows? What gallows?" panted Mr. Goodfellow in my ear a few moments later, as we tore in a body down the lane. "Hush!" I panted in answer. "It's all a mistake."

Page 49

"It ought to be." We drew up by the stile, where I pointed to the smear of blood, and Mr. Rogers, calling to Hosken to follow him, dashed into the coppice and down the path into the rank undergrowth. I, too, was lifting a leg to throw it over the bar, when Mr. Goodfellow plucked me by the arm. "Terribly hasty friends you keep in these parts, Brooks," he said plaintively. "What's it all about?"

"Why, murder!" said I. "Haven't you heard, man?"

"Not a syllable! Good Lord, you don't mean—" He passed a shaky hand over his forehead as a cry rang back to us through the coppice.

"Here, Hosken, this way! Oh, by the Almighty, be quick, man!"

I vaulted over the stile, Mr. Goodfellow close after me. For two hundred yards and more—three hundred, maybe—we blundered and crashed through the low-growing hazels, and came suddenly to a horrified stand.

A little to the left of the path, between it and the stream, Mr. Rogers and the constable knelt together over the body of a man half hidden in a tangle of brambles.

The corpse's feet pointed towards the path, and I recognized the shoes, as also the sea-cloth trousers, before Mr. Rogers—cursing in his hurry rather than at the pain of his lacerated hands—tore the brambles aside and revealed its face—the face of Captain Coffin, blue-cold in death and staring up from its pillow of rotted leaves.

I felt myself reeling. But it was Mr. Goodfellow who reeled against me, and would have fallen if Hosken the constable had not sprung upon one knee and caught him.

"If you ask my opinion," I heard Hosken saying as he raised himself and held Mr. Goodfellow upright, steadying him, "'tis a case o' guilty conscience, an' I never in my experience saw a clearer."

CHAPTER XIII.

CLUES IN A TANGLE.

"Guilty or not," said Mr. Jack Rogers, sharply, "I'll take care he doesn't escape. Run you down to Miss Belcher's kennels, and fetch along a couple of men—any one you can pick up—to help. And don't make a noise as you go past the cottage; the women there are frightened enough already. Come to think of it, I heard some fellows at work as I drove by just now, thinning timber in the plantation under the kennels. Off with you, man, and don't stand gaping like a stuck pig!"

Thus adjured, Constable Hosken ran, leaving us three to watch the body.

“The man’s pockets have been rifled, that’s plain enough,” Mr. Rogers muttered, as he bent over it again, and with that I suppose I must have made some kind of exclamation, for he looked up at me, still with a horrified frown.

“Hallo! You know him?”

I nodded.

“His name’s Coffin. He came here from Falmouth.”

For a moment Mr. Rogers did not appear to catch the words. His eyes travelled from my face to Mr. Goodfellow’s.

Page 50

"You, too?"

"Knew him intimate. Know him? Why, I live but two doors away from him in the same court."

"Look here," said Mr. Rogers, slowly, after a pause, "this is a black business, and a curst mysterious one, and I wasn't born with the gift of seeing daylight through a brick wall. But speaking as a magistrate, Mr. What's-your-name, I ought to warn you against saying what may be used for evidence. As for you, lad, you'd best tell as much as you know. What d'ye say his name was?"

"Coffin, sir."

"H'm, he's earned it. The back of his head's smashed all to pieces. Lived in Falmouth, you say? And you knew him there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then what was he doing in these parts?"

"He started to call on my father, sir."

"Eh? You knew of his coming?"

"Yes, sir. We planned it together."

Mr. Rogers, still on his knees, leaned back and regarded me fixedly.

"You planned it together?" he repeated slowly. "Well, go on. He started to call on your father? Why?"

"He wanted to show my father something," said I, with a glance at Mr. Goodfellow. "Are you sure, sir, there's nothing in his pockets?"

"Not a penny-piece. I'll search 'em again if you insist, though I don't like the job."

"He carried it in his breast-pocket, sir; there, on the left side."

"Then your question's easy to answer." Mr. Rogers turned back the lapel and pointed. The pocket hung inside out. "But what was it he carried?"

I hesitated, with another glance towards Mr. Goodfellow, who at the same moment uttered a cry and sprang for a thicket of brambles directly behind Mr. Rogers's back. Mr. Rogers leapt up, with an oath.

"No, you don't!" he threatened, preparing to spring in pursuit.

But Mr. Goodfellow, not heeding him, plunged a hand among the brambles and drew forth a walking-stick of ebony, carved in rings, ending with a ferrule in an iron spike—Captain Coffin's walking-stick.

"I glimpsed at it, there, lyin' like a snake," he began, and let fall the stick with another sudden, sharp cry. "Ur-rh! There's blood upon it!"

Mr. Rogers picked it up and examined it loathingly. Blood there was—blood mixed with grey hairs upon its heavy ebony knob, and blood again upon its wicked-looking spike.

"This settles all question of the weapon," he said. "The owner of this—"

We cried out, speaking together, that the stick belonged to the murdered man; and just then a voice hailed us, and Constable Hosken came panting up, with two of Miss Belcher's woodmen at his heels.

Mr. Rogers directed them to fetch a hurdle. Then came the question whither to carry the corpse, and after some discussion one of the woodmen suggested that Miss Belcher's cricket pavilion lay handy, a couple of hundred yards beyond the rise of the park, across the stream. "At this time of year the lady wouldn't object—"

Page 51

Mr. Rogers shuddered.

“And the last time I saw the inside of it ’twas at Lydia’s Cricket-Week Ball—and the place all flags and lanterns, and a good third of the men drunk! Well, carry him there if you must, but damme if I’ll ever find stomach to dance there again!”

The men lifted their burden and carried it out into the lane, where the rest of us pulled away the furze-bushes stopping the gate into the park, and so followed the body up the green slope towards the rise, over which, as we climbed, the thatched roof of the pavilion slowly hove into sight.

“Hallo!” Mr. Rogers halted and stared at the bearers, who also had halted. “What the devil noise is that?”

The noise was that of a sudden blow or impact upon timber. After about thirty seconds it was repeated, and our senses told us that it came from within the pavilion.

“I reckon, sir,” suggested one of the woodmen, “’tis Miss Belcher practising.”

“Good Lord! Come with us, Harry—the rest stay where you are,” Mr. Rogers commanded, and ran towards the pavilion; and as we started I heard a whizzing and cracking within, as of machinery, followed by a double crack of timber.

“Lydia! Lydia Belcher!”

“Hey! What’s the matter now?” I heard Miss Belcher’s voice demand, as he burst in through the doorway. “Take care, the catapult’s loaded!” A whiz, and again a crack. “There now! Oh, well fielded, indeed! Well fiel—Eh? Caught you on the ankle, did it? Well, and you’re lucky it didn’t find your skull, blundering in upon a body in this fashion.”

The first sight that met me as I reached the doorway was Mr. Jack Rogers holding one foot and hopping around with a face of agony. From him my astonished gaze travelled to Miss Lydia Belcher, whom I must pause to describe.

I have hinted before that Miss Belcher was an eccentric; but I certainly cannot have prepared the reader—as I was certainly unprepared myself—for Miss Belcher as we surprised her.

She wore top-boots, but this is a trifle, for she habitually wore top-boots. Upon them, and beneath the short skirt of a red flannel petticoat, she had indued a pair of cricket-guards. Above the red flannel petticoat came, frank and unashamed, an ample pair of stays; above them, the front of a yet ampler chemise and a yellow bandanna kerchief tied in a sailor’s knot; above these, a middle-aged face full of character and not without a touch of moustache on the upper lip; an aquiline nose, grey eyes that apologized to nobody, a broad brow to balance a broad, square jaw, and, on the top of all, a square-



topped beaver hat. So stood Miss Belcher, with a cricket-bat under her arm; an Englishwoman, owner of one of England's "stately homes"; a lady amenable to few laws save of her own making, and to no man save—remotely—the King, whose health she drank sometimes in port and sometimes in gin-and-water.

"Good morning, Jack! Sorry to cut you over with that off-drive; but you shouldn't have come in without knocking. Eh? Is that Harry Brooks?" Her face grew grave for a moment before she turned upon Mr. Rogers that smile which, if usually latent and at the best not entirely feminine, was her least dubitable charm. "Now, upon my word. Jack, you have more thoughtfulness than ever I gave you credit for."

Page 52

Mr. Rogers stared at her.

“An hour’s knockabout with me will do the child more good than moping in the house, and I ought to have thought of it myself. Come along, Harry Brooks, and play me a match at single wicket. Help me push away the catapult there into the corner. Will you take first innings, or shall we toss?”

The catapult indicated by Miss Belcher was a formidable-looking engine with an iron arm or rod terminating in a spoon-shaped socket, and worked by a contrivance of crank and chain. You placed your cricket-ball in the socket, and then, having wound up the crank and drawn a pin which released the machinery, had just time to run back and defend your wicket as the iron rod revolved and discharged the ball with a jerk. The rod itself worked on a slide, and could be shortened or extended to vary the trajectory, and the exercise it entailed in one way and another had given Miss Belcher’s cheeks a fine healthy glow.

“Whew!” she exclaimed, tucking the bat under her arm and wiping her forehead with a loose end of her yellow bandana. “I’m feelin’ like the lady in ‘The Vicar of Wakefield’; by which I don’t mean the one that stooped to folly, but the one that was all of a muck of sweat.”

“My dear Lydia,” gasped Mr. Rogers, “we haven’t come to play cricket! Put down your bat and listen to me. There’s the devil to pay in this parish of yours. To begin with, we’ve found another body—”

“Eh? Where?”

“In the plantation under the slope here—close beside the path, and about two gunshots off the lane.”

“What have you done with it?”

“Two of your fellows are fetching it along. I was going to ask you as a favour to let it lie here for the time while we follow up the search.”

“Of course you may. But who is it?”

“An old man in sea clothes. Harry knows him; says he hails from Falmouth, and that his name is Coffin. And we’ve arrested a young fellow on suspicion, though I begin to think he hasn’t much to do with it; but, as it happens, he comes from Falmouth too, and knows the deceased.”

Miss Belcher hitched an old riding-skirt off a peg and indued it over her red flannel petticoat, fastening it about her waist with a leathern strap and buckle.

“Well, the first thing is to fetch the body along, and then I’ll go down with you and have a look.”

“I’ve halted the men about a hundred yards down the hill. I thought perhaps you’d step straight along with me to the house, so as to be out of the way when they—But, anyhow, if you insist on coming, we can fetch across the cricket-field and down to the left, so that you needn’t meet it.”

“Bless the man!”—Miss Belcher had turned to another peg, taken down a loose weather-stained gardening-jacket, and was slipping an arm into the sleeve—“you don’t suppose, do you, that I’m the sort of person to be scared by a dead body? Open the door, please, and lead the way. This is a serious business, Jack, and I doubt if you have the head for it.”

Page 53

Sure enough, the sight of the dead body on the hurdle shook Miss Belcher's nerve not at all, or, at any rate, not discernibly.

"Humph!" she said. "Take him to the pavilion and cover him decently. You'll find a yard or two of clean awning in the left-hand corner of the scoring-box." She eyed Mr. Goodfellow for a couple of seconds and swung round upon Mr. Rogers. "Is that the man you've arrested?"

Mr. Rogers nodded.

"Fiddlestick-end!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Fiddlestick-end! Look at the man's face. And you call yourself a justice of the peace?"

"It was thrust upon me," said Mr. Rogers, modestly. "I don't say he's guilty, mind you; and, of course, if you say he isn't—"

"Look at his face!" repeated Miss Belcher; and, turning, addressed Mr. Goodfellow. "My good man, you hadn't any hand in this—eh?"

"No, ma'am; in course I hadn't," Mr. Goodfellow answered fervently.

"There! You hear what he says?"

"Lydia, Lydia! I've the highest possible respect for your judgment; but isn't this what you might cull a trifle—er—summary?"

"It saves time," said Miss Belcher. "And if you're going to catch the real culprit, time is precious. Now take me to see the spot."

But at this point Mr. Goodfellow's emotions overmastered him, and he broke forth into the language of rhapsody.

"O woman, woman!" exclaimed Mr. Goodfellow, "whatever would the world do without your wondrous instink!"

"Bless the man!"—Miss Belcher drew back a pace—"is he talking of me?"

"No, ma'am; generally, or, as you might say, of the sex as a whole. Mind you, I won't go so far as to deny that the gentleman here—or the constable, for that matter—had some excuse to be suspicious. But to think o' me liftin' a hand against poor old Danny Coffin! Why, ma'am, the times I've a-led him home from the public when incapable is not to be numbered; and only at this very moment in my little shop, home in Falmouth, I've a

corner cupboard of his under repair that he wouldn't trust to another living soul! And along comes you an' say, 'That man's innocent! Look at his face!' you says, which it's downright womanly instink, if ever there was such a thing in this world."

"A corner cupboard!" I gasped. "You have the corner cupboard?"

Mr. Goodfellow nodded. "I took it home unbeknowns to the old man. Many a time he'd spoken to me about repairin' it, the upper hinge bein' cracked, as you may remember. But when it came to handin' it over I could never get him. So that afternoon, the coast bein' clear and him sitting drunk in the Plume o' Feathers, as again you will remember —"

But here Miss Belcher shot out a hand and gripped my collar to steady me as I reeled. I dare say that hunger and lack of sleep had much to do with my giddiness; at any rate, the grassy slope had begun all of a sudden to heave and whirl at my feet.

Page 54

"Drat the boy! *He's* beginning now!"

"Take me home," I implored her, stammering. "Please, Miss Belcher!"

"Now, I'll lay three to one," said Miss Belcher, holding me off and regarding me, "that no one has thought of giving this child an honest breakfast. And"—she turned on Mr. Jack Rogers—"you call yourself a justice of the peace!"

CHAPTER XIV.

HOW I BROKE OUT THE BED ENSIGN.

We were seated in council in the little parlour of Minden Cottage— Miss Belcher, Miss Plinlimmon, Mr. Jack Rogers, Mr. Goodfellow, and I. Mr. Goodfellow had been included at Miss Belcher's particular request. Constable Hosken had been despatched to search the plantation thoroughly and to report. Two other constables had arrived, and were coping, in front and rear of the cottage, with a steady if straggling incursion of visitors from the near villages and hamlets of St. Germans, Hessenford, Bake, and Catchfrench, drawn by reports of a second murder to come and stand and gaze at the premises. The report among them (as I learned afterwards) ran that a second body—alleged by some to be mine, by others to be Ann the cook's—had been discovered lying in its own blood in the attic; but the marvel was how the report could have spread at all, since Miss Belcher had sworn the two woodmen to secrecy. Whoever spread it could have known very little, for the sightseers wasted all their curiosity on the house and concerned themselves not at all with the plantation.

From the plantation Miss Belcher had led me straight to the house, and there in the darkened parlour I had told my story, corroborated here and there by Mr. Goodfellow. In the intervals of my narrative Miss Belcher insisted on my swallowing great spoonfuls of hot bread-and-milk, against which—faint though I was and famished—my gorge rose. Also the ordeal of gulping it under four pairs of eyes was not a light one. But Miss Belcher insisted, and Miss Belcher stood no nonsense.

I told them of my acquaintance with Captain Coffin; how he had invited me to his lodgings and promised me wealth; of his studying navigation, of his reference to the island and the treasure hidden on it, and of the one occasion when he vouchsafed me a glimpse of the chart; of the French prisoner, Aaron Glass, and how we escaped from him, and of the plan we arranged together at the old windmill; how Captain Danny had taken boat to board the St. Mawes packet; how the man Glass had followed; how I had visited the lodgings, and of the confusion I found there. I described the ex-prisoner's appearance and clothing in detail, and here I had Mr. Goodfellow to confirm me under cross-examination.

“An’ the cap’n,” said he, “was afraid of him. I give you my word, ladies and gentlemen, I never saw a man worse scared in my life. Put up his hands, he did, an’ fairly screeched, an’ bolted out o’ the door with his arm linked in the lad’s.”

Page 55

Three or four times in the course of my narrative I happened to thrust my hands into my breeches-pocket, and was reminded of the gold eyeglass concealed there. I had managed very artfully to keep Captain Branscome entirely out of the story, but twice under examination I was forced to mention him—and each time, curiously enough, in answer to a question of Miss Belcher's.

"You are sure this Captain Coffin showed the chart to no one but yourself?" she asked.

"I am pretty sure, ma'am."

"There was always a tale about Falmouth that Cap'n Danny had struck a buried treasure," said Mr. Goodfellow. "'Twas a joke in the publics, and with the street boys; but I never heard tell till now that any one took it serious."

"He was learning navigation," mused Miss Belcher. "What was the name of his teacher?"

"A Captain Branscome, ma'am. He's a teacher at Stimcoe's."

"Lives in the house, does he?"

"No, ma'am."

"A *Captain* Branscome, you say?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's a retired packet captain, and lame of one leg. Every one in Falmouth knows Captain Branscome."

"H'm! Wouldn't this Captain Branscome wonder a little that a man of your friend's age, and (we'll say) a bit wrong in his head, should want to learn navigation?"

"He might, ma'am."

"He certainly would," snapped Miss Belcher. "And wouldn't this Captain Branscome know it was perfectly useless to teach such a man?"

"I dare say he would, ma'am," I answered, guiltily recalling Captain Branscome's own words to me on this subject.

"Then why did he take the man's money, eh? Well, go on with your story."

I breathed more easily for a while, but by-and-by, when I came to tell of the discussion by the old windmill, I felt her eyes upon me again.

“Wait a moment. Captain Coffin gave you a key, and this key was to open the corner cupboard in his lodgings. Wasn’t it rather foolish of him to send you, seeing that this Aaron Glass had seen you in his company, and would recognize you if he were watching the premises, which was just what you both feared?”

“He didn’t count on me to go,” I admitted; “at least, not first along.”

“On whom, then?”

“On Captain Branscome, ma’am.”

“Oh! Did he send you with that message to Captain Branscome?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Then why didn’t you tell us so? Well, when you took the message, what did Captain Branscome say? And why didn’t he go?”

“He was not at home, ma’am. Mr. Stimcoe had given us a holiday in honour of the prisoners.”

“I see. So Captain Branscome was off on an outing? When did he return?”

“I didn’t see him that evening, ma’am.”

“That’s not an answer to my question. I asked, When did he return?”

“Not until yesterday afternoon.”

I had to think before giving this answer, so long a stretch of time seemed to lie between me and yesterday afternoon.

Page 56

"Where had he been spending his holiday meanwhile?"

"He didn't tell me, ma'am."

"At all events, he didn't turn up for school next day, nor the next again, until the afternoon. Queer sort of academy, Stimcoe's. Did Mr. Stimcoe make any remark on his under-teacher's absence?"

"No, ma'am."

"The school went on just as usual?"

"No-o, ma'am"—I hesitated—"not quite just as usual. Mr. Stimcoe was unwell."

"Drunk?"

"My dear Miss Belcher!" put in the scandalized Plinny. "A scholar, and such a gentleman!"

"Fiddlestick-end!" snapped the unconscionable lady, not removing her eyes from mine. "Was this man Stimcoe drunk, eh? No; I beg your pardon," she corrected herself. "I oughtn't to be asking a boy to tell tales out of school. 'Thou shalt not say anything to get another fellow into trouble'—that's the first and last commandment—eh, Harry Brooks? But, my good soul"—she turned on Plinny—"if 'drunk and incapable' isn't written over the whole of that seminary, you may call me a Dutchwoman!"

"There's a point or so clear enough," she announced, after a pause, when I had finished my story.

"We must placard the whole country with a description of that prisoner chap Glass," said Mr. Jack Rogers; "and I'd best be off to Falmouth and get the bills printed at once."

"Indeed?" said Miss Belcher, dryly. "And pray how are you proposing to describe him?"

"Why, as for that, I should have thought Harry's description here, backed up by Mr. Goodfellow's, was enough to lay a trail upon any man. My dear Lydia, a fellow roaming the country in a red coat, drill trousers, and a japanned hat!"

"It would obviously excite remark: so obviously that the likelihood might even occur to the man himself."

Mr. Rogers looked crestfallen for a moment.

"You suggest that by this time he has changed his rig?"

"I suggest, rather, that he started by changing it, say, as far back as St. Mawes. Some one must ride to St. Mawes at once and make inquiries." Miss Belcher drummed her fingers on the table. "But the man," she said thoughtfully, "will have reached Plymouth long before this."

"You don't think it possible he went back the same way he came?"

"In a world, Jack, where you find yourself a magistrate, all things are possible. But I don't think it at all likely."

"It's a rum story altogether," mused Mr. Rogers. "A couple of murders in this part of the world, and mixed up with an island full of treasure! Why, damme, 'tis almost like Shakespeare!"

"For my part," observed Miss Plinlimmon, with great simplicity, "though sometimes accused of leaning unduly toward the romantic, I should be inclined to set down this story of Captain Coffin's to hallucination, or even to stigmatize it as what I believe is called in nautical parlance 'a yarn.'"

Page 57

"And small blame to you, my dear!" agreed Miss Belcher; "only, you see, when folks go about killing one another, the hallucination begins to look disastrously as if there were something in it."

"Yet I still fail to see," urged Plinny, "why our dear Major should have fallen a victim."

"It's plain as a pikestaff, if you'll excuse me," Mr. Rogers answered her. "This Coffin carried the chart on him, meaning to deliver it into the Major's keeping. He came here, entered the garden by the side-gate, found the Major in the summer-house, told his story, handed over the chart, and was making his way back to the high-road through the plantation, when he came full on this man Aaron Glass, who had tracked him all the way from St. Mawes. Glass fell on him, murdered him, rifled his pockets, and, finding nothing—but having some hint, perhaps—pursued his way to the garden here. There in the summer-house he found the Major, who meanwhile had fetched his cashbox from the house and locked the chart up in it. What followed, any one can guess."

"Not a bad theory, Jack!" murmured Miss Belcher, still drumming softly on the table. "Indeed, 'tis the only explanation, but for one or two things against it."

"For instance?"

"For instance, I don't see why the Major should want to go to the house and bring back his cashbox to the garden. Surely the simple thing was to take the paper, or whatever it was, straight to the house, lock it up, and leave the cashbox in its usual place? I don't see, either, what that box was doing, later on, in the brook below my lodge-gate; for, by every chance that I can reckon, the murderer—supposing him to be this man Glass—would have pushed on in haste for Plymouth, whereas my lodge-gate lies half a mile in the opposite direction."

"Are those all your objections?" asked Mr. Rogers. "Because, if so, I must say they don't amount to much."

"They don't amount to much," Miss Belcher agreed, "but they don't, on the other hand, quite cover all my doubts. However, there's less doubt, luckily, about the next step to be taken. You send Hosken or some one to Torpoint Ferry to inquire what strangers have crossed for Plymouth during these forty-eight hours. You meanwhile borrow my roan filly—your own mare is dead-beat—clap her in the tilbury, and off you go to St. Mawes, and find out how this man Glass got hold of a change of clothes. Take Mr. Goodfellow with you, and while you are playing detective at St. Mawes, he can cross over to Falmouth and fetch along the corner cupboard. Harry has the key, and we'll open it here and read what the captain has to say in this famous roll of paper. It won't do more than tantalize us, I very much fear, seeing that the chart has disappeared, and likely enough for ever."

But it had not.

It so happened that while I stood by my father's bedside that morning I had noticed a flag, rolled in a bundle and laid upon the chest of drawers beside his dressing-table. I concluded at once that Plinny had fetched it from the summer-house to spread over his coffin.

Page 58

Women know nothing about flags. This one was a red ensign, in those days a purely naval flag, carried (since Trafalgar) by the highest rank of admirals. Ashore, any one could hoist it, but the flag to cover a soldier's body was the flag of Union.

This had crossed my mind when I caught sight of the red ensign on the chest of drawers; and again in the summer-house, as I lifted the lid of the flag-locker and noted the finger-marks in the dust upon it, I guessed that Plinny had visited it with pious purpose, and, woman-like, chosen the first flag handy. I had meant to repair her mistake, and again had forgotten my intention.

Mr. Jack Rogers had driven off for St. Mawes, with Mr. Goodfellow in the tilbury beside him. Constable Hosken was on his way to Torpoint. Miss Belcher had withdrawn to her great house, after insisting that I must be fed once more and packed straight off to bed; and fed I duly was, and tucked between sheets, to sleep, exhausted, very nearly the round of the clock.

Footsteps awoke me—footsteps on the landing outside my bedroom. I sat up, guessing at once that they were the footsteps of the carpenter and his men, arrived in the dawn with the shell of my father's coffin. Almost at once I remembered the red ensign, and, waiting until the footsteps withdrew, stole across, half dressed, to my father's room to change it. The faint rays of dawn drifted in through the closed blinds. The coffin-shell lay the length of the bed, and in it his body. The carpenter's men had left it uncovered. In the dim light, no doubt, they had overlooked the flag, which I felt for and found. Tucking it under my arm, I closed the door and tiptoed downstairs, let myself out at the back, and stole out to the summer-house.

There was light enough within to help me in selecting the Union flag from the half-dozen within the locker. I was about to stow the red ensign in its place when I bethought me that, day being so near, I might as well bend a flag upon the flagstaff halliards and half-mast it.

So, with the Union flag under one arm, I carried out the red ensign, bent it carefully, still in a roll, and hoisted it to the truck. In half-masting a flag, you first hoist it in a bundle to the masthead, break it out there, and thence lower it to the position at which you make fast.

I felt the flag's toggle jam chock-a-block against the truck of the staff, and gave a tug, shaking out the flag to the still morning breeze. A second later something thudded on the turf close at my feet.

I stared at it; but the halliards were in my hand, and before picking it up I must wait and make them fast on the cleat. Still I stared at it, there where it lay on the dim turf.

And still I stared at it. Either I was dreaming yet, or this—this thing that had fallen from heaven—was the oilskin bag that had wrapped Captain Coffin's chart.

I stooped to pick it up. At that instant the side-gate rattled, and with a start I faced, in the half light—Captain Branscome.



Page 59

CHAPTER XV.

CAPTAIN BRANSCOME'S CONFESSION—THE MAN IN THE LANE.

He opened the gate and came across the turf to me. I observed that his hand trembled on his walking-cane, and that he dragged his injured leg with a worse limp than usual; also—but the uncertain light may have had something to do with this—his face seemed of one colour with the grey dust that powdered his shoes.

"Good morning, Harry!"

"Good morning, sir," I answered, crushing the oilskin into my pocket and waiting for his explanation.

"You are surprised to see me? The fact is, I have something to tell you, and could not rest easy till it was off my mind. I have travelled here by Russell's waggon,[1] but have trudged a good part of the way, as you see." He glanced down at his shoes. "The pace was too slow for my impatience. I could get no sleep. Though it brought me here no faster, I had to vent my energies in walking." His sentences followed one another by jerks, in a nervous flurry. "You are surprised to see me?" he repeated.

"Why, as to that, sir, partly I am and partly I am not. It took me aback just now to see you standing there by the gate; and," said I more boldly, "it puzzles me yet how you came there and not to the front door, for you couldn't have expected to find me here in the garden at this time in the morning."

"True, Harry; I did not." He paused for a moment, and went on—"It is truth, lad, that I meant to knock at your front door, by-and-by, and ask for you. But, the hour being over-early for calling, I had a mind, before rousing you out of bed, to walk down the lane and have a look over your garden gate. Nay," he corrected himself, "I do not put it quite honestly, even yet. I came in search of something."

"I can save you the trouble, perhaps," said I, and, diving a hand into my breech-pocket, I pulled out the gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

He made no offer to take them, though I held them out to him on my open palm, but fell back a step, and, after a glance at them, lifted his eyes and met mine honestly, albeit with a trouble in his face.

"You found them?"

"Yes."

"To whom have you shown them?"

“To nobody.”

“Yet there has been some inquiry?”

I nodded.

“At which you were present?”

I nodded again.

“And you said nothing of this—this piece of evidence? Why?”

“Because”—I hesitated for a couple of seconds and then gulped hesitation down—

“because I could not believe that you—that you were really—”

“Thank you, Harry.”

“All the same, sir, your name was mentioned.”

“Eh?” He was plainly astonished. “My name mentioned? But why? How? since no one saw me here, and if, as you say, you hid this only evidence—”

“It came up, sir, when they examined me about Captain Danny. You know—do you not?—that they have found his body, too.”

Page 60

"I heard the news being cried in Truro streets as we came through. Poor old Coffin! It is all mystery to me—mystery on mystery! But how on earth should my name have come up in connection with him?"

"Why, about your teaching him navigation, sir."

Captain Branscome passed a hand over his forehead.

"Navigation? Yes; to be sure, I taught him navigation—or, rather, tried to. But what of that?"

"Well, sir, Miss Belcher seemed to think it suspicious."

He reached out a hand, and, taking the glasses from me, sat down upon the stone base of the flagstaff and began feebly to polish them.

"Impossible!" he said faintly, as if to himself; then aloud: "The man was a friend of yours, too, wasn't he?"

"Yes, sir; if you mean Captain Coffin, he was a friend of mine."

"And of mine; and, as you say, he came to me to learn navigation. Now, what connection there can be between that and his being murdered a dozen miles inland—"

But here he broke off, and we both looked up and across the stream as, with a click of the latch, the door there creaked and opened, and Miss Belcher entered the garden. She wore an orange-coloured dressing-gown, top-boots to guard her ankles from the morning dew, a red kerchief tied over her brow to keep her iron-grey locks in place, and over it her customary beaver hat—*et vera incessu patit dea*. Even thus attired did Miss Belcher, a goddess of the dawn, come striding over the footbridge and across the turf to us; and the effect of the apparition upon Captain Branscome's nerves, after a night of travel alongside Russell's van, I can only surmise. I did not observe it, having for the moment no eyes for him.

"Hallo!" said Miss Belcher, walking straight up to us, and halting, with a hand planted, washerwoman fashion, on either hip, as Captain Branscome staggered to his feet and saluted. "Hallo! who's this?"

"Captain Branscome, ma'am," stammered I.

"I thought as much. And what is Captain Branscome doing here?"

"By your leave, ma'am," said Captain Branscome, "I—I was just dropping in for a talk here with my friend Harry Brooks."

“H’m!” sniffed Miss Belcher, and eyed him up and down for a full ten seconds with an uncompromising stare. “As an explanation, sir, you will allow that to be a trifle unsatisfactory. What have you been eating lately?”

“Madam?”

Captain Branscome stared at her in weak bewilderment; and, indeed, the snort which accompanied Miss Belcher’s question seemed to accuse him of impregnating the morning air with a scent of onions.

“You can answer a plain question, I hope?” said she. “When did you eat last, and what was it?”

“To be precise, ma’am—though I don’t understand you—it was an apple, and about—let me see—seven hours ago.”

Miss Belcher turned to me and nodded.

Page 61

"In other words, the man's starving. I don't blame you, Harry Brooks. One can't look for old heads on young shoulders. But, for goodness' sake, take him into the house and give him something to eat!"

"Madam—" again began Captain Branscome, still a prey to that mental paralysis which Mrs. Belcher's costume and appearance ever produced upon strangers, and for which she never made the smallest allowance.

"Don't tell me!" she snapped. "I breed stock and I buy 'em. I know the signs."

"I was about to suggest, ma'am, that—travel-stained as I am—a wash and a shave would be even more refreshing."

"H'm! You're one of those people—eh?—that study appearances?" (In the art of disconcerting by simple interrogation I newer knew Miss Belcher's peer, whether for swiftness, range, or variety.) "Brought a razor with you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Take him to the house, Harry; but first show me where the hens have been laying."

Half an hour later, as Captain Branscome, washed, brushed, and freshly shaven, descended to the breakfast-parlour, Miss Belcher entered the house by the back door, with her hat full of new-laid eggs.

"Nothing like a raw egg to start the day upon," she announced. "I suck 'em, for my part; but some prefer 'em beaten up in a dish of tea."

She suited the action to the word, and beat up one in the Captain's teacup while Plinny carved him a slice of ham.

"Ladies," he protested, "I am ashamed. I do not deserve this hospitality. If you would allow me first to tell my story!"

"*You're* all right," said Miss Belcher. "Couldn't hurt a fly, if you wanted to. There! Eat up your breakfast, and then you can tell us all about it."

The two ladies had, each in her way, a knack of making her meaning clear without subservience to the strict forms of speech.

"It will be a weight off one's mind," declared Plinny, "even if it should prove to be the last straw."

“There’s one thing to be thankful for,” chimed in Miss Belcher, “and that is, Jack Rogers has gone to St. Mawes. When there’s serious business to be discussed I always thank a Providence that clears the men out of the way.”

I glanced at Captain Branscome. Assuredly he had come with no intention at all of unbosoming himself before a couple of ladies. He desired—desired desperately, I felt sure—to confide in me alone. But Miss Belcher’s off-handish air of authority completely nonplussed him; he sat helplessly fidgeting with his breakfast-plate.

“To tell you the truth, ladies,” he began, “I had not expected this— this audience. It finds me, in a manner of speaking, unprepared.” He ran a finger around the edge of his saucer after the manner of one performing on the musical glasses, and threw a hunted glance at the window, as though for a way of escape. “My name, ladies, is Branscome. I was once well-to-do, and commanded a packet in the service of his Majesty’s Postmasters-General. But times have altered with me, and I am now an usher in a school, and a very poor man.”

Page 62

He paused; looked up at Miss Belcher, who had squared her elbows on the table in very unladylike fashion; and cleared his throat before proceeding—

“You will excuse me for mentioning this, but it is an essential part of my story.”

“The Stimcoes,” suggested Miss Belcher, “didn’t pay up—eh?”

“Mr. Stimcoe—though a scholar, ma’am—has suffered from time to time from pecuniary embarrassment.”

“—Traceable to drink,” interpolated Miss Belcher, with a nod towards Plinny. “No, sir; you need not look at Harry: *he* has told us nothing. I formed my own conclusions.”

“Mrs. Stimcoe, ma’am—for I should tell you she keeps the purse—is too often unable to make two ends meet, as the saying is. I believe she paid when she could, but somehow my salary has always been in arrear. I have used remonstrance with her, before now, to a degree which it shames me to remember; yet, in spite of it, I have sometimes found myself on a Saturday, after a week’s work, without a loaf of bread in the cupboard. I doubt, ma’am, if any one who has not experienced it can wholly understand the power of mere hunger to degrade a man; to what lengths he can be urged, willy-nilly, as it were, by the instinct to satisfy it. There were Sabbaths, ma’am, when to attend divine worship seemed a mockery; the craving drove me away from all congregations of Christian men and out into the fields, where—I tell it with shame, ma’am—I have stolen turnips and eaten them raw, loathing the deed even worse than I loathed the vegetable, for the taste of which—I may say—I have a singular aversion. Well, among my pupils was Harry here, whom I discovered to be the son of an old friend of mine. I dare to call the late Major James Brooks a friend in spite of the difference between our stations in life—a difference he himself was good enough to forget. Our acquaintance began on the *Londonderry* transport, which I commanded, and in which I brought him home from Corunna to Plymouth in the January of 1809. It ended with the conclusion of that short and anxious passage. But I had always remembered Major Brooks as one who approached, if ever man did, the ideal of an officer and a gentleman. Now at first, ladies, the discovery suggested no thought to me beyond the pleasure of knowing that my old friend was alive and hale, and the hope of seeing Harry grow up to be as good a man as his father. But by-and-by I found a thought waking and growing, and awake again and itching after I had done my best to kill it, that the Major might be moved by the story of an old shipmate brought so low. God forgive me, ladies!” Captain Branscome put up a hand to cover his brow. “The very telling of it degrades me over again; but I came here to make a clean breast, and there is no other way. I had cross-examined Harry about the Major and his habits—not always allowing to myself why I asked him many trivial questions. And then suddenly the temptation

Page 63

came to a head. Certain Englishmen discharged from the French war-prisons were landed at Plymouth. The town turned out to welcome the poor fellows home, and the Mayor entertained them at a banquet, to which also he invited some two hundred townsmen. Among the guests he was good enough to include me; for it has been a consolation to me, ladies, and a source of pride, that my friends in Falmouth have not withdrawn in adversity the respect which in old days my uniform commanded."

"Captain Branscome is not telling you the half of it," I broke in eagerly. "Every one in Falmouth knows him to be a hero. Why, he has a sword of honour at home, given him for one of the bravest battles ever fought!"

"Gently, boy—gently!" Captain Branscome corrected me, with a smile, albeit a sad one. "Youth is generous, ladies; it sees these things through a haze which colours and magnifies them, and—and it's a very poor kind of hero you'll consider me before I have done. Where was I? Ah, yes, to be sure—the banquet. His Worship can little have guessed what his invitation meant to me, or that, while others thanked him for a compliment, to me it offered a satisfying meal such as I had not eaten for months. Mr. Stimcoe had given the school a holiday. In short, I attended.

"I fear, ladies, that the food and the generous wine together must have turned my head—there is no other explanation; for when the meal was over and I sat listening to the speeches, but fumbling with a glass of port before me, scarcely with the half-crown in my pocket which must carry me over another week's house-keeping, all of a sudden the man inside me rose in revolt. I felt such poverty as mine to be unendurable, and that I was a slave, a spiritless fool, to put up with it. There must be hundreds of good, Christian folk in the world who had only to know to stretch out a hand of help and gladly, as I would have helped such a case in the days of my own prosperity. Remember, I am not putting this forward as a sober plea. I know it now to be false, self-cheating, the apology that every beggar makes for himself, the specious argument that every poor man must resist who would hold fast by his manhood. But there, with the wine in me and the juices of good meat, the temptation took me at unawares and mastered me as I had never allowed it to master me while I hungered. I saw the world in a sudden rosy light; I felt that my past sufferings had been unnecessary. I thought of Major Brooks—"

"Bless the man!" interjected Miss Belcher. "He's coming to the point at last."

"Your pardon, ma'am. I will be briefer. I thought of Major Brooks. I took a resolve there and then to extend my holiday; to walk hither to Minden Cottage, and lay my case before him. The banquet had no sooner broken up than I started. I reached Truro at nightfall, and hired a bed there for sixpence. Early next morning I set forward again. By this time the impulse had died out

Page 64

of me, but I still walked forward, playing with my intention, always telling myself that I could relinquish it and turn back to Falmouth, cheating—yes, I fear deliberately cheating—myself with the assurance until more than half the journey lay behind me, and to turn back would be worse than pusillanimous. At St. Austell a carrier offered me a lift, and brought me to Liskeard. Thence I walked forward again, and in the late afternoon came in sight of Minden Cottage.

“I recognized it at once from Harry’s description, and at first I was minded to walk up and knock boldly at the front door. But remembering also the lad’s account of the garden and how the Major would spend the best part of his day there—and partly, I fancy, being nervous and uncertain with what form of words to present myself—I pulled up at the angle of the house, where the lane comes up alongside the garden wall to join the road, and halted, to collect myself and study my bearings.

“The time was about twenty minutes after five, and the light pretty good. But the lane is pretty well overgrown, as you know. I looked down and along it, and it appeared to end in a tangle of brambles. I turned my attention to the house, and was studying it through my glasses, taking stock of its windows and chimneys, and generally (as you might say) reckoning it up, along with the extent of its garden, when, happening to take another glance down the lane, to run a measure of the garden wall—or perhaps a movement caught my eye—I saw a man step across the path between the brambles, out of the garden, as you might say, and into the plantation opposite. The path being so narrow, I glimpsed him for half a second only. But the glimpse of him gave me a start, for, if to suppose it had been anywise possible, I could have sworn the man was one I had known in Falmouth and left behind there.”

“Captain Coffin!” I exclaimed.

“Ay, lad, Captain Coffin—Captain Danny Coffin. But what should he be doing at Minden Cottage?”

“The quicker you proceed, sir,” said Miss Belcher, rapping the table, “the sooner we are likely to discover.”

[1] Russell’s waggons—“Russell and Co., Falmouth to London”—were huge vehicles that plied along the Great West Road under an escort of soldiers, and conveyed the bullion and other treasure landed at Falmouth by the Post Office packets. They were drawn, always at a foot-pace, by teams of six stout horses. The waggoner rode beside on a pony, and inside sat a man armed with pistols and blunderbuss. Poor travellers used these waggons, walking by day, and sleeping by night beneath the tilt.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAPTAIN BRANSCOME'S CONFESSION—THE FLAG AND THE CASHBOX.

"Well, ma'am," resumed Captain Branscome, "so strong was the likeness to old Coffin, and yet so incredible was it he should be in these parts, that, almost without stopping to consider, I turned down the lane on the chance of another glimpse of the man. This brought me, of course, to the stile leading into the plantation; but the path there, as you know, takes a turn among the trees almost as soon as it starts, and runs, moreover, through a pretty thick undergrowth. The fellow, whoever he was, had disappeared.

Page 65

"I can't say but what I was still puzzled, though the likeliest explanation—indeed, the only likely one—seemed to be that my eyes had played me a trick. I had pretty well made up my mind to this when I turned away from the stile to have a look at the garden gate on the other side of the lane; and over it, across the little stretch of turf, I caught sight of the summer-house and of Major Brooks standing there in the doorway with a bundle between his hands—a bundle of something red, which he seemed to be wrapping round with a piece of cord.

"Here, then, was the very man I had come to see; and here was a chance of getting speech with him and without the awkwardness of asking it through a servant, perhaps of having to invent an excuse for my visit. Without more ado, therefore, I made bold to lift the latch of the gate and step into the garden.

"At the sound of the latch—I can see him now—Major Brooks lifted his head with a curious start, and tucked the bundle under his arm. The movement was like that of a man taken at unawares, and straightening himself up to meet an attack. I cannot describe it precisely, but that was just the impression it made on me, and it took me aback for a moment, so that I paused as the gate fell-to and latched itself behind me.

"‘Halt there!’ the Major commanded, facing me full across the turf. ‘Halt, and tell me, please, why you have come back!’

"This puzzled me worse for a moment, for the light was good, though drawing towards sunset, and it seemed impossible that, looking straight at me, he could mistake me for the man who had just left the garden. Then I remembered what Harry had told me of his father's blindness.

"My silence naturally made him more suspicious.

"‘Who is it there? Your name, please?’ he demanded sharply.

"‘Sir,’ I answered, ‘I beg your pardon for coming thus unannounced, but my name is Branscome, and I had once the honour to be shipmate with you on board the *Londonderry* transport.’

"For a while he continued to stare at me in his blind way.

"‘Yes,’ he said slowly, at length; ‘yes; I remember your voice, sir. But what in the name of wonder brings you to my garden just now?’

"‘Your son Harry, sir,’ said I, ‘some time ago gave me a message from you. If ever (he said) I found myself in the neighbourhood of Minden Cottage you would be pleased to receive a visit from me.’



“‘Yes,’ said he, but still with a something in his voice between wonder and suspicion; ‘that’s true enough. I have always retained the highest respect for Captain Branscome, and by your voice you are he. But—but—’ He hesitated, and fired another question point-blank at me: ‘You come from Falmouth?’

“‘I do, sir.’

“‘Alone?’

“‘Yes, sir. I have walked all the way from Falmouth, and without a companion.’

Page 66

“Look here, my friend,’ he said, after seeming to ponder for a moment, ‘if you mean ill, you must have altered strangely from the Captain Branscome I used to know, and if you mean well you have timed your visit almost as strangely.’ He paused again. ‘Either you know what I mean, or you do not; if you do not, you will have to forgive a great deal in this reception; and you will, to begin with, forgive my asking you, on your word of honour, if on your journey hither you have overtaken or met or recognized any one hailing from Falmouth. You do not answer,’ he added, after yet another pause.

“Why, as to that, sir,’ said I, ‘since leaving Falmouth I have neither met nor overtaken any one of my acquaintance. But, since you put it to me precisely, I will not swear that I have not recognized one. A few minutes ago, standing at the head of the lane here, I saw a man cross it, presumably from this garden, and take the path leading through the plantation yonder. It certainly strikes me that I knew the man, and I followed him down the lane here to make sure.’

“Why?’ the Major asked me.

“Because, sir,’ said I, ‘it did not seem possible to me that the man I mean could have any business here; besides which, an hour or two before leaving Falmouth I had passed him in the street, and though he had, indeed, the use of his legs, he was too far gone in liquor to recognize me.’

“His name?’ the Major asked.

“Coffin, sir,’ said I; ‘usually known as Captain Coffin, or Captain Danny.’

“A drunkard?’ he asked.

“A man given to liquor,’ said I, ‘by fits and starts; but mild enough in an ordinary way. You might call him the least bit touched in the upper story; of a loose, rambling head, at all events, as I can testify, who have taught him navigation—or tried to.’

“The Major, though he could not see me, seemed to study me with his blind eyes. He stood erect, with the bundle clipped under his left arm; and the bundle I made out to be a flag, rolled up and strapped about with its own lanyard.

“One more question, Captain Branscome,’ said he. ‘This Captain Coffin, as you call him—is he, to the best of your knowledge, an honest man?’

“I answered that I had heard question of Coffin’s sanity, but never of his honesty.

“His sanity, eh?’ said the Major; and I could see he was hung in stays, but he picked up his wind after a second or two, and paid off on another tack. ‘Well, well,’ he said, ‘we’ll drop talking of this Coffin, and turn to the business that brings you here. What is it? For

I take it you've walked all the way from Falmouth for something more than the sake of a chat over old times.'

Page 67

"I remember, ladies, the words he used, though not the tone of them. To tell the truth, though my ears received 'em, I was not listening. I stood there, wishing myself a hundred miles away; but his manner gave me no chance to fob him off with an excuse, or pretend I had dropped in for a passing call. There was nothing for it but to out with my story, and into it I plunged somehow, my tongue stammering with shame. He listened, to be sure, but without offering to help me over the hard places. Indeed, at the first mention of my poverty, I saw all his first suspicions—whatever they had been—return and show themselves in his blind eyes. His mouth was set like a closed trap. Yet he heard me out, and, when I had done, his suspicions seemed to have faded again, for he answered me considerably enough, though not cordially.

"‘Captain Branscome,’ he said, ‘I may tell you at once that I never lend money; and my reason is partly that good seldom comes of it, and partly that I am a poor man—if you can call a man poor who is by a few pounds richer than his needs. But I have a great respect for you’—the ladies will forgive me for repeating his exact words—‘and your voice seems to tell me that you still deserve it; that you have suffered more than you say before being driven to make this appeal. I can do something—though it be little—to help an old comrade. Will you oblige me by stepping into the summer-house here, and taking a seat while I go to the house? I will not keep you waiting more than a few minutes.’

"He picked up his walking-stick, which rested against a chair, just within the doorway, and stood for a moment while I stepped past him and entered the summer-house; and so, with a nod of the head, turned and walked towards the house, using his stick very skilfully to feel his path between the bushes, and still keeping the flag tucked under his left arm.

"So I sat and waited, ladies, on no good terms with myself. The way of the borrower was hard, I found, and the harder because the Major’s manner had not been unkindly, but—if you’ll understand my meaning—only just kindly enough. In short, I don’t know but that I must have out and run rather than endure his charity, had not my thoughts been distracted by this mystery over Captain Coffin. For the Major had said too much, and yet not enough. The man I had seen crossing the lane was certainly Coffin, but to connect him with Minden Cottage I had no clue at all beyond the faint one, Harry, that you and he were acquaintances. Besides, I had seen him, the morning before, in the crowd around the prisoners, and could have sworn he was then—saving your presence, ladies—as drunk as a fiddler. If vehicle had brought him, it could not be any that had passed me on the road, or for certain I should have recognized him. Well, here was a riddle, and I had come no nearer to guessing it when the Major returned.

"He had left his bundle in the house, and in place of it he carried a cashbox, which he set on the table between us, but did not at once open. Instead, he turned to me with a complete change of manner, and held out his hand very frankly.

Page 68

“I owe you an apology, Captain,” said he. ‘To be plain with you, at the moment you appeared, I was half expecting a different kind of visitor, and I fear you received some of the welcome prepared for him. Overlook it, please, and shake hands; and, to get our business over,’—he unlocked the cashbox—‘here are ten guineas, which I will ask you to accept from me. We won’t call it a gift; we will call it an acknowledgement for the extra pains you have put into teaching my son. Tut, man!’ said he, as I protested. ‘Harry has told us all about that. I assure you the youngster came near to wearying us, last holiday, with praise of you.’”

“And so he did,” Plinny here interrupted. “That is to say, sir—I—I mean we were only too glad to listen to him.”

“I thank you, ma’am.” Captain Branscome bowed to her gravely. “I will not deny that the Major’s words gave me pleasure for the moment. He, for his part, appeared to be quite another man. ‘Twas as if between leaving me and returning to the summer-house a load had been lifted from his mind. He counted out the guineas, locked the cashbox again, lit his pipe, and then, seeming to recollect himself, reached down a clean one from a stack above the doorway, and insisted upon my filling and smoking with him. ‘Twas a long while since I had tasted the luxury of tobacco. We talked of old days on the *Londonderry*, of Sir John Moore’s last campaign, of Falmouth and the packets, of the peace and the overthrow of Bonaparte’s ambitions; or, rather, ‘twas he that talked and questioned, while for me ‘twas pleasure enough, and a pleasure long denied me, to sit on terms with a well-read gentleman and listen to talk of a quality which—”

“Which differed from that of the Rev. Philip Stimcoe’s,” suggested Miss Belcher, as he hesitated. “Proceed, sir.”

“I shall add, madam, that the Major very kindly invited me to sleep that night under his roof. I could pick up the coach in the morning (he said). But this I declined, professing that I preferred the night for travelling, and maybe, before tiring myself, would overtake one of Russell’s waggons and obtain a lift; the fact being that, grateful though I found it to sit and converse with him, my conscience was accusing me all the while.

“Towards the end of our talk he had let slip by accident that he was by no means a rich man. The money from that moment began to burn in my pockets, and I had scarcely shaken hands with him and taken my leave—which I did just as the sun was sinking behind the plantation across the lane—before his guineas fairly scorched me. I held on my way for a mile or more. You may have observed, ladies, that I limp in my walk? It is the effect of an old wound. But, I declare to you, my limp was nothing to the thought I dragged with me—the recollection of the Major’s face and the expression that had come over it when I had first confessed my errand. All his subsequent kindness, his sympathy, his hospitality, his frank and easy talk, could not wipe out that recollection. I had sold something which for years it had been my pride to keep. I had forced it on an unwilling buyer. I had taken the money of a poor man, and had given him in exchange

—what? You remember, ladies, those words of Shakespeare— good words, although he puts them into the mouth of a villain—that:

Page 69

“ . . . He who filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.’

“No one had filched my honour—I had sold it to a good man, but yet without enriching him, while in the loss of it I knew myself poor indeed. At the second milestone I turned back, more eager now to find the Major and get rid of the money than ever I had been to obtain it.

“My face was no sooner turned again towards the cottage than I broke into a run, and so good pace I made between running and walking that it cannot have been more than an hour from my leaving the garden before I arrived back at the head of the lane. The evening was dusking in, but by no means dark as yet, even though a dark cloud had crept up from the west and overhung the plantation to the right. I looked down the lane as I entered it, and again—yes, ladies, as surely as before—I saw a man cross it from the garden gate and step into the plantation!

“Who the man was I could not tell, the light being so uncertain. Although he crossed the lane just where Coffin had crossed it and disappeared in just the same manner, I had an impression that he was not Coffin, and that his gait, for one thing, differed from Coffin’s. But I tell you this for what it is worth: I was startled, you may be sure, and hurried down the lane after him even quicker than I had hurried after the first man; but when I came to the stile, he, like the first man, had vanished, and within the plantation it was impossible by this time to see more than twenty yards deep.

“Again I turned and crossed the lane to the garden gate. A sort of twilight lay over the turf between me and the summer-house, and beneath the apple-trees skirting my path to it on the left you might say that it was night; but the water at the foot of the garden threw up a sort of glimmer, and there was a glimmer, too, on the vane above the flagstaff. I noted this and that, though my eyes were searching for Major Brooks in the dark shadow under the pent of the summer-house.

“Towards this I stepped; but in the dark I must have walked a few feet wide of the straight line, for I remember brushing against a low-growing branch of one of the apple-trees, and this must have caught in my eyeglass-ribbon and torn it, for when I came to fumble for them a few seconds later to help my sight, the glasses were gone.

“By this time I had reached the summer-house and come to a halt, three paces, maybe, from the doorstep. ‘Major Brooks!’ I called softly, and then again, but a thought louder, ‘Major Brooks!’

“There was no answer, ladies, and I turned myself half about, uncertain whether to go back up the lane and knock at the front door or to seek my way to the house through the garden. Just then my boot touched something soft, and I bent and saw the Major’s

body stretched across the step close beside my ankles. I stooped lower and put down a hand. It touched his shoulder, and then the ground beneath his shoulder, and the ground was moist. I drew my hand back with a shiver, and just at that moment, as I stared at my fingers, the heavy cloud beyond the plantation lifted itself clear of the trees and let the last of the daylight through—enough to show me a dark stain running from my finger-tips and trickling towards the palm.

Page 70

“And then, ladies—at first I thought of no danger to myself, but ran for the gate, still groping as I went, for my eyeglasses; stumbled across the lane somehow, and over the stile in vain chase of the man I had glimpsed two minutes before. I say a vain chase, for I had not plunged twenty yards into the plantation before—short-sighted mole that I am—I had lost the track. I pulled up, on the point of shouting for help, and with that there flashed on me the thought of the Major’s guineas in my pocket. If I called for help I called down suspicion on myself, and suspicion enough to damn me. How could I explain my presence in the garden? How could I account for the money—straight from the Major’s cashbox?”

Captain Branscome paused and gazed around upon us as if caught once more in that terrible moment of choice. Miss Belcher met his gaze and nodded.

“So the upshot was that you ran for it? Well, I can’t say that I blame you. But, as it happens, if you had stood still the cashbox might have helped to clear you; for it was found next morning, half a mile away in the brook, below my lodge-gate.”

“And there’s one thing,” said Plinny, “we may thank God for, if it is possible to be thankful for anything in this dreadful business. The murderer, whoever he was, got little profit from his crime, for I know pretty well the state of your poor father’s finances, Harry; and if, as Captain Branscome tells us, he had taken ten guineas from the box, there must have been very few left in it.”

“My good soul,” said Miss Belcher, “the man wasn’t after money! He wanted the map this Captain Coffin had left in the Major’s keeping. That’s as plain as the nose on your good, dear face. If the map happened to be in the cashbox, and I’ll bet ten to one it wasn’t—”

“You may bet ten thousand to one!” I cried. “It was never in the cashbox at all. It was wrapped up in the flag my father carried into the house.”

“Bless the boy,” said Miss Belcher; “he’s not half a fool, after all! Yes, yes—where is the flag?”

“On the flagstaff,” said I. “I hoisted it there this morning.”

“Eh?”

“And here,” I panted, jumping up in my excitement, “here is Captain Coffin’s map!”

I heard Miss Belcher breathing hard as I lugged out the oilskin packet, tore open the knotted string which bound it, and, drawing forth the parchment, spread it, with shaking fingers, on the table.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CHART OF MORTALLONE.

While the others drew their chairs closer, and while I spread flat the parchment—which was crinkled (by the action of salt water, maybe)—I had time to assure myself that this was the selfsame chart of which Captain Coffin had once vouchsafed me a glimpse. I remembered the shape of the island, the point marked “Cape Alderman,” the strange, whiskered heraldical monster depicted in the

Page 71

act of rising from the waves off the north-western coast, the equally impossible ship, decorated with a sprit-top-mast and a flag upon it, and charging up under full sail for the southern entry, the name of which ("Gow's Gulf") I must have missed to read in the short perusal Captain Coffin had allowed me. At any rate, I could not recall it. But I recalled the three crosses which showed (so he had told me) where the treasure lay. They were marked in red ink, and I explained their meaning to Miss Belcher, who had pounced upon them at once.

"Fiddlestick-end!" said that lady, falling back on her favourite ejaculation. "Great clumsy crosses of that size! How in the world could any one find a treasure by such marks, unless it happened to be two miles long?"

She pointed to the scale at the head of the chart, which, to be sure, gave six miles to the inch. By the same measurement the crosses covered, each way, from half a mile to three-quarters. Moreover, each had patently been dashed in with two hurried strokes of the pen and without any pretence of accuracy. The first cross covered a "key" or sand-bank off the northern shore of the island; the second sprawled athwart what appeared to be the second height in a range of hills running southward from Cape Alderman, and down along the entire eastern coast at a mean distance of a mile, or a little over, from the sea; while the third was planted full across a grove of trees at the head of the great inlet—Gow's Gulf—to the south, and, moreover, spanned the chief river of the island, which, running almost due south from the back of the hills or mountains (their size was not indicated) below Cape Alderman, discharged itself into the apex of the gulf.

"Without bearings of some sort," said Miss Belcher, "these marks are merely ridiculous."

"You may well say so, ma'am," Captain Branscome answered, but inattentively. "Mortallone—Mortallone," he went on, muttering the word over as if to himself. "It is curious, all the same."

"What is curious?" demanded Miss Belcher.

"Why, ma'am, I have never myself visited the Gulf of Honduras, but among seamen there are always a hundred stories floating about. In a manner of speaking, there is no such shop for gossip as the sea. In every port you meet 'em, in taverns where sailors drink and brag—the liquor being in them—and one man talks and the rest listen, not troubling themselves to believe. It is good to find one's self ashore, you understand? And a good, strong-flavoured yarn makes the landlord and all the shore-keeping folk open their eyes—"

"Bless the man!" Miss Belcher rapped her knuckles on the table. "This is not a 'longshore tavern."

“No, ma’am.”

“Then why not come to the point?”

“The point, ma’am—well, the point is that every one—that is to say, every seaman—has heard tell of treasure knocking about, as you might put it, somewhere in the Gulf of Honduras.”

Page 72

“What sort of treasure?”

“Why, as to that, ma’am, it varies with the story. Sometimes ’tis bar silver from the isthmus, and sometimes ’tis gold plate and bullion that belonged to the old Kings of Mexico; but by the tale I’ve heard offtenest, ’tis church treasure that was run away with by a shipful of logwoodmen in Campeachy Bay. But there again you no sooner fix it as church treasure, and ask where it came from, than you have to choose between half a dozen different accounts. Some say from the Spanish islands—Havana for choice; others from the Main, and I’ve heard places mentioned as far apart as Vera Cruz and Caracas. The dates, too—if you can call them dates at all—vary just as surprisingly.”

“The date on this chart is 1776,” said Miss Belcher, who had been peering at it while the Captain spoke.

“Then, supposing there’s something in poor Coffin’s secret, that gives you the year to start from. We’ll suppose this is the very chart used by the man who hid the treasure. Then it follows the treasure wasn’t hidden before 1776, and that rules out all the yarns about Hornigold, Teach, Bat Roberts, and suchlike pirates, the last of whom must have been hanged a good fifty years before: though here’s evidence”—Captain Branscome laid a forefinger on the chart— “that these gentry had dealings with the island in their day. ‘Gow’s Gulf,’ ‘Cape Fea’—Gow was a pirate and a hard nut at that; and Fea, if I remember, his lieutenant or something of the sort; but they had gone their ways before ever this was printed, and consequently before ever these crosses came to be written on it. You follow me, ma’am?”

Miss Belcher gave a contemptuous sniff which, I doubt not, would have prefaced the remark that an unweaned child would arrive unaided at the same conclusions; but here I interposed.

“Captain Coffin,” said I, “told me that a part of the treasure was church plate, and that he had seen it. He showed me a coin, too, and said it came from the island.”

“Hey, lad? What sort of coin?”

But to this I could give no answer, except that it was a piece of gold, and in size perhaps a trifle smaller than a guinea.

“That’s a pity, lad. The coin might have helped us. You’re sure now that you can’t remember? It hadn’t a couple of pillars engraved on it, for instance?”

I shook my head. I had taken no particular heed of the stamp on the coin.

Captain Branscome sighed his disappointment.

“The church plate don’t help us at all,” he said, “or very little. Why, I’ve heard this Honduras treasure dated so far back as Morgan’s time, when he sacked Panama. The tale went that the priests at Panama or Chagres, or one of those places, on fright of Morgan’s coming, clapped all their treasure aboard ship under a guard of militia—soldiers of some sort, anyway—and that the seamen cut the soldiers’ throats, slipped cable, and away-to-go. But Morgan! He must have died before Queen Anne was born—well, not so far back as that maybe, but then or thenabouts. I tell you, ma’am, this story hangs around every port and every room where seamen gather and drink and take their ways again. ’Tis for all the world like the smell of tobacco-smoke, that tells you some one has come and gone, but leaves you nothing to get hold of. Hallo!—”

Page 73

As the exclamation escaped him, Captain Branscome, who had casually picked up a corner of the parchment between finger and thumb, with a nervous jerk drew the whole chart from under my outspread palms and turned it over face-downwards.

“Eh? But see here!”

He fumbled with his glasses, while Miss Belcher and I, snatching at the chart, almost knocked our heads together as we bent over a corner of it—the left-hand upper corner—and a dozen lines of writing scrawled there in faded ink. They ran thus—

1. Landed by cuttar when wee saw a sail. Lesser Kay N. of Gable. Get open water between two kays S.W. and W. by S., and N. inner point of Gable (where is green patch, good watering) in line with white rock (birds), neer as posble. S. a point E. 3 feet bare, being hurried.
2. Bayse of cliff second hill S.S.W. from Cape Alderman. Here is bank over 2 waterfals. Neer lower fall, 12 paces back from egge, getting island open N.E. beyond rock W. of inlet, and first tree Misery Swamp over Crabtree, W.S.W Bush above rock to rt of fall. Shaddow 1/4 to 4, June 21st, when we left digging.
3. R. bank river, 1 and 1/2 mile up from Gow crikke. Centre tree in clump 5 branch bearing N. and by E. 1/2 point, two forks. R. fork 4ft. red cave under hill 457yds. foot of tree N.N.W. N.B.—The stones here, under rock 4 spans L side.

That was all, except two short entries. The first scribbled aslant under No. 1, and in Captain Coffin’s own handwriting—so Captain Branscome, who knew it, assured us.

N.B.—Took out 5 cases Ap. 5, 1806, besides the boddies. Avging 3/4 cwt. 1 case jewels. We left the clothes, wh. were many.

The second entry appeared to have been penned by the same hand as the original, but more neatly and some while later. The ink, at any rate, was blacker and fresher. It ran:

S.W. ann. aetat. 37. R.I.P.

The handwriting, though rugged—and the indifferent ink may have been to blame for this—was well formed, and, but for the spelling, might have belonged to an educated man.

The reader, if he choose, may follow our example and discuss the above directions for half an hour—I will warrant with as little result. Miss Belcher ended by harking back to the summer-house and to the latest crime—if we might guess, the latest of many—for which this document had been responsible.

“What puzzles me is this: Since the Major had pockets in his coat, why should he have hidden the parcel as he did? So small a parcel, too!”

“Captain Coffin,” I suggested, “may have known that he was being followed.”

“Well?”

“And in handing it over he may have warned my father that there was danger.”

Page 74

"I believe the boy is right," said Captain Branscome. "Now I recall the Major's face at the moment when I rattled the latch, I feel sure he was on his guard. Yes—yes, he had been warned against carrying this on his person—he was wrapping it away for the time —"

"Why, what ails the man?" demanded Miss Belcher, as Captain Branscome stopped short with a groan.

"I was thinking, ma'am, that but for my visit he might never have relaxed his guard—that it was I who helped the murderer to take him at unawares. Nay—worse, ma'am, worse—his last thought may have been that I was the traitor—that the blow he took was from the hand he had filled with gold—that I had returned to kill him in his blindness!"

Captain Branscome bowed his head upon his hands. I saw Plinny—who all this while had sat silent, content to listen—rise, her face twitching, and put out a hand to touch the captain's shoulder. I saw her hand hesitate as her sense of decorum overtook her pity and seemed to reason with it. And with that I heard the noise of wheels on the road.

"Hallo!"—Miss Belcher pricked up her ears. "Here's that nuisance Jack Rogers turning up again!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CONTENTS OF THE CORNER CUPBOARD.

Mr. Jack Rogers, as he pulled up by the porch and directed me to stand by the young mare's head, wore a look of extreme self-satisfaction. Beside him, also beaming, sat Mr. Goodfellow, with the corner cupboard nursed between his knees.

"Capital news, lad!" announced Mr. Rogers, climbing down from the tilbury. "The filly's pretty near dead-beat, though—must see to her and cool her down before telling it. Now, then, Mr. Goodfellow, if you'll hand out the cupboard. By the way, sonny, I hope Miss Plinlimmon can give us breakfast. I'm as hungry as a hunter, for my part, and deserve it, too, after a good night's work. With my fol-de-rol, diddledy—" He started to hum, but checked himself shamefacedly. "There I go again, and I beg your pardon! 'Tis the most difficult thing in the world to me to behave myself in a house of mourning."

Mr. Goodfellow by this time had clambered down, and was embracing the corner cupboard as though he had parted from it for an age, instead of for fifty seconds at the farthest.

"Carry it indoors, but don't open it till I'm ready," commanded Mr. Rogers, stooping under the filly to loosen her belly-band. "I'm a magistrate, remember, and these things

must be done in order. You come along with me, Harry; that is, if you have the key in your pocket.”

“I have, sir.”

“Right! Then come along with me, and you’ll be out of harm’s way.”

So, while Mr. Goodfellow carried the cupboard into the house, Mr. Rogers and I attended to the filly.

Page 75

This took, maybe, twenty minutes; but Mr. Rogers was a sportsman, and thought of his horse before himself. Not till all was done, and well done, did he announce again that he was devilish peckish; nor did I take the measure of his meaning until, returning to the breakfast-room where Mr. Goodfellow sat before a plate of bread and cream, he helped himself to a mass of veal pie fit for a giant, and before attacking it drained a tankard of cider at a single pull, while he nodded over the rim to Captain Branscome, to whom Plinny introduced him.

“Jack,” said Miss Belcher, with a jerk of her thumb towards the Captain, “I’ll lay you two to one in guineas, that our news is more important than yours!”

“I take you,” said Mr. Rogers.

“It will save time if we tell it while you’re eating, and will save you the trouble of talking with your mouth full.”

Once or twice, while she abridged Captain Branscome’s narrative, Mr. Rogers set down knife and fork, and stared at her with round eyes, his jaws slowly chewing.

“And I reckon,” concluded Miss Belcher, “that you won’t dispute your owing me a guinea.”

“Wait a bit!” Mr. Rogers pushed his empty plate away, selected a clean one, and helped himself to six slices of ham. “To begin with, I’ve found scent and laid on the hounds.”

“Where?”

“At St. Mawes. Captain Coffin, the murdered man, landed there from the ferry on the night of the 11th, at a few minutes before nine, and walked straight to the Lugger Inn, above the quay. There he borrowed fifteen shillings off the landlord, who knew him well; ordered two glasses of hot gin-and-water, drank them, paid down sixpence, and took the road that leads east through Gerrans village. His tale was that he had a relative to visit at Plymouth Dock, and meant to push on that night so far as Probus, and there sleep and wait for Russell’s waggon.”

“But his road,” I objected, “wouldn’t lie through Gerrans village, unless he went by the short cut through the field beyond St. Mawes, and took the ferry at Percuil.”

“Right, lad; and that is precisely what he did; for—to push ahead a bit—we overran his track on the main road, and, learning of that same short cut, drove back along the other side of the creek to Percuil, and had a talk with the ferryman. The ferryman told us that at ten o’clock, or thereabouts, he was going to bed having closed the ferry, when a voice on the other shore began bawling ‘Over!’ He slipped on his boots again, rowed across, and took over a man who was certainly Captain Coffin.”

“He was alone?” I asked.

“He came across the ferry alone,” said Mr. Rogers, “and I dare say he had no idea of being followed. But back at St. Mawes, while he was drinking gin-and-water in the taproom, another man came to the door of the Lugger. This man sent for the landlord—Bogue by name—and asked to be shown into a private room. He was dressed in odds-and-ends of garments, including a soiled regimental coat and dirty linen trousers.”

Page 76

"The French prisoner!" said I.

"That's the man. He told Bogue, fair and straight, he was an ex-prisoner, and off the *Wellinboro'* transport, arrived that day in harbour. He had money in his pocket—in Bogue's presence he pulled out a fistful of gold—and he pitched a tale that he was bound for his home, a little this side of Saltash, but couldn't face the road in the clothes he wore. You'll admit that this was reasonable when you've seen 'em, for I brought the suit along in the tail of the tilbury. For a pound, Bogue fitted him up with an old suit of his own—coat and waistcoat of blue sea-cloth, not much the worse for wear, duck trousers, a tarpaulin hat, and a flannel shirt marked J. B. (Bogue's Christian name is Jeremiah). The fellow had no shirt when he presented himself—nothing between the bare buff and the uniform coat that he wore buttoned across his chest. And here our luck comes in. He was shy of stripping in Bogue's presence, and, on pretence of feeling chilly, sent him out of the room for a glass of hot grog. As it happened, Bogue met the waiting-maid in the passage, coming out of the bar with a tray and half a dozen hot grogs that had been ordered by customers in the tap-room. He picked up one, and, sending the maid back to fetch another to fill up her order, returned at once to the private room. My gentleman there was standing with his back to the door, stripped to the waist, with the shirt in his hand, ready to slip it on. He wasn't expecting Bogue so soon, and he turned about with a jump, but not before Bogue had sight of his back and a great picture tattooed across it—Adam and Eve, with the tree between 'em, and the serpent coiled around it complete."

"The man Bogue must have quick sight," commented Miss Belcher.

"So I told him, but his answer was that it didn't need more than a glance, because this picture is a favourite with seamen. Bogue has been a seaman himself."

"That is so," Captain Branscome corroborated. "The man must have been a seaman, and at one time or another in the Navy. There's a superstition about that particular picture: tattooed across the back and loins it's supposed to protect them, in a moderate degree, against flogging."

"Well," said Miss Belcher, "his belonging to the Navy seems likely enough. It accounts, in one way, for his finding himself in a French war-prison. Go on, Jack."

"The man (said Bogue) faced about with a start, catching his hands— with the shirt in 'em—towards his chest, and half covering it, but not so as to hide from Bogue that his chest, too, was marked. Bogue hadn't time to make out the design, but his recollection is there were several small ones—ships, foul-anchors, and the like— besides a large one that seemed to be some sort of a map."

“You haven’t done so badly, Jack,” Miss Belcher allowed. “If the man hasn’t given us the slip at Plymouth you have struck a first-class scent. Only I doubt ’tis a cold one. You sent word at once?”

Page 77

“By express rider, and with orders to leave a description of the man at all the ferries. But there’s more to come. The man, that had seemed at first in a desperate hurry, was no sooner in Bogue’s clothes than he took a seat, made Bogue fetch another glass of grog and drink it with him, and asked him a score of questions about the best road eastward. It struck Bogue that, for a man whose home was Saltash, he knew very little about his native county. All this while he appeared to have forgotten his hurry, and Bogue was thinking to make him an excuse to go off and attend to other customers, when of a sudden he ups and shakes hands, says good night, and marches out of the house. Bogue told me all this in the very room where it happened. It opens out on the passage leading from the taproom to the front door. I asked Bogue if he could remember at what time Coffin left the house, and by what door; also, if the prisoner-fellow heard him leave; but at first he couldn’t tell me anything for certain except that Coffin went out by the front door—he remembered hearing him go tapping down the passage. The old man, it seems, had a curious way of tapping with his stick.”

Here Mr. Rogers looked at me, and I nodded.

“Where was the landlord when he heard this?” asked Miss Belcher.

“That, my dear Lydia, was naturally the next question I put to him. ‘Why, in this very room,’ said he, ‘now I come to think of it.’ ‘Well, then,’ said I, ‘how long did you stay in this room after the prisoner (as we’ll call him) had taken his leave?’ ‘Not a minute,’ said he; ‘no, nor half a minute. Indeed, I believe we walked out into the passage together, and then parted, he going out to the door, and I up the passage to the taproom.’ ‘Was Coffin in the taproom when you reached it?’ I asked. ‘No,’ says Bogue; ‘to be sure he wasn’t.’ ‘Why, then, you thickhead,’ says I, ‘he must have left while you were talking with the prisoner; and since you heard him go, the odds are the prisoner heard him, too.’ That’s the way to get at evidence, Lydia.”

“My dear Jack,” said Miss Belcher, “you’re an Argus!”

“Well, I flatter myself it was pretty neat,” resumed Mr. Rogers, speaking with his mouth full; “but, as it happens, we don’t need it. For when, as I’ve told you, we drove around to the ferry at Percuil, and the ferryman described Coffin and how he’d put him across, the first question I asked was ‘Did you put any one else across that night?’ He said, ‘Yes; and not twenty minutes later.’ ‘Man or woman?’ I asked. ‘Man,’ said he, ‘and a d—d drunk one’—saving your presence, ladies. I pricked up my ears. ‘Drunk?’ I asked. ‘How drunk?’ ‘Drunk enough to near-upon drown himself,’ said the ferryman. ‘It was this way, sir: I’d scarcely finished mooring the boat again, and was turning to go indoors, when I heard a splash, t’other side of the creek, where; the path comes down under the loom of the trees, and, next moment,

Page 78

a voice as if some person was drowning and guggling for help. So I fit and unmoored again, and pushed across for dear life, just in time to see a man scrambling ashore. He was as drunk as a fly, sir, even after his wetting. Said he was a retired seaman living at Penzance, had come round to Falmouth on a lime-barge bound for the Truro river, and must get along to St. Austell in time to attend his sister's wedding there next morning. Told me his sister's name, but I forget it. Said he'd fallen in with some brave fellows at Falmouth just returned from the French war-prisons, and had taken a glass or two. Gave me half a crown when I brought him over and landed him,' said the ferryman, 'and too far gone in liquor to understand the mistake if I'd explained it to him, which I didn't.' He was dressed in what appeared to be a dark cloth jacket, duck trousers of sea-going cut, and a tarpaulin hat. 'There was just moon enough,' said the ferry-man, 'to let a man take notice of his trousers, they being white; and maybe I took particular notice of his legs, because they were dripping wet. As for his face, by the glimpse I had of it he was a middle-aged man that had seen trouble.' I asked if he would know the man again. He said, 'Yes,' he was pretty sure he would. So there, Lydia, you have the villain dogging Coffin, tracking him to Percuil, and shamming drunk to get carried over the ferry in pursuit. On Bogue's testimony he was as sober as a judge at St. Mawes, and drank but one glass of grog there, and from St. Mawes to Percuil is but a step, mainly by footpath over the fields, with no public-house on the way."

"H'm," said Miss Belcher; "and yet he couldn't have been following the man to murder him, or he must have taken more care to cover up his traces. All his concern seems to have been to follow Coffin without being seen by him. Is that all?"

"My dear Lydia, consider the amount of time I've had! Almost before I'd finished with Bogue, and certainly before the filly was well rested, Mr. Goodfellow here had crossed to Falmouth and was back again, bringing the cupboard—"

"Yes, Jack; you have done very well—surprisingly well. But I'll not hand over my guinea until we've examined the cupboard. Here, Mr. Goodfellow"—she cleared a space amid the breakfast things—"be so good as to lift it on to the table. Harry, where's the key?"

I produced it.

"A nice bit of work—and Dutch, by the look of it," she commented, pausing to admire the inlaid pattern as she inserted the key. She turned it, and the door fell back, askew on its broken hinges.

Page 79

Mr. Goodfellow had carried the cupboard with infinite care, but the contents, I need not say, had mixed themselves up in wild disorder, though nothing was broken—not even the pot of guava-jelly. They included a superannuated watch in a loose silver case, a medal (in bronze) struck to commemorate Lord Howe’s famous victory of the First of June, two pieces-of-eight and a spade guinea (much clipped); a small china mug painted with libellous portraits of King George III. and his consort; a printed pamphlet on Admiral Byng; two strings of shells; a mourning-ring with a lock of hair set between two pearls under glass; another ring with a tiny picture of a fountain and urn, and a weeping willow; a paper containing a baby’s caul and a sampler worked with the A.B.C. and the Lord’s Prayer and signed “A.C., 1785;” a gourd, a few glass beads, and a Chinese opium-pipe; and lastly, a thick paper roll bound in yellow-stained parchment. The roll was tied about with string, and the string was sealed, in coarse wax without imprint.

Miss Belcher dived a hand into a fold of her skirt, and drew forth a most unladylike clasp-knife.

“Now for it!” said Miss Belcher.

CHAPTER XIX.

CAPTAIN COFFIN’S LOG.

As she severed the string the roll fell open and disclosed itself as a book of small quarto shape, bound in limp parchment, with strings to tie the covers together. Its pages, measuring 9 and 3/4 by 8 in., were 64, and numbered throughout; but a bare third of them were written on, and these in an unformed hand which yet was eloquent of much. A paragraph would start with every letter drawn as carefully as in a child’s copy-book; would gradually straggle and let its words fall about, as though fainting by the way; and so would tail into incoherence, to be picked up—next day, no doubt—by a new effort, which, after marching for half a dozen lines, in its turn collapsed. There were lacunae, too, when the shaking hand had achieved but a few weak zigzags before it desisted. The two last pages were scribbled over with sums—or, to speak more correctly, with combinations of figures resembling sums. Here is a single example—

Ode to W. Bate

To bacca 9 and 1/2d

Haircutt 1s

Bliddin[1] 18d.

To more bacca Oct. 10th do.

Ditto and shave ditto ditto

Mem. do. to him 2s. 6d.



The fly-leaf started bravely with "D. Coffin, His Book." After this the captain had fallen to practising his signature by way of start. "D. Coffin," "Danl. Coffin," "Danyel Coffin," over and over, and once "D. Coffin, Esq.," followed by "Steal not this Book for fear of shame."

Danl. Coffin is my name
England is my nation
Falmth ditto ditto dwelling-place
And hopes to see Salvation.

Page 80

After these exercises came a blank page, and then, halfway down the next, abruptly, without title, began the manuscript which I will call Captain Coffin's statement.

"Pass it to Lydia," said Mr. Rogers. "She reads like a parson."

"Better than most, I hope," said Miss Belcher, taking the book; and this—I omit the faults of spelling—is what she read aloud—

Mem. Began this August 15th, 1812. Mem. Am going to tell about the treasure, and what happened. But it will be no use without the map. If any one tries to bring up trouble, this is the truth and nothing else. Amen. So be it. Signed, D. Coffin.

My father followed the sea, and bred me to it. He came from Devonshire, near Exmouth. N.B.—He used to say the Coffins were a great family in Devonshire, and as old as any; but it never did him no good. He was an only son, and so was I, but I had an older sister, now dead. She grew up and married a poultryman in Quay Street, Bristol. I remember the wedding. Died in childbed a year later, me being at that time on my first voyage.

We lived at Bristol, at the foot of Christmas Stairs, left-hand side going up, two doors from the bottom. My mother from Stonehouse, Gloster, where they make cloth, specially red cloth for soldiers' coats. Her maiden name Daniels. She was a religious woman, and taught me the Bible. My father was lost at sea, being knocked overboard by the boom in half a gale, two miles S.W. of Lundy. I was sixteen at the time, and apprentice as cabin-boy on board the same ship, the *Caroline*, bound from Hayle to Cardiff with copper ore. I went home and broke the news to my mother, and she told me then what I didn't know before, that she was very poorly provided for. I will say this, that I made her a good son; and likewise, that I never had no luck till I struck the Treasure.

I was born in the year 1750. My father's death happened 1766. From that time till my twenty-seventh year, I supported my mother. She died of a seizure in 1777, and is buried by St. Mary's Redclyf—we having moved across the water to that parish. Married next year, Elizabeth Porter, in service with Soames Rennalls, Esquire, Alderman of the City. She had been brought up an orphan by the Colston Charity; a good pious woman, and bore me one child, a daughter, christened Ann—a dear little one. She lived and throve up to the year 1787, me all the time coming and going on voyages, mostly coasting, too numerous to mention. Then the small-pox carried her off with my affectionate wife, the both in one week. At which I cursed all things, and for several years ran riot, not caring what I said or did.

Page 81

Was employed, from 1790 on, in the slave trade, by W. S., merchant of Bristol. Must have made as many as a dozen passages before leaving him and shipping on the *Mary Pynsent*, Pink, Bristol-owned by a new company of adventurers. She was an old boat, and known to me, but not the whole story of her. I signed as mate. We were bound for the W. Coast, about 50 leagues E. of Cape Corse Castle, with gunpowder and old firearms for the natives, that were most always at war with one another. Ran coastwise and touched at three or four places on the way, and at each of them peddled powder and muskets, the muskets being most profitable, by reason the blacks have no notion of repairing a gun. So we, carrying a gunsmith on board, bought up at one place the guns that wanted repairs, and sold them at the next for new pieces. In this way we came to our destination, which was the mouth of a river full of slime and mosquitoes, and called the Popo River. There a whole tribe of niggers put out to receive us.

They knew the *Mary Pynsent*, and worse luck. Her last trip, when owned by Mr. W. S., aforesaid, she had sold them 1500 kegs of sifted sea-coal dust, passing it off for gunpowder, and had made off with 7000 pounds worth of gold dust, besides ivory, *white and black*, before they discovered the trick. We being without knowledge of what had happened, and having real gunpowder to sell, let the niggers swarm on board, and welcome. Whereupon, in revenge for past usage, they attacked us on the spot and clubbed all the crew but me, that was getting out the boat under the seaward quarter and baling her, but dived as soon as the murder began, and swam to the shore. The shore was mudbanks and reeds and mangroves, and all sweating with heat and mosquitoes. I spent that day in hiding. Towards sunset the savages rafted a good third of the cargo ashore, and, having stacked the kegs and built a fire about them, started to dance, making a silly mock of the powder, till it blew up. Which it did, and must have killed hundreds.

I heard the noise of it at about two miles' distance, having crept out of my hiding when I saw them busy, and started to tramp it along shore to Cape Corse Castle. I had no food, and must have died but that next morning I fell in with a tribe that seemed pleased to see me; which was lucky, me having no strength left to run. They took me to their kraal, a mile inland, and to a hut where was a man lying in a fever. He was a man covered with dirt and vermin, but at first sight of his face I knew him to be a white man and English. Ever since my first voyage to these parts I carried a small box in my pocket, filled with bark of Peru, which is the best cure for coast fever. I took out some of this bark and managed to make myself understood that I wanted a fire lit and some water fetched; boiled up the bark and made him drink it. After that I nursed him for three days before he died.

Page 82

The second day he sits up and says in English: "Who are you?" So I told him. Then he says: "Why are you doing this for me? You wouldn't do it if you knew who I am." "I'd do it," I said, "if you were the devil." "I am next door to him," he says. "I am Melhuish, of the Poison Island Treasure." "I never heard of it," said I. "There's others call it the Priests' Treasure," says he; "and if you have never heard of it, you cannot have sailed anywhere near the Bay of Honduras." "Never in my life," I said. "My business has lain along the coast for years. But what of it?" "What of it?" he says, sitting up, his eyes all shining with the fever, "why, nothing, except that I am one of the richest men in the world." I set this down to raving. "You don't believe me?" he asks after some time. "Why," I answers him, "this is a funny sort of place for a nabob, and that you must allow; not to mention," I adds, "that from here to Honduras is a long step." "You fool!" said he, "that is the very reason of it. I don't believe in a hell on the t'other shore of this life, whatever your views may be. You go to sleep and have done with it—that's my belief. But I believe in hell upon earth, because I have lived in it. And I believe in a devil upon earth, because I lived months in his company; but he can't be as clever as the priests make out, because I came here to hide from him, and hidden I have."

With that he fell into cursing and raving, but after a time he grew quiet again, and said he: "Daniel Coffin, if that is your name, there's hundreds of thousands of men walking this world would envy you at this moment. And why? Because I can make you richer than any Lord Mayor in his coach; and, what's more, I will."

He said no more that evening, but next day woke up in his wits, and asked me to slip a hand under his pillow and take out what I found there. Which I took out a piece of parchment. He said: "Coffin, I am going to be as good as my word. That there which you hold in your hand is a map of the Island of Mortallone, where the treasure lies. I will tell you how I come by it.

"My home," he said, "was St. Mary's, in Newfoundland, which is but a small harbour and a few wood houses gathered about a factory. The factory belonged to a firm at Carbonear, and employed, one way and another, all the people in the place, in number less than two hundred. The women worked at the fish-curing, along with the children and some old men, but the able-bodied men belonged mostly to the Labrador fleet, or manned a two-three small vessels that made regular voyages to the Island of St. Jago to fetch home salt for the pickling. My mother, besides working at the factory, kept a boarding-house for seamen. In this she was helped by my only sister, a middle-aged woman and single. My mother was a widow. She kept her house very respectable, but the business was slight, the town being empty of men most of the year.

Page 83

“In the autumn of 'ninety-eight, arriving home with salt as usual from St. Jago, I found a stranger lodging in the house. He had come over from Carbonear with a party of clerks, and had taken a fancy to the place—or so he said; besides which, it had been recommended to him for his health, which was delicate. He was a common-spoken man, aged between fifty and sixty, and looked like a skipper that had hauled ashore; but he never talked about the sea in my hearing, and he never mixed with the few seamen who came to the house. He rented a separate room and kept to it. His habits were simple enough, and his manner very quiet and friendly, though he spoke as little as he could help, unless to my sister. My mother liked him because he paid his way and seemed content with whatever food was put before him. The only thing he complained about was the cold.

“I had been at home for three weeks and a little more when one evening, as I was passing downstairs from my bedroom in the attic, this Mr. Shand—that was the name he gave us—called me into his room and showed me a small bird he had picked up dead on the beach. He did not know its name, and I was too ignorant to tell him. He stood there looking at it under the lamp when my sister came upstairs with a note and word that the messenger was waiting outside for an answer. Mr. Shand took the note and read it under the lamp. Then he turned to the fire, and stood with his back to us for a moment. I saw him drop the note into the fire. He faced round to us again and said he to my sister: ‘Mary, my dear, here is something I want you to keep for me. Do not look at it to-night; and when you do, show it to no one but your brother here.’ With that he gave her the very packet you have in your hand, shook hands with us both, and went downstairs. We never saw him again. The weather was thick, with some snow falling, and the snow increased towards midnight. We waited up till we were tired, but he did not return that night or the next day. Three days later his body was found in a drift of snow, halfway down a cliff to the west of the town. The right leg and arm were broken and two ribs on the same side.”

I asked: “Who was the man that brought the message?” Melhuish said: “My sister could not tell, except that he was a stranger. She supposed he belonged to one of two ships that had arrived in harbour the day before. She saw nothing of his face to remember; his jacket-collar being turned up against the snow, and the flaps of his fur cap pulled down over his ears.”

I asked: “Did the man’s chest tell nothing when you came to examine it?” Melhuish said: “Nothing at all. It was full of new clothes, and very good clothes; but they had no mark upon them, and, besides the clothes, there was not so much as a scrap of paper.”

Page 84

He went on: "About two weeks later there called a clerk from the factory to claim the chest, the firm having acted as Mr. Shand's agents. He was a foreign-looking man, and older than most of the clerks employed by Davis and Atchison—which was the firm's name. He gave his own name as Martin. He had been sent over from Carbonear about ten days before to teach the factory a new way of treating seal-pelts by means of chemicals. We learnt afterwards that he earned good wages. He had brought two hands from the factory to carry the chest, which we gave up to him as soon as he presented a letter from Mr. Hughes, the firm's chief agent. He said: 'Is this all you have?' And we said, 'Yes.' We Kept quiet about the map, which we had examined, but could not make head nor tail of it. He went away with the chest, and we heard no more of the matter. The winter closing in, I took service in the factory. I used to run against this Martin almost every day, but being my superior he never got beyond nodding to me.

"So it went on, that winter. The next spring I sailed with the salting fleet as usual. I was mate by this time, and had learned to navigate. I came back, to find Martin seated in the parlour and talking, and my mother told me he had asked my sister to marry him. They had met at the factory and fixed it up between them. He appeared to be very fond of my sister, who was usually reckoned a plain-featured woman, and there couldn't be a doubt she was fond of him. Later on, I heard that she had told him all about the chart, but had not shown it to him, being afraid to do so without my leave.

"He opened the subject himself about a week later, during which I had become very thick with him. He said that, in his belief, there was money in it, and I was a fool not to take it up. I answered, What could I do? He said there was ways and means that a lad of spirit ought to be able to discover. With that he talked no more of it that day, but it cropped up again, and by little and little he so worked me up that I took to dreaming of the cursed thing.

"This went on for another fortnight, during which time he told me a deal about himself, very frank—as that he was the son of an English sea-captain and a Spanish woman, and was born in Havana; that he had been educated by the Jesuits, who had meant to make a priest of him; that, not being able to abide the Spaniards, he had chased over to Port Royal and studied chemistry in the college there. It was there, he said, he had discovered a preparation for curing the hides of animals so that the hair never dropped off, but remained as firm and fresh as life. He told me that for this secret Davis and Atchison paid him better than any of their clerks.

Page 85

“At the end of a fortnight he sailed for Carbonear. He returned as I was making ready for the summer trip, and laid a scheme before me that took my breath away. He had spoken to Mr. Atchison, the junior partner, and engaged a schooner, the *Willing Mind*; likewise a crew. I was to command her, being the only one of the lot that understood navigation. For the crew he had picked up a mixed lot at Carbonear and St. John’s—good seamen, but mostly unknown to one another. They were the less likely, he said, to smell out our purpose until we reached the island, and for the rest I might trust to him. He had laid our plans before Mr. Atchison, who approved. If I listened to him without arguing, he would make my fortune and my sister’s as well.

“I had never met a man of his quality before. I was a young fool, yet not altogether such a fool but I had persuaded my sister to hand the map over to me, and wore it always about me. She told me that she had shown it twice to Martin, but never for more than two minutes at a time, and had never let it go out of her hands. I wonder now that he didn’t murder her for it; and the only reason must be that he reckoned to use me for navigating the ship, and then to get rid of me.

“A fool I was even to the extent of letting him talk me over when I found he had engaged twelve hands for the cruise. There was no reason on earth for this number except that these were the gang after the treasure, and that he was playing with the lot of them, same as with me.

“The upshot was that we said goodbye to my mother and sister, and crossed over to Carbonear, where I made acquaintance with my crew. The number of them raised no suspicion in the port, because it was taken for granted the *Willing Mind*, an old salt ship, was bound for St. Jago, where ten or a dozen hands are nothing unusual to work the salt; and this was the argument he had used to make me carry so many. Our pretence was we were all bound for St. Jago, and the crew seemed to take this for understood. I didn’t like their looks. Martin said they were an ignorant lot, and chosen for that reason. All I had to do was to run south, and he undertook to give them the slip at the first point we touched.

“He had a wonderful command over them, considering that he was but one plotter in a dozen; and for reasons of his own he kept them off me and the map. On our way he proposed to me that I should teach him a little navigation; helped me take the reckonings; and picked it up as easy as a child learns its letters. But his keeping watch over me and the map was what broke up the crew’s patience. I was holding the schooner straight down for the Gulf of Honduras, and, by my reckoning, within a few hours of making a landfall, wondering all the while that they took the courses I laid without grumbling—though by this time our course was past all explaining—when the quarrel broke out.

“I was standing by the wheel with a seaman, Dick Hayling by name, a civil fellow, and more to my liking than the most of them, when we heard a racket in the forecabin, and

by-and-by Martin—he was too fond, to my taste of going down into the forecastle and making free with the men—comes up the hatchway, very serious, with half a dozen behind him.

Page 86

“‘Melhuish,’ says he, ‘there’s trouble below. The men will have it that we are steering for treasure. I tell them that, if you are, they are bound to know as soon as we sight it, and neither you nor I—being two to twelve—can prevent their having the game in their own hands. I have told them, over and above this,’ he went on, pitching his voice loud—but having his back towards them he winked at me—‘that by your reckoning we shall sight land in a few hours at the farthest, and are willing to serve out a double tot of rum; that, as soon as ever land is sighted, you will call all hands aft and tell them our intention, as man to man; and that then, if they have a mind, they can elect whatever new captain they choose.’

“The impudence of this took me fair between wind and water. I saw, of course, that I was trapped, and naturally my first thought was to suspect the man speaking to me. I looked at him, and he winked again, not seeming one bit abashed.

“‘You may tell them,’ said I, with my eyes on his face, ‘that as soon as we sight land I shall have a statement to make to them.’ I wondered what it would be; but I said it to gain time. ‘As for the rum,’ I went on, ‘they can drink their fill. If we sight land, I will steer the ship in.’

“‘Better go and draw the liquor yourself,’ said he, and, picking up a ship’s bucket, came aft to me. ‘The second barrel in the afterhold,’ he whispered. ‘And don’t drink any yourself.’

“I nodded, as careless as I could. It seemed a rash thing to go down to the afterhold, where any one might batten me down. But, there being no help for it, I took the bucket and went. I filled it well up to the brim from the second cask, returned to deck, and handed it to the man who stood behind Martin. They took it, pretty respectfully, and went below, Martin still standing amidships, where he had stood from the first.

“‘And now,’ said I, turning back to him, ‘perhaps you will explain.’

“‘Keep your eye on the helmsman,’ was his answer, ‘and pistol him if he gives trouble.’

“He walked forward and stood leaning over the forehatch, seeming to listen.” . . .

[1] Qy. “Bleeding.”

CHAPTER XX.

CAPTAIN COFFIN’S LOG—CONTINUED.

Up to this Melhuish had been making good weather of his tale, though forced to break off once or twice by reason of his weakness. But here he came to a dead stop, which at

first I set down to the same. But by-and-by I looks up. He was making a curious noise in his throat, and fencing with both hands to push something away from him.

“I never done it!” he broke out. “Take them away! I never done it! Oh, my God! never—never—never!”

With that he ran off into a string of prayers and cursings, all mixed up together, the fever shaking him like a sail caught head-to-wind, and at every shake he screeched louder.

Page 87

"I won't, I won't!" he kept saying. "Hayling, take that devil off and cover them up. The boat, Hayling! Fetch the boat and cover them up!" Then, a little after: "Who says the anchor's fouled? How can I tell for the noise? Tell them, less noise below. I never done it, tell them! And take his grinning face out of the way, or you'll never get it clear! 'Tisn't Christian burial—look at their fins! D—n them, Hayling, look at their fins! Three feet of sand, or they'll never stay covered. Who says as I poisoned them? Hayling knows. Where is Hayling?"

I am writing down all I can remember; but there was more—a heap of it—that I did not catch, being kept busy holding him down till the strength went out of him and he lay quiet; which he did in time, the shivers running down through him between my hands, and his voice muttering on without a stop.

For an hour I sat, hoping he would fall asleep; for his voice weakened little by little, and by-and-by he just lay and stared up at the roof, with only his lips moving. After that I must have dropped off in a doze; for I came to myself with a start, thinking that I heard him speak to me. It was the rattle in his throat. He lay just the same, with his eyes staring, but, putting out a hand to him, I knew at once that the man was dead as a nail.

I had now to think of myself, for I knew that the niggers in the kraal had not spared me out of kindness, but only that I might attend to the white man, who was their friend. They were even ignorant enough to believe that I had killed him. I worked out my plan: (1) I must run for it; (2) the village was asleep, and the sooner I ran the better; (3) they had met me heading for Cape Corse Castle, and would hunt me in that direction—therefore I had best go straight back on my steps; (4) they were less likely to chase me that way because it led into the Popo country, and Melhuish had told me that these men were Alampas, and afraid of the Popo tribes. True, if I headed back, there was the river between me and Whydah, the nearest station to eastward; but to get across it I must trust to luck.

I crept out of the hut. The night was black as my hat, almost, and no guard set. At the edge of the kraal I made a dash for it, and kept running for three miles. After that I ran sometimes, and sometimes walked. The sun was up and the day growing hot when I came to the shore by the river; and there in the offing lay the *Mary Pynsent* at anchor, just as if nothing had happened, and the boat made fast alongside as I had left her. If I could swim out and get into the boat, my job was done. I had not thought upon sharks while swimming ashore, but now I thought of them, and it gave me the creeps. I dare say I sat on the shore for an hour, staring at the boat before I made up my mind to risk it. There was a plenty of sharks, too. When I reached the boat and climbed aboard of her, I took a look around and saw their fins playing about in the shallows, being drawn off there by the dead bodies the gunpowder had blown into the water.

Page 88

The boat had a mast and spritsail. I reckoned that I would wait until sunset, then hoist sail and hold on past the river and along shore towards Whydah. I counted on a breeze coming off shore towards evening, which it did, and blew all night, so stiff that at two miles' distance, which I kept by guess, I could smell the stink of swamps. I ought to say here that, before starting, I had climbed aboard the *Mary Pynsent* and provisioned the boat. The niggers had left a few stores, but the mess on board made me sick.

The breeze held all night, and towards daybreak freshened so that I reckoned myself safe against any canoe overtaking me if any should put out from shore; for my boat, with the wind on her quarter, was making from six to seven knots. She measured seventeen feet.

The breeze dried up as the day grew hotter, and in the end I downed sail and rowed the last few miles. I know Whydah pretty well, having had dealings there. It is a fine place, with orange-trees growing wild and great green meadows, and rivers chock full of fish, and the whole of it full of fever as an egg is of meat. The factory there was kept by an old man, an Englishman, who pretended to be Dutch and called himself Klootz, but was known to all as Bristol Pete. The building stood on a rise at the back of the swamps. It had a verandah in front, with a tier of guns which he loaded and fired off on King George's birthday, and in the rear a hell of a barracks, where he kept the slaves, ready for dealing. He was turned sixty and grown careless in his talk, and he lived there with nine wives and ten strapping daughters. Sons did not thrive with him, somehow. In the matter of men he was short-handed, his habit being to entice seamen off the ships trading there to take service with him on the promise of marrying them up to his daughters. It looked like a good speculation, for the old man had money. But every one of the women was a widow, and the most of them widowed two deep. The climate never agreed with the poor fellows, and just now he had over four hundred slaves in barracks, and only one son-in-law, an Englishman, to look after them.

The old man made me welcome. A father couldn't have shown himself kinder, and when I told him about the *Mary Pynsent* he could scarce contain himself.

"If there's one thing more than another I enjoy at my age," said he, "'tis a salvage job."

And he actually left the agent—A. G.—in charge of the slaves for three days, while he and I and three of the women took boat and went after the vessel. We found her still at her moorings, and brought her round to Whydah, he and me working her with the youngest of the three (Sarah by name), while the two others cleaned ship. I cannot say why exactly, but this woman appeared superior to her sisters, besides being the best looking. The old man—he had an eye lifting for everything—took notice of this almost before

Page 89

I knew it myself, and put it to me that I couldn't do better than to marry her. The woman, being asked, was willing. She had lost two husbands already, she told me, but the third time was luck. Her father read the service over us, out of a Testament he always carried in his pocket. As for me, since my poor wife's death I had thoroughly given myself over to the devil, and did not care. Old Klootz was first-rate company, too; though living in that forsaken place he seemed to be a dictionary about every ship that had sailed the seas for forty years past, and to know every scandal about her. He listened, too, though he seemed to be talking in his full-hearted way all the time. And the end was that I told him about Melhuish, and showed him the map.

He had heard about Melhuish, as about everything else; but the map did truly—I think—surprise him. We studied it together, and he wound up by saying—

“There's a clever fellow somewhere at the bottom of this, and I should like to make his acquaintance.”

Said I: “Then you believe there is such a treasure hidden?”

“Lord love you,” said he, “I know all about that! It happened in the year '86 at Puerto Bello. A Spaniard, Bartholomew Diaz, that had been flogged for some trouble in the mines, stirred up a revolt among the niggers and half-breeds, and came marching down upon the coast at the head of fourteen thousand or fifteen thousand men, sacking the convents and looting the mines on his way. He gave himself out to be some sort of religious prophet, and this brought the blacks like flies round a honey-pot. The news of it caught Puerto Bello at a moment when there was not a single Royal ship in the harbour. The Governor lost his head and the priests likewise. Getting word that Diaz was marching straight on the place, and not five leagues distant, they fell to emptying the banks in a panic, stripping the churches, and fetching up treasure from the vaults of the religious houses. There happened to be a schooner lying in the harbour—the *Rosaway*, built at Marblehead—lately taken by the Spaniards off Campeachy, with her crew, that were under lock and key ashore, waiting trial for cutting logwood without licence. The priests commandeered this Vessel and piled her up with gold, the Governor sending down a guard of soldiers to protect it; but in the middle of the night, on an alarm that Diaz had come within a mile of the gates, the dunderhead drew off half of this guard to strengthen the garrison. On their way back to the citadel these soldiers were met and passed in the dark by the *Rosaway's* crew, that had managed to break prison, and in the confusion had somehow picked up the password. Sparke was the name of *Rosaway's* skipper, a Marblehead man; the mate, Griffiths, came from somewhere in Wales; the rest, five in number, being likewise mixed English and Americans. They picked up a shore-boat down by the harbour, rowed off to the ship,

Page 90

got on board by means of the password, and within twenty minutes had knocked all the Spaniards on the head, themselves losing only one man. Thereupon, of course, they slipped cable and stood out to sea. Next morning the *Rosaway* hadn't been three hours out of sight before two Spanish gun-ships came sailing in from Cartagena, having been sent over in a hurry to protect the place; and one of them started in chase. The *Rosaway*, being speedy, got away for the time, and it was not till three weeks later that the Spaniards ran down on her, snug and tight at anchor in a creek of this same island of Mortallone. She was empty as a drum, and her crew ashore in a pretty state of fever and mutiny. The Spaniards landed and took the lot, all but the mate Griffiths, that was supposed to have been knifed by Sparke, but two of the prisoners declared that he was alive and hiding. They hanged four, saving only Sparke, keeping him to show where the treasure was hidden. He led them halfway across the island, lured them into a swamp, and made a bolt to escape, and the tale is he was getting clear off when one of the Spanish seamen let fly with his musket into the bushes and bowled him over like a rabbit. It was a chance shot, and of course it put an end to all hope of finding the treasure. They ransacked the island for a week or more, but found never a dollar; and before giving it up some inclined to believe what one of the prisoners had said, that the treasure had never been buried in Mortallone at all, but in the island of Roatan, some leagues to the eastward. But, if you ask my opinion, the stranger that took lodgings with Melhuish was the mate Griffiths, and no other. There has always been rumours that he got away with the secret. Know about it?" said old Klootz. "Why, there was even a song made up about it—

"O, we threw the bodies over, and forth we did stand
Till the tenth day we sighted what seemed a pleasant land,
And alongst the Kays of Mortallone!"

From the first the old man had no doubt but we had struck the secret. All the way home he was scheming, and the very night we reached Whydah again he came out with a plan.

"Have you ever read your Bible?" said he.

"A little," I said, "between whiles; but latterly not much."

"The more shame to you," said he, "for it is a good book. But you ought to have heard of Noah, if you ever read the Book at all, for he comes almost at the beginning. Well, I've a notion almost as good as Noah's and not so very different. We will take the *Mary Pynsent* and put all the family on board, for we must take A. G. (naming the Englishman, his other son-in-law), and I don't like to leave the women alone, here in this wicked place. We will pack her up with slaves and sail her across to Barbadoes. 'Tis an undertaking for a man of my years, but a man is not old until he feels old; and I have

been wanting for a long time to see if trade in the Barbadoes is so bad as the skippers pretend, cutting down my profits. At Barbadoes we can hire a pinnacle. Daniel Coffin, you and me will go into this business in partnership," says he.

Page 91

The old fellow, once set going, had the pluck of a boy. The very next night he called in A. G., and took him into the secret, in his bluff way overriding me, that was for keeping it close between us two. That the map was mine did not trouble him. He agreed that I should be guardian of it, but took charge of all the outfit, ordering me about sometimes like a dog, though, properly speaking, the vessel herself belonged to me—or, at any rate, more to me than to him. As for A. G., he didn't count. We filled up and weighed anchor on August 12, having on board 420 blacks—290 men and 130 women—all chained, and all held under by us twenty-two whites, of the which nineteen were women. The weather turned sulky almost from the start, and after ten days of drifting, with here and there a fluke of wind, we found ourselves off the Gaboon river. From this we crept our way to the Island of St. Thomas, three days; watered there, and fetched down to the south-east trades. The niggers were dying fast, and between the south-east and north-east trades, six weeks from our starting, we lost between one and two score every day. I will say that all the women worked like horses. We reached Barbadoes short of our complement by 134 negroes and one of Klootz's wives. This last did not trouble him much.

He kept mighty cheerful all the way, although the speculation up to now had turned out far from cheerful; and all the way he kept singing scraps about the Kays of Mortallone in a way to turn even a healthy man sick. I had patched up a kind of friendship with A.G., and we allowed that, for all his heartiness, the old man was enough to madden a saint. The slaves we landed fetched about nineteen pounds on an average. They cost at starting from two pounds to three pounds; but the ones that had died at sea knocked a hole in the profits.

At Barbadoes Klootz left the womenfolk in a kind of boarding-house, and hired a pinnace, twenty tons, to take us across to the main, pretending he wanted to inquire into the market there. Klootz and I made the whole crew, with A. G., who could not navigate. January 17, late in the afternoon, we ran down upon Mortallone Island and anchored off the Kays, north of Gable Point. Next morning we out with the boat and landed. Time, about three-quarters of an hour short of low water.

The Kays are nothing but sand. At low water, and for an hour before and after, you can cross to Gable point dry-shod. We spent that day getting bearings; dug a little, but nothing to reward us. Next day we got to work early. Had been digging for two hours, when we turned up the first body. It turned A. G. poorly in the stomach, and he sat down to watch us. Half an hour later we struck the first of the chests. It did not hold more than five shillings' worth, and we saw that somebody had been there before us.

The third day we turned up three more bodies, besides two chests, empty as before, and a full one. We stove it in, emptied the stuff into the boat, and made our way back to the ship.

Page 92

The fourth day we had scarcely started to dig before Kloodt struck on a second chest that sounded like another full one—

Here Miss Belcher turned a page, glanced overleaf, and came to a full stop.

“For pity’s sake, Lydia—” protested Mr. Rogers, who sat leaning forward, his elbows on the table.

“There’s no more,” Miss Belcher announced.

“No more?”

“Not a word.” She fumbled quickly through the remaining blank leaves. “Not a word more,” she repeated.

“Death cut short his hand,” said Captain Branscome, his voice breaking in upon a long silence.

“Cut short his fiddlestick-end!” snapped Miss Belcher. “The man funk’d it at the last moment—started out promising to tell the whole truth, but refused the fence. Look back at the story, and you can see him losing heart. Just note that when he comes to A. G. —that’s the man Aaron Glass, I suppose—he dares not write down the man’s name. There has been foul work, and he’s afraid of it. That’s as plain as the nose on my face.”

“But what’s to be done?” asked Mr. Rogers, picking up the manuscript and turning its pages irritably.

“Dear me,” said a voice, “there is surely but one thing to be done! We must go and search for ourselves.”

We all turned and stared at Plinny.

CHAPTER XXI.

IN WHICH PLINNY SURPRISES EVERYONE.

Everybody stared; and this had the effect of making the dear good creature blush to the eyes.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am?” said Mr. Jack Rogers.

“It—it was not for me to say so, perhaps.” Her voice quavered a little, and now a pair of bright tears trembled on her lashes; but she kept up her chin bravely and seemed to take courage as she went on. “I am aware, sir, that in all matters of hazard and

enterprise it is for the gentlemen to take the lead. If I appear forward—if I speak too impulsively—my affection for Harry must be my excuse.”

Mr. Rogers stared at Captain Branscome, and from Captain Branscome to Mr. Goodfellow, but their faces did not help him.

“That’s all very well, ma’am, but an expedition to the other end of the world—if that’s what you suggest?—at a moment’s notice—on what, as like or not, may turn out to be a wild-goose chase—Lord bless my soul!” wound up Mr. Rogers incoherently, falling back in his chair.

“I was not proposing to start at a moment’s notice,” replied Plinny, with extreme simplicity. “There will, of course, be many details to arrange; and I do not forget that we are in the house of mourning. The poor dear Major claims our first thoughts, naturally. Yes, yes; there must be a hundred and one details to be discussed hereafter—at a fitting time; and it may be many weeks before we find ourselves actually launched—if I may use the expression—upon the bosom of the deep.”

Page 93

"We?" gasped Mr. Rogers, and again gazed around; but we others had no attention to spare for him. "We? Who are 'we'?"

"Why, all of us, sir, if I might dare to propose it; or at least as many as possible of us whom the hand of Providence has so mysteriously brought together. I will confess that while you were talking just now, discussing this secret which properly speaking belongs to Harry alone, I doubted the prudence of it—"

"And, by Jingo, you were right!" put in Miss Belcher.

"With your leave, ma'am," Plinny went on, "I have come to think otherwise. To begin with, but for Captain Branscome the map would never have found its way to the Major's room, where Harry discovered it; but might—nay, probably would—have been stolen by the wicked man who committed this crime to get possession of it. Again, but for Mr. Goodfellow this written narrative would undoubtedly have been lost to us, and the map, if not meaningless, might have seemed a clue not worth the risk of following. In short, ma'am"—Plinny turned again to Miss Belcher—"I saw that each of us at this table had been wonderfully brought here by the hand of Providence. And from this I went on to see, and with wonder and thankfulness, that here was a secret, sought after by many evildoers, which had yet come into the keeping of six persons, all of them honest, and wishful only to do good. Consider, ma'am, how unlikely this was, after the many bold, bad hands that have reached out for it. And will you tell me that here is accident only, and not the finger of Providence itself? At first, indeed, we suspected Captain Branscome and Mr. Goodfellow: they were strangers to us, and, as if that we might be tested, they came to us under suspicion." Here Mr. Goodfellow put up a hand and dubiously felt his nose, which was yet swollen somewhat from his first encounter with Mr. Rogers. "But they have proved their innocence; Harry gives me his word for them; and I do not think," said Plinny, "that you, ma'am, can have heard Captain Branscome's story without honouring him."

Miss Belcher, thus appealed to, answered only with a grunt, at the same time shooting from under her shaggy eyebrows an amused glance at the Captain, who stared at the table-cloth to hide his confusion, which, however, was betrayed by a pair of very red ears.

"All this," pursued Plinny, "I saw by degrees, and that it was marvellous; but next came something more marvellous still, for I saw that if one had gone forth to choose six persons to carry out this business, he could not have chosen six better fitted for it."

From the effect of this astounding proposition Miss Lydia Belcher was the first to recover herself.

“Thank you, my dear,” she murmured; “on behalf of myself and the company, as they say. It is true that in all these years I have overlooked my qualifications for a buccaneering job; but I’ll think them out as you proceed.”

Page 94

“Oh!” exclaimed Plinny, “I wasn’t counting on you, ma’am, to accompany this expedition; nor on Mr. Rogers. You are great folks as compared with us, and have public duties—a stake in the country— great wealth to administer. Yet I was thinking that, while we are abroad, there may happen to be business at home requiring attention, and that we may perhaps rely on you—who have shown so much interest in this sad affair.”

“Meaning that we have been dipping our fingers pretty deep into this pie. Well, and so we have; and thank you again, my dear, for putting it so delicately.”

“But I meant nothing of the sort—indeed I didn’t!” protested Plinny.

“Tut, tut! Of course you didn’t, but it’s the truth nevertheless. Well, then, it appears that Jack Rogers and I are to be the sportsmen[1] for this little expedition, and that you and Captain Branscome, and Mr. Goodfellow, and—yes, and Harry, too, I suppose— are to be the Red Rovers and scour the Spanish Main. All right; only you don’t look it, exactly.”

“But is not that half the battle?” urged the indomitable Plinny. “They’ll be so much the less likely to suspect us.”

“They—whoever they may be—will certainly be so far deluded.”

“And really—if you will consider it, ma’am—what I am proposing is not ridiculous at all. For what is chiefly wanted for such an adventure? In the first place, a ship—and thank God I have means to hire one, in the second place, a trustworthy navigator—and here, by the most unexpected good fortune, we have Captain Branscome; in the third place, a carpenter, to provide us with shelter on the island and be at hand in case of accident to the vessel—and here is Mr. Goodfellow; while as for Harry—” Plinny hesitated, for the moment at a loss; then her face brightened suddenly. “Harry can climb a tree, and the instructions on the back of the map point to this as necessary. Harry will be invaluable!”

I could have wrung her hand; but Plinny, having finished her justification of the ways of Providence, had taken off her spectacles and was breathing on them and polishing them with a small silk handkerchief which she ever kept handy for that purpose.

“Captain Branscome,” said Miss Belcher, sharply, “will you be so good as to give us your opinion?”

Captain Branscome lifted his head. “My mind, if you’ll excuse me, ma’am, works a bit slowly, and always did. But there’s no denying that Miss Plinlimmon has given the sense of it.”

“Hey?”

“To be sure,” said the Captain, tracing with his finger an imaginary pattern on the tablecloth, “her courage carries her too far—as in this talk about hiring a ship. A ship needs

a crew; a crew that could be trusted on a treasure-hunt is perhaps the most difficult to find in the whole world; and when you've found one to rely upon, your troubles are only just beginning. The main trouble is with the ship, and that's what no landsman can ever understand. A ship's the most public thing under heaven. You think of her, maybe, as something that puts out over the horizon and is lost to sight for months. But that helps nothing. She must clear from a port, and to a port sooner or later she must return; and in both ports a hundred curious people at least must know all about her business.

Page 95

"I don't say that a ship, once out of sight, cannot be made away with—though even that, with a crew to tell tales, has beaten some of the cleverest heads; but to take out a ship and fill her up with treasure, and bring her home *and unload her without any one's knowing*—that's a feat that (if you'll excuse me) I've heard a hundred liars discuss at one time and another; and one has said it can be done in this way, and another in that, but never a one in my hearing has found a way that would deceive a child."

"Yet you said, a moment since, that Miss Plinlimmon had given the sense of it?"

"I did, ma'am. I am saying that to fetch this treasure will be difficult, even if we find it—"

"You don't doubt its existence?"

"I do not, ma'am. I doubt it so little, ma'am, that I would ten times sooner engage to find than to fetch it. But I don't even despair of fetching it, if the lady goes on being as clever as she has begun."

"What?" exclaimed Plinny. "I? Clever?"

"Yes, indeed, ma'am," Captain Branscome answered, still in a slow, measured voice. "But, indeed, too, I might have been prepared for it when you started by taking a line that beats all my experience of landsmen; or perhaps in this case I ought to say lands_ladies_."

"Why, what have I done that is wonderful?"

"You took the line, ma'am, that, from here to Honduras, what is it but a passage? A few months at the most—oh, to be sure, to a seaman that's no more than nature; but to hear it from any one land-bred, and a lady too! As a Christian man, I have believed in miracles, but to-day I seem to be moving among them. And after your saying *that*, I had no call to be surprised when you up and suggested a way that would have taken a seaman twenty years to hit upon! I am not talking about the ship, ma'am. That part of your plan (if you'll allow me, as a seaman, to give an opinion) won't work at all. But the plan in general is a masterpiece."

"But I do not see," Plinny confessed, with a small puckering of the brows, "that I have suggested anything that can be called a plan."

"Why, ma'am, you have been talking heavenliest common sense, and once you've started us upon common sense there's no such thing as a difficulty. 'Let us go to the island,' you said; and with that at a stroke you get rid of the worst danger we have to fear, which is suspicion. For who's to suspect such a company as this present, or any part of it, of being after treasure? 'Let us make it a pleasure trip,' said you, or words to that effect; and what follows but that the whole journey is made cheap and simple? We book our passages in the Kingston packet. Peace has been declared with France, and

what more natural than that a party of English should be travelling to see the West Indies? Or what more likely than that, after what has happened, the doctor has advised a sea-voyage, to soothe your mind? As for me, I am Harry's tutor; every one in Falmouth knows it, and thinks me lucky to get the billet. It won't take five minutes to explain Mr. Goodfellow here, just as easily—"

Page 96

"And as for me," struck in Miss Belcher, "I'm an old madwoman, with more money than I know what to do with. And as for Jack Rogers, I'm eloping with him to a coral island."

Mr. Rogers checked himself on the edge of a guffaw.

"But, I say, Lydia, you're not serious about this?" he asked.

"I don't know, Jack. I rather think I am. I'm getting an old woman, mad or not; and the hours drag with me sometimes up at the house. But"—and here she looked up with one of those rare smiles that set you thinking she must have been pretty in her time—"there's this advantage in having followed my own will for fifty years: that no one any longer troubles to be surprised at anything I may do. You're something of an eccentric yourself, Jack. You had better join the picnic."

"I ought to warn you, ma'am," said Captain Branscome gravely, "that although the West India route has been fairly well protected for some months now, there *is* a certain amount of risk from American privateers."

"The Americans are a chivalrous nation, I have always heard."

"Extremely so, ma'am; nevertheless, there is a risk, in the event of the packet being attacked. But I was about to say," pursued Captain Branscome, "that our being at war with America may actually help us to get across from Jamaica to the island. Quite a number of old Colonial families—loyalists, as we should call them—have been driven from time to time to cross over from the Main and settle in the West Indies. But of course they have left kinsfolk behind them in the States; and, in spite of wars and divisions, it is no unusual thing for relatives to slip back and forth and visit one another—secretly, you understand. I have even heard of an old lady, now or until lately residing in St. Kitts, who has made no less than eleven such voyages to the Delaware—whenever, in short, her daughter was expecting an addition to her family."

"Good," said Miss Belcher. "I have found some one to impersonate; and that settles it."

"I really think, ma'am," said Captain Branscome, "that, once in Jamaica, we shall have no difficulty in finding, at the western end of the island, just the ship we require."

"Bless my soul!" said Miss Belcher. "Except for the sea-voyage, it might be a middle-aged jaunt in a po'-shay!"

[1] Miss Belcher was here employing a smuggling term. A "spotsman" is the agent who arranges for a run of goods, and directs the operation from the shore, without necessarily taking a part in it.

CHAPTER XXII.

A STRANGE MAN IN THE GARDEN.

Indeed, the longer we weighed the pros and cons the more feasible appeared the simple adventure. We ran, to be sure, the risk of being waylaid on our passage by an American privateer; but this was a danger incident to all who sailed on board his Majesty's Post Office packets in the year 1814. That anything was to be feared from the man Glass, none of us (I believe) stopped to consider. We thought of him only as a foiled criminal, a fugitive from justice, and speculated only on the chance that, with the hue-and-cry out and the whole countryside placarded, the Plymouth runners would lay him by the heels.

Page 97

Undoubtedly he had made for Plymouth. From Torpoint came news that a man answering to his description had crossed the ferry there on the morning after the murder. The regular ferryman there had stepped into a public-house for his regular morning glass of rum-and-water; and in his absence the small boy who acted as substitute had taken a stranger across. The stranger, who appeared to be in a sweating hurry, had rewarded the boy with half a crown; and the boy, rowing back to the Torpoint side and finding his master still in the tavern, had kept his own counsel and the money. Now the hue-and-cry had frightened him into confessing; and his description left no doubt that the impatient passenger was Aaron Glass.

Such a man had been observed, about two hours later, mingling in a fish auction on the Barbican; and had actually bidden for a boatload of mackerel, but without purchasing. From the auction he had walked away in the direction of Southside Street; and from that point all trace of him was lost.

Mr. Rogers, who had posted straight to Plymouth from the inquest, spent a couple of days in pushing inquiries here, there and everywhere. But not even the promise of a clue rewarded him. Two foreign-going vessels and four coasters had sailed from the port on the morning after the murder. The coasters were duly met, boarded, and searched at their ports of arrival—two at Liverpool, one at Milford, and one at Gravesend—but without result. If, as seemed likely, the man had contrived to ship himself on board the *Hussar* brig, bound for Barcelona, or the *Mary Harvey* barque, for Rio, the chances of bringing him to justice might be considered nil, or almost nil; for Mr. Rogers had some hope of the *Hussar* being overtaken and spoken by a frigate which happened to be starting, two days later, to join our fleet in the Mediterranean.

During the week or two that followed my father's funeral little was said of our expedition, although I understood from Plinny that the start would only be delayed until she and the lawyers had proved the will and put his estate in order for me. My father's pension had, of course, perished with him; but he left me a small sum in the funds, bearing interest between fifty and sixty pounds per annum, together with the freehold of Minden Cottage. Unfortunately, he had appointed no trustees, and I was a minor; and even more unfortunately his will directed that Minden Cottage should be sold "within a reasonably brief time" after his death, and that the sum accruing should be invested in Government stock for my benefit; and with this little tangle to work upon, our lawyers—Messrs. Harding and Whiteway, of Plymouth—and the Court of Chancery, soon involved the small estate in complications which (as Miss Belcher put it) were the more annoying because the fools at both ends were honest men and trying to do the best for me.

Of this business I understood nothing at the time, save that it caused delay; and I mention it here only to explain the delay and because (as will be seen) the sale of Minden Cottage, when at length the Lord Chancellor was good enough to authorize it, had a very important bearing on the rest of my story.

Page 98

Meanwhile, Captain Branscome had, of course, returned to Falmouth, and would book our passages on the Kingston packet as soon as my affairs allowed. We received letters from him from time to time, and on Saturdays and Mondays a passing call from Mr. Goodfellow, on his way to and from Plymouth. He had stipulated that, before sailing with us, he should take his inamorata into his confidence; and this was conceded after Miss Belcher had taken the opportunity of a day's marketing in Plymouth to call at the dairy-shop in Treville Street and make the lady's acquaintance.

"A very sensible young person," she reported; "and of the two I'd sooner trust her than Goodfellow to keep a still tongue. There's no danger in *that* quarter!"

Nor was there, as it proved. Mr. Goodfellow told us that he could hardly contain himself whenever he thought of his prospects; "for," said he, "I was born a parish apprentice; in place of which here I be at the age of twenty with two fortunes waiting for me, one at each end of the world."

At length, in the last week of July, Messrs. Harding and Whiteway announced that all formalities were complete; and three days later a bill appeared on the whitewashed front of Minden Cottage announcing that this desirable freehold residence with two and a half acres of land would be sold by public auction on August 6, at 1.30 o'clock p.m., in the Royal Hotel, Plymouth. Any particulars not mentioned in the bills would be readily furnished on application at the office of the vendor's solicitors; and parties wishing to inspect the premises might obtain the keys from Miss Belcher's lodge-keeper, Mr. Polglaze—that is to say, from the nearest dwelling-house down the road.

Plinny, with the help of half a dozen of Miss Belcher's men and a couple of waggon, had employed these three days in removing our furniture to the great cricket pavilion above the hill; an excellent storehouse, where, for the time, it would remain in charge of Mr. Saunders, the head keeper. We ourselves removed to the shelter of Miss Belcher's lordly roof, as her guests; and Ann, the cook, to a cottage on the home farm, where that lady—who usually superintended her own dairy—had offered her the post of *locum tenens* until our return from foreign travel. By the morning when the bill-poster came and affixed the notice of sale, Minden Cottage stood dismantled—a melancholy shell, inhabited only by memories for us, and for our country neighbours by mysterious ghostly terrors.

This was one of the many grounds on which we agreed that the Lord Chancellor had acted foolishly in insisting upon a public auction. His lordship, to be sure, could not be expected to know that recent events had utterly depreciated the selling value of Minden Cottage over the whole of the south and east of Cornwall; that the homeward-trudging labourer would breathe a prayer as he neared it along the high-road in the dark, and

Page 99

would shut his eyes and run by it, nor draw breath until he reached the lodge, down the road; that quite a number of Christian folk who had been used to envy my father the snuggest little retreat within twenty miles would now have refused a hundred pounds to spend one night in it. So it was, however; and the chance of an "out"-bidder might be passed over as negligible. On the other hand, Miss Belcher had offered Messrs. Harding and Whiteway a handsome and more than sufficient price for the property. She wanted it to round off her estate, out of which, at present, it cut a small cantle and at an awkward corner. Moreover, if Miss Belcher had not come forward, Plinny was prepared to purchase. That Miss Belcher would acquire the place no one doubted. Still, a public sale it had to be.

Early in the afternoon of the 5th, she left us for Plymouth, to make arrangements for the bidding. I did not see her depart, having been occupied since five in the morning in a glorious otter-hunt, for which Mr. Rogers had brought over his hounds. The heat of the day found us far up-stream, and a good ten miles from home; and by the time Mr. Rogers had returned his pack to Miss Belcher's hospitable kennels the sun was low in the west. I know nothing that will make a man more honestly dirty than a long otter-hunt, followed by a perspiring tramp along a dusty road. From feet to waist I was a cake of dried mud overlaid with dust. I had dust in my hair, in the creases of my clothes, in the pores of my skin. I needed ablution far beyond the resources of Miss Belcher's establishment, which, to tell the truth, left a good deal to seek in the apparatus of personal cleanliness; and, snatching up the clean shirt and suit of clothes which the ever-provident Plinny had laid out on the bed for me, I ran down across the park to the stream under the plantation.

Little rain had fallen for a month past, and, arriving at the pool on which I had counted for a bath, I found it almost dry. While I stood there, in two minds whether to return or to strip and make the best of it, I bethought me that—although I had never bathed there in my life, the stream would be better worth trying where it ran through the now deserted garden of Minden Cottage, below the summer-house. The bottom might be muddy, but the dam which my father had built there secured a sufficiency of water in the hottest months. I picked up my clothes again, and, following the stream up to the little door in the garden wall, pushed open the rusty latch, and entered the garden.

The hour, as I have said, was drawing on to dusk; and though, perhaps I ought to say, I am by nature not inclined to nervousness (or I had not ventured so near that particular spot), yet scared enough I was, as I stepped on to the little foot-bridge, to see a man standing by the doorway of the summer-house.

For an instant a terror seized me that it might be a ghost—or, worse, the man himself, Aaron Glass. But a second glance, as I halted on a hair-trigger—so to speak—to turn and run for my life, assured me that the man was a stranger.

Page 100

He wore a suit of black, and a soft hat of Panama straw with a broad brim, and held in his hand a something strange to me, and, indeed, as yet almost unknown in England—an umbrella. It had a dusky white covering, and he held it by the middle, as though he had been engaged in taking measurements with it when my entrance surprised him.

It appeared to me for the moment that I had not only surprised him but frightened him, for the face he turned to me wore a yellowish pallor like that of old ivory. Yet when he drew himself up and spoke, I seemed to know in an instant that this was his natural colour. The face itself was large and fleshy, with bold, commanding features: a face, on second thoughts, impossible to connect with terror.

“Hallo, little boy! What are you doing in this garden?”

I answered him, stammering, that I was come to bathe; and while I answered I was still in two minds about running; for his voice, appearance, bearing, all alike puzzled me. He spoke genially, with something foreign in his accent. I could not determine his age at all. At first glance he seemed to be quite an old man, and not only old but weary; yet he walked without a stoop, and as he came slowly across the turf to the bridge-end I saw that his hair was black and glossy, and his large face unwrinkled as a child's.

“Not after the plums, eh?”

“No, sir; and besides,” said I, picking up my courage, “there's no harm if I am. The garden belongs to me.”

“So?” He regarded me for some seconds, his hands clasping the umbrella behind his back. The sight of the bundle of black clothes I carried apparently satisfied him. “Then you have right to ask what brings me here. I answer, curiosity. What became of the man who did it?” he asked, with a glance over his shoulder towards the summer-house.

“Nobody knows, sir,” I answered, recovering myself.

“Disappeared, hey?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I fancy I could put my hand on him,” he said very coolly, after a pause. And I began to think I had to deal with a madman.

“Suppose, now, that I do catch him,” he went on after a pause. “What shall I do with him? In my country—for I live a great way off—we either choke a murderer or cut off his head with a knife.”

I told him—since he waited for me to say something—how in England we disposed of our worst criminals.

“No, you don’t,” said he quietly. “You let some of the worst go, and the very worst (as you believe) you banish to an island, treating them as the old Romans treated theirs. Now, I’m a traveller; and where do you suppose I spent this day month?”

I could not give a guess.

Page 101

“Why, on the island of Elba. I’m curious, you know, especially in the matter of criminals, so I came—oh, a tremendous way—to have a look at Napoleon Bonaparte, there. Now I’ll tell you another thing, he’s going to escape in a month or two, when his plans are ready. I had that from his own lips; and, what’s more, I heard it again in Paris a week later. From Paris I came across to London, and from London down to Plymouth, and from Plymouth I was to have travelled straight to Falmouth, to take my passage home, when I heard of what had happened here, and that the house was for sale. So I stopped to have a look at it; for I am curious, I tell you.”

He went on to prove his curiosity by asking me a score of questions about myself: my age, my choice of a profession, my relatives (I told him I had none), and my schooling. He drew me (I cannot remember how) into a description of Plinny, and agreed with me that she must be a woman in a thousand; asked where she lived at present, and regretted—pulling out his watch—that he had not time to make her acquaintance. Oddly enough, I felt when he said it that this was no idle speech, but that only time prevented him from walking up the hill and paying his respects. I felt also, the longer we talked, I will not say a fear of him, for his manner was too urbane to permit it, but an increasing respect. Crazy he might be, as his questions were disconnected and now and again bewildering, as when he asked if my father had travelled much abroad, and again it I really preferred to remain idle at home instead of returning to finish my education with Mr. Stimcoe; but his manner of asking compelled an answer. I could not tell myself if I liked or disliked the man, he differed so entirely from any one I had ever seen in my life. His questions were intimate, yet without offence. I answered them all, with a sense of talking to some one either immensely old or divided from me by hundreds of miles.

In the midst of our talk, and while he was pressing me with questions about Mr. and Mrs. Stimcoe, he suddenly lifted his head, and stood listening.

“Hallo!” said he. “Here’s the coach!”

I had heard nothing, though my ears are pretty sharp. But sure enough, though not until a couple of minutes had passed, the wheels of the *Highflyer*, our evening coach to Plymouth, sounded far along the road.

The stranger pulled out a bunch of keys from his pocket.

“I will ask you as a favour,” said he, “to return these to the lodge-keeper, from whom I borrowed them. Will you be so kind?”

I said that I would do so with pleasure.

“I have been over the house. It appears—the lodge-keeper tells me— that I have been almost the only visitor to inspect it. That’s queer, for I should have thought that to an

amateur in crime— with a taste for discovery—it offered great possibilities. But never mind, child,” said this strange man, and shook hands. “I have great hopes of finding the scoundrel, and of dealing with him. Eh? ‘How?’ Well, if we get him upon an island, he shan’t get away, like Napoleon.”

Page 102

With these words, which I did not understand in the least, he turned and left me, passing out into the lane by the side-gate. A minute later I heard the coach pull up, and yet a minute later roll on again, conveying him towards Plymouth. I stole a glance at the water, at the summer-house, at the tree behind it. Somehow in the twilight they all wore an uncanny look. On my way home—for I decided to return and take my bath in the house, after all—my mind kept running on a story of Ann the cook's, about a man (a relative of hers, she said) who had once seen the devil. And yet the stranger had tipped me a guinea at parting, nor was it (except metaphorically) red hot in my pocket.

Next evening Miss Belcher rode back to us from Plymouth with the announcement that Minden Cottage was hers. She had not attended the sale in person, but Maddicombe, her lawyer, had started the bidding (under her instruction) at precisely the sum which she had privately offered Messrs. Harding and Whiteway. There was no competition. In fact, Maddicombe reported that, apart from the auctioneers and himself, but six persons attended the sale. Of these, five were local acquaintances of his whom he knew to be attracted only by curiosity. Of the sixth, a stranger, he had been afraid at first, but the man appeared to be a visitor, who had wandered into the sale by mistake. At any rate, he made no bid.

"What sort of man?" I asked.

"As to that, Maddicombe had no very precise recollection, or couldn't put it into words. A tall man, he said, and dressed in black; a noticeable man—that was as far as he could get—and, he believed, a foreigner."

CHAPTER XXIII.

HOW WE SAILED TO THE ISLAND.

The business of the sale concluded, we had nothing to detain us, and an order was at once sent to Captain Branscome to book our passages in the next packet for the West Indies. Meanwhile we held long discussions on details of outfit, for since our impedimenta included two moderately heavy chests—the one of guns and ammunition, the other of spades, picks, hatchets, and other tools—and since on reaching Jamaica we must take a considerable journey on muleback, it was important to cut our personal luggage down to the barest necessities. We did not forget a medicine-chest.

On August 28 we received word from Captain Branscome that he had taken berths for us on the *Townshend* packet, commanded by an old friend of his, a Captain Harrison. She was due to sail on the 1st. Accordingly, on August 30 we travelled down by Royal Mail to Falmouth, Mr. Rogers following that same noon by the *Highflyer*; spent a busy day in making some last purchases, and a sleepless night in the noisiest of hotels; and went on board soon after breakfast, to be welcomed there by Mr. Goodfellow, who had



got over his parting three days before, at Plymouth, and professed himself to be in the very jolliest of spirits. At the head of the after-companion Captain Branscome met us and conducted us below, to introduce us to our quarters and be complimented on the thought and care he had bestowed in choosing them and fitting them up—for the ladies' comfort especially. He himself lodged forward, in a small double cabin which he shared with Mr. Goodfellow.

Page 103

I will spare the reader a description of our departure and of the passage to Jamaica, not only because they were quite uneventful (we did not even sight a' privateer), but because they have been celebrated in verse by Plinny, in a descriptive poem of five cantos and some four thousand lines, entitled "The Voyage: with an Englishwoman's Reflections on her Favourite Element," a few extracts from which I am permitted to quote—

"We sailed for Kingston in the *Townshend* packet.
The day auspicious was, and calm the heavens;
Not so the scene on board—oh, what a racket!
And everything on deck apparently at sixes and sevens.
Mail-bags and passengers mixed up in every direction,
The latter engaged with their relatives in fond farewells;
On the one hand the faltering accents of affection,
On the other the unpolisht seamen emitting yells,
With criticisms of a Custom House official
Whose action for some reason they resented as prejudicial.

"At length the last farewell is said,
The anchor tripped, the gangway clear'd;
'Twas five p.m. ere past Pendennis Head
Forth to th' unfathomable deep we steer'd.
The bo'sun piped (he wore a manly beard);
And while th' attentive crew the braces trimm'd
(Alluding to the ship's), and while from observation
The coast receded, we with eyes be-dimm'd
Indulged in feelings natural to the situation.

"Albion! My Albion! So called from the hue
Thy cliffs wear by the Straits of Dover—
Though darker in this neighbourhood—still adieu!
Albion, adieu! I feel myself a rover.
Thy sons instinctively take to the water,
And so will I, albeit but a daughter."

A page later, in more tripping metre (which reflects her gaiety of spirits), she describes the ship—

"The *Townshend* Packet is a gallant brig
Of one hundred and eighty tons;
'Tis the Postmaster-General's favourite rig,
And she carries six useful guns.
As she sails, as she sails
With his Majesty's mails,



Hurrah for her long six-pounders!
They relieve our fear
Of a privateer,
But what shall we do if she founders?
I prefer not to think of any such contingency:
She has excellent sailing qualities,
And her captain appears to rule with stringency
And to be averse from minor frivolities.
With the late Admiral Nelson he may not provoke comparison.
But one and all place implicit confidence in Captain Harrison."

While Plinny cultivated the Muse—and with the more zest as, to her pride and delight, she found herself immune from sea-sickness—I kept up, through the long mornings, the pretence of studying mathematics with Captain Branscome, and regularly at noon received a lesson in taking the ship's bearings. Our fellow-voyagers were mostly merchants and agents bound for Jamaica, the trade of which had revived since the restoration of peace; and among them we passed for a well-to-do family travelling partly for pleasure to visit the island, but partly also with an idea of buying a plantation and settling there—which explained the presence of Mr. Goodfellow.

Page 104

Our captain justified the confidence so poetically expressed above. He sailed his ship along steadily, taking no risks, and after a pleasant passage of thirty-six days brought her to anchor in Carlisle Bay, Barbadoes, where we were due to deliver some bags of mails. I have said that the trip was uneventful; it was even without incident save for some fooleries on reaching the Line, and such trifling distractions as an unsuccessful attempt to shoot an albatross, and the sighting of some flying-fish and sundry long-tailed birds which the sailors called boatswains. But, as Plinny wrote—

“Life at sea has a natural monotony
Of which 'twere irrational to complain:
You cannot, for instance, study botany
As in an English country lane.
But the mind is superior to distance
With its own reminiscences stored,
Not to mention the spiritual assistance
We derived from a clergyman on board.”

(He was a sallow young man of delicate constitution, and, partly for his health's sake, had accepted the pastorate of a Genevan church in Kingston.)

From Barbadoes we beat up for Jamaica, and anchored in Kingston Harbour just forty-five days from home. The next morning we said farewell to the ship, and were rowed ashore to a good hotel, where we spent a lazy week in email excursions, while Captain Branscome busied himself in hiring a mule-train and holding consultations with a firm of merchants, Messrs. Cox and Roebuck, to whom Miss Belcher came recommended with a letter of credit. These gentlemen, understanding that we desired to cross over to the Main to visit some relations of Miss Belcher resident in Virginia (for that was our pretence), opined that the matter was not difficult of management, but that we must needs travel to the extreme west of the island if we would hire a vessel for the purpose, and they mentioned an agent of theirs at Savannah-la-Mar—Jacob Paz by name—as the likeliest man for our purpose.

Armed with a letter of introduction to this man, in the early morning of October 22 we started on muleback, and, travelling without haste through the exquisite scenery of Jamaica (the main roads of which put ours of Cornwall to shame), arrived at Savannah-la-Mar on the 27th, a great part of the way having been occupied by Miss Belcher (who hated the sight of a negro) in rebuking Plinny's sentimental objections to slavery, and by Mr. Rogers in begging a collection of humming-birds.

It took (I believe) some time at Savannah-la-Mar to convince Mr Paz, a subtle half-breed, that we were actually fools enough to wish to purchase one of his vessels, and mad enough to propose working her alone. He had three boats idle, including a pretty little fore-and-aft schooner of thirty tons, the *EsPRIella*, which Captain Branscome had no

sooner set eyes upon than he decided to be the very thing for our purpose. She was fitted with a large ladies' cabin aft

Page 105

of the companion, a saloon, and a small single-berth cabin between it and the fo’c’s’le, which would house three men comfortably. We ended by purchasing her for three hundred and seventy pounds; and into the fo’c’s’le I went with Mr. Goodfellow and Mr. Jack Rogers, who insisted on resigning the spare cabin to Captain Branscome—henceforward, or until we should reach the island, by consent the leader of the expedition.

So on October 30, at six in the morning, after being commended to God by Mr. Paz, we worked out of Savannah-la-Mar, and, having gained an offing with a light breeze, hoisted all her bits of canvas, even to a light jib-topsail we found on board—chiefly, I think, to impress her late owner, whom we could descry on the shore, watching us. He had steadfastly refused to believe us capable of handling a boat, whereas of our party Plinny and Mr. Goodfellow were the only landlubbers. Miss Belcher could take the helm with the best of us, and indeed it was reported of her that she had on more than one occasion played helmswoman to a run of goods upon her own Cornish estate. Mr. Jack Rogers had once owned a yacht and suffered from tedium; now, as a foremast hand, he was enjoying himself amazingly.

But the pride above all prides was Captain Branscome’s. After many years he trod a deck again, commander of his own ship; and the bearing of the man was that of a prince restored after long exile to his kingdom. Courteous as ever to the ladies, to the rest of us he behaved as a master, noble but severe, unwearied in explaining the least minutiae of seamanship, inexorable in seeing that his smallest instruction was obeyed. Mr. Rogers at the end of the first day confided to me that he had much ado to refrain from touching his forelock whenever he heard the skipper’s voice.

I shall not be believed if I say that in all the five days of our voyage Captain Branscome never snatched a wink of sleep. Doubtless he did sleep, between whiles; but doubtless also no one saw him do it.

It was daybreak or thereabouts on the morning of November 5—and a faint light coming through the decklight over the fo’c’s’le—when I, that had kept the middle watch and was now snoring in my bunk, sat up at a touch on my shoulder, and stared, rubbing my eyes, into the dim face of Mr. Goodfellow.

“Skipper wants you on deck,” he announced. “We’ve lifted something on the starboard bow, and he swears ’tis the Island.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

WE ANCHOR OFF THE ISLAND.

The word fetched me out of my bunk like a shot from a gun. I ran past him, scrambled up the fo’c’s’le ladder, and gained the deck in time to see Miss Belcher emerge from the after-companion upon the dawn, her hair in a “bun,” her bare feet thrust into loose felt slippers, her form wrapped in a Newmarket overcoat closely buttoned over her *robe de nuit*.

“The Island, ma’am!” announced Captain Branscome from the helm; and, turning there by the fo’c’s’le hatch and following the gesture of his hand, I descried a purplish smear on the southern horizon. To me it looked but a low-lying cloud or a fogbank.

Page 106

"I'll take your word for it," answered Miss Belcher, calmly. "You have timed it well, Captain Branscome."

"Under Providence, ma'am," the Captain corrected her, and called to me to take the wheel while he fetched out his chart and unrolled it for her inspection. "We are running straight down upon the northern end of it, and our best anchorage (if I may suggest) lies to the south'ard—in Gow's Creek, as they call it."

He laid a finger on the chart.

"We rely upon you, sir, to choose."

"I thank you, ma'am. If (as I doubt not) we find plenty of water there, it will be the best anchorage in this breeze; not to mention that this Gow's Creek runs up, as we are directed, to within a mile and a half of the No. 3 *cache*. If you agree, ma'am, I have only to ask your instructions whether to coast down the east or the west side of the Island. The wind, you perceive, serves equally well for both."

Miss Belcher considered for a moment.

"The Keys lie to the west of Gable Point, here. By taking that side we can have a look at them on our way."

"Right, ma'am. Harry!"—he turned to me—"bring her nose round to sou'-west and by south, and stand by for the gybe." He hauled in the main-sheet and eased it over.

"Now, see here, lad," he called to me sharply as the little vessel yawed: "where were your eyes just then?"

"I was taking a look at the land-fall, sir," I answered truthfully.

"Then I'll trouble you to fix your mind on the lubber's-mark and hold her straight. That's discipline, my boy, and in this business you may want all you can learn of it."

It was not Captain Branscome's habit to speak sharply. I turned my attention to the card, conscious of a pair of red ears.

The sky brightened, and within an hour, as we ran down upon it at something like eight knots, the Island began to take shape. A wisp of morning fog floated horizontally across it, dividing its shore-line from the hills in the interior, which, looming above this cloudy base, appeared considerably higher than, in fact, they were. The shore itself along the eastern side showed almost uniformly steep—a line of reddish rock broken with patches of green, which we mistook for meadows (but they turned out to be nothing more or less than sheets of green creepers matted together and overhanging the cliffs). At its northern extremity, upon which we were closing down at an acute angle, the land

dropped to a low-lying, sandy peninsula with a backbone of rock almost bare of vegetation, and beyond this we saw the white surf glittering around the Keys.

Our course gave them a fairly wide berth; and at first I took them for a continuous line of sandbanks running in a rough semicircle around the low spit which the chart called Gable Point; but as we drew level they broke up into islets, with blue channels between, and at sight of us thousands of sea-birds rose in cloud upon cloud, with a clamour that might have been heard for miles. One of these banks— the northernmost—showed traces of herbage, grey in colour and dull by contrast with the verdure of the Island. The rest were but barren sand.

Page 107

We rounded them at about three cables' length and stood due south, giving sheet again. Southward from the neck of the peninsula this western side of the Island differed surprisingly from the other. Here were no cliffs, but a flat shore and long stretches of beach, gradually shelving up to green bush, with here a palmetto grove and there a lagoon of still water within the outer barrier of sand. Mr. Jack Rogers had relieved me at the helm, and with the Captain's permission I had stepped below to the saloon, where Plinny was waiting to give me breakfast, and persuaded the good soul not only to let me carry it on deck and eat it there, but to postpone washing-up for a while and accompany me. To this she would by no means consent until I had brought her the Captain's leave.

"You may take her my leave," said he, with a sudden flush on his face, "and my apologies for having neglected to request the honour of her company. The fact is," he added, with a hard glance at me, "Miss Plinlimmon's sense of discipline is so rare a thing that I am always forgetting to do justice to it. Were it possible to find a whole crew so conscientious I would undertake to sail to the North Pole."

I conveyed this answer to Plinny, and it visibly gratified her. She retired at once to the ladies' cabin to indue her poke-bonnet with coquelicot trimmings. Her apron she retained, observing that on an expedition of this sort one should never be taken at unawares, and that when at Rome you should do as the Romans did. "By which, my dear Harry," she explained, "you are not to understand me to refer to their Papist observances, such as kissing a man's toe. Were such a request proffered to me even at the cannon's mouth, I trust my courage would find an answer. 'No, no,' I would say,

"I will not bow within the House of Rimmon:
Yours faithfully, Amelia Plinlimmon."

As we reached the head of the companion-ladder Captain Branscome, who was standing just aft of the wheel, behind Mr. Rogers's shoulder, and scanning the shore through his glass, made a motion to step forward and hand her on deck. This was ever his courteous way, and I turned a moment later in some surprise, to find that, instead of closing the glass, he had lifted it, and was holding it again to his eye, at the same time keeping his right shoulder turned to us.

While we looked, he lowered it and made his bow, yet with something of a preoccupied air.

"Good morning, ma'am. You are very welcome on deck, and I trust that Harry conveyed the apology I sent by him."

"I beg you will not mention it, sir. It is true that I suffered from the curiosity which outspoken critics have called the bane of my sex; yet, believe me, I was far from accusing you, knowing how many responsibilities must weigh on the captain of an expedition, even though it fare as prosperously as ours."

“True, ma’am,” Captain Branscome tapped his spyglass absent-mindedly, and seemed on the point of lifting it again. “Though, with your permission, I will add ‘D.V.’”

Page 108

“Yes—yes”—Plinny smiled a cheerful approval—“we are ever in the Divine Hand; not more really, perhaps, in the tropics than in those more temperate latitudes when, though the wolf and lion do not howl for prey, an incautious step upon a piece of orange-peel has before now proved equally fatal.”

Captain Branscome bowed again.

“You call me the leader of this expedition, Miss Plinlimmon; and so I am, until we drop anchor. With that, in two or three hours at farthest, my chief responsibility ends, and I think it time”—he turned to Mr. Rogers—“that we made ready to appoint my successor. I shall have a word to say to him.”

“Nonsense, man!” answered Mr. Rogers, looking up from the wheel. “If you mean me, I decline to act except as your lieutenant. You have captained us admirably; and if I decline the honour, you will hardly suggest promoting Harry, here, or Goodfellow!”

“I was thinking that Miss Belcher, perhaps—”

“Hallo!” said Miss Belcher, turning at the sound of her name, and coming aft from the bows, whence she had been studying the coastline. “What’s the matter with *me*?”

“The Captain,” exclaimed Mr. Rogers, “has been tendering us his resignation.”

“Why?”

“Mr. Rogers misunderstands me, ma’am,” said Captain Branscome. “I merely said that, so far as we have agreed as yet, My authority ceases as soon as we cast anchor. If you choose to re elect me, I shall not say ‘No’—though not coveting the honour; but I can only say ‘Yes’ upon a condition.”

“Name it, please.”

“That I have every one’s implicit obedience. I may—nay, I shall— give orders that will be irksome and at the same time hard to understand. I may be unable to give you my reasons for them; or able to give you none beyond the general warning that we are after treasure, and I never yet heard of a treasure-hunt that was child’s-play.”

He spoke quietly, but with an impressiveness not to be mistaken, though we knew no cause for it. Miss Belcher, at any rate, did not miss it. She shot him a keen glance, turned for a moment, and seemed to study the shore, then faced about again, and said she—

“I am not used to be commanded. But I can command myself, and am not altogether a fool.”

The Captain bowed. “I was thinking, ma’am, that might be our difficulty. But if I have your word to try—”

“You have.”

“I thank you, ma’am, and will own that my mind is relieved. It may even be that, from time to time, I may do myself the honour of consulting you. Nevertheless—”

“I mustn’t count on it, eh? Well, as you please; only I warn you that, while in any case I am going to be as good as my word, if you treat me like a sensible person I shall probably be a trifle better.”

For ten seconds, maybe, the pair looked one another in the eyes; then the Captain bowed once more, and apparently this invited her to step forward with him to the bows, where they halted and stood conning the coast, the Captain through his spyglass.

Page 109

As they left us, Plinny and I moved to the waist of the ship, where we paused by consent, and I resumed my breakfast, munching it as I leaned against the port bulwarks. We were now rapidly opening Long Bay (as the chart called it), a deep recess running out squarely at either extremity, the bight of it crossed by a beach, and a line of tumbling breakers, that extended for close upon three miles. Above the beach a forest of tall trees, in height and colour at once distinguishable from the thick bush we had hitherto been passing, screened the bases of a range of hills which obviously formed the backbone of the island; and as the whole bay crept into view we discerned in the north (or, to be accurate, N.N.E.) corner of this long recess a marshy valley dividing the scrub from the forest. The mouth of this valley, where it widened out upon the beach, measured at least half a mile across. The chart marked it as Misery Swamp, and indicated a river there. We could detect none, or, at any rate, no river entrance. If river there were, doubtless it emptied its waters through the fringe of grey-green weeds, and dispersed over the flat-looking foreshore; but even at two miles' distance it looked to be a dismal, fever-haunted spot.

By contrast, the noble range of woodland to southward of it and the rocky peaks that rose in delicate shadow above the tree-tops were beautiful as a dream, even to eyes fresh from the forest scenery of Jamaica; and while Plinny leant with me against the bulwarks, I felt that in the silence immortal verse was shaping itself, which it did after a while to this effect—

“Arrived o’er the limitless ocean
In 16 degrees of N. latitude,
Our lips were attuned to devotion,
Our spirits uplifted in gratitude.

“Our hearts with poetic afflatus
Took wing and impulsively soared
As the lead-line (a quaint apparatus)
Reported the depth overboard.

“Oh, oft had I dream’d of the tropics—
But never to see them in person—
So full of remarkable topics
To speculate, sing, and converse on.”

It was Mr. Goodfellow who worked the hand-lead, under Captain Branscome’s orders, from a perch just forward of the main rigging; but at a mile’s distance we carried deep water with us past Crabtree Point, and around the unnamed small cape which formed the south-western extremity of the island. We rounded this, and, hauling up to the wind, found (as the reader may discover for himself by a glance at the chart) that the shore made almost directly E. by N., with scarcely an indentation, for Gow’s Gulf.



Here the water shoaled, though for the first mile almost imperceptibly. The inlet itself resembled the estuary of a mighty river, its both sides well wooded, though very different in configuration, the northern rising quietly from shelving beaches of coral-white sand to some of the most respectable hills in the island, while that on our starboard hand presented a succession of cliff and chasm, the cliffs varying, as we judged, from two hundred to two hundred and fifty feet sheer.

Page 110

In three and a half fathoms (reported by Mr. Goodfellow) the water, which was exquisitely clear, showed good white sand under us. Ahead of us the creek narrowed, promising an anchorage almost completely landlocked and as peaceful as the soul of man could desire. We drew a short eight feet of water, and with such soundings (for the tide had not been making above an hour) I expected the old man to hold on for at least another mile, when, to my surprise, he took the helm from Mr. Rogers and, sending him forward, shook the *Espriella* up in the wind, at the same time calling to Goodfellow and me to lower the main throat-halliards.

“Leave go anchor!”

With a splash her anchor plunged over, took the ground, and in another twenty yards brought us up standing.

“Hallo!” Miss Belcher scanned the shore. “You’re giving the boats a long trip, Captain.”

“I take my precautions, ma’am,” answered Captain Branscome, almost curtly.

CHAPTER XXV.

I TAKE FRENCH LEAVE ASHORE.

In a sweating hurry I helped Mr. Rogers and Mr. Goodfellow to furl sail, coil away ropes, and tidy up generally. After these tedious weeks at sea I was wild for a run ashore, and, with the green woods inviting me, grudged even an hour’s delay.

We had run down foresail and come to our anchor under jib and half-lowered mainsail. I sprang forward to take in the jib and carry it, with the foresail, to the locker abaft the ladies’ cabin, when Captain Branscome sang out to me to be in no such hurry, but to fold and stow both sails neatly without detaching them—the one along the bowsprit, the other at the foot of the fore-stay, when they could be re-hoisted at a moment’s notice.

These precautions were the more mysterious to me because a moment later he sent me to the locker to fetch up a tarpaulin cover for the mainsail, which he snugged down carefully, to protect it (as he explained) from the night dews—so carefully that he twice interrupted Mr. Goodfellow to correct a piece of slovenly tying. The sail being packed at length to his satisfaction, we laced the cover about it carefully as though it had been a lady’s bodice.

Our next business was to get out the boats. The *Espriella* possessed three—a gig, shaped somewhat like a whaleboat; a useful, twelve-foot dinghy; and a small cockboat, or “punt” (to use our West Country name), capable, at a pinch, of accommodating two persons. This last we carried on deck; but the larger pair at the foot of the rigging on

either side, whence we unlashd and lowered them by their falls. The punt we moored by a short painter under the bowsprit, so that she lay just clear of our stem.

This small job had fallen to me by the Captain's orders, and I clambered back, to find him and Mr. Rogers standing by the accommodation ladder on the port side, and in the act of stepping down into the dinghy. Indeed, Mr. Rogers had his foot on the ladder, and seemed to wait only while the Captain gave some instructions to Mr. Goodfellow, who was listening respectfully.



Page 111

"Are we all to go ashore in the dinghy?" I asked.

The Captain turned on me severely, and I observed that he and Mr. Rogers had armed themselves with a musket apiece, each slung on a bandolier, and that Mr. Rogers wore an axe at his belt.

"Certainly not," said the Captain. "Mr. Rogers and I are going on shore to prospect, and I was at this moment instructing Mr. Goodfellow that nobody is to leave the ship without leave from me."

"But—" I began, and checked myself, less for fear of his anger than because I was actually on the verge of tears. I looked around for the ladies, but they had retired to their cabin. Oh, this was hard—a monstrous tyranny! And so I told Mr. Goodfellow hotly as the dinghy pushed off and, Mr. Rogers paddling her, drew away up the creek and rounded the bend under the almost overhanging trees.

"When are they coming back?" I demanded.

"Captain didn't say."

"You seem to take it easily," I flamed up; "but I call it a burning shame! Captain Branscome seems to think that this Island belongs to him; and you know well enough, if it hadn't been for me, he'd never have set eyes on it. What are you going to do?"

"Smoke a pipe," said Mr. Goodfellow, "and watch the beauties o' Nature."

"Well, I'm not," I threatened. "Captain Branscome may be a very good seaman but he's too much of an usher out of school. This isn't Stimcoe's."

"Not a bit like it," assented Mr. Goodfellow, feeling in his pockets.

"And if he thinks he can go on playing the usher over me, he'll find out his mistake. Why, look you, whose is the treasure, properly speaking? Who found it?"

"Nobody, yet."

Mr. Goodfellow drew forth a pipe and rubbed the bowl thoughtfully against his nose.

"Well, then, who found the chart? Who put you all on the scent? Who was it first heard the secret from Captain Coffin? And this man doesn't even consult me—doesn't think me worth a civil word! I'll be shot if I stand it!" I wound up, pacing the deck in my rage.

Just then Plinny's voice called up to us from the cabin, announcing that dinner was ready.



"But," said she, "one of you must eat his portion on deck while he keeps watch; that was Captain Branscome's order."

"More orders!" I grumbled; and then, with a sudden thought, I nodded to Mr. Goodfellow, who was replacing his pipe in his pocket. "*You* go. Hand me up a plate and a fistful of ship biscuit, and leave me to deal with 'em. I'm not for stifling down there under hatches, whatever your taste may be."

"'Tis a fact," he admitted, "that a meal does me more good when I square my elbows to it."

"Down you go, then," said I; "and when you're wanted I'll call you."

He descended cheerfully, reappeared to pass up a plate, and descended again. I gobbled down enough to stay my appetite, crammed my pocket full of ship biscuit, and, after listening for a moment at the hatchway, tiptoed forward and climbed out upon the bowsprit. Then, having unloosed the cockboat's painter, I lowered and let myself drop into her, and, slipping a paddle into the stern-notch, sculled gently for shore.

Page 112

The *Espriella*, of course, lay head-to-tide, and the tide by this time was making strongly—so strongly that I had no time to get steerage way on the little boat before it swept her close under the open porthole through which I heard Miss Belcher inviting Mr. Goodfellow to pass his plate for another dumpling. Miss Belcher's voice—as I may or may not have informed the reader—was a baritone of singularly resonant *timbre*. It sounded through the porthole as through a speaking trumpet, and I ducked and held my breath as the boat's gunwale rubbed twice against the schooner's side before drifting clear.

Once clear, however, I worked my paddle with a will, though noiselessly; and, the tide helping me, soon reached and rounded the first bend. Here, out of sight of the ship, I had leisure to draw breath and look about me.

Ahead of me lay a still reach, close upon half a mile in length, and narrowing steadily to the next bend, when the two shores overlapped and mingled their reflections on the water. On my right the red cliffs, their summits matted with creepers, descended sheer into water many fathoms deep, yet so clear that I could spy the fish playing about their bases where they met the firm white sand. On my left the channel shoaled gradually to a beach of this same white sand, which followed the curve of the shore, here and again flashing out into broad sunshine from the blue shadow cast by the overhanging forest.

Between these banks the breeze could scarcely be felt, yet, though the sun scorched me, the heat was not oppressive. The woods, dense and tangled though they were, threw up no exhalations of mud or rotting leaves, but a clean, aromatic odour. It seemed to give them a substance without which they had been but a mirage, a scene painted on a cloth, so motionless and apparently lifeless they stood, with the long vines hanging from their boughs, and the hot, rarefied air quivering above them.

At first their silence daunted me; by-and-by I felt (I could hardly be said to hear) that this silence was intense, and held a sound of its own, a murmur as of millions of flies and minute winged things—or perhaps it came from the vegetation itself, and the sap pushing leaf against leaf and ceaselessly striving for room.

With scarcely more noise than the forest made in growing, I let the cockboat float up on the tide, correcting her course from time to time with a touch of the paddle astern; and so coming to the second bend, began to search the shore for a convenient landing. The Captain and Mr. Rogers, no doubt, had rowed up to the very head of the creek, and would by this time be prospecting for the clump of trees which were the key to unlock No. 3 cache. To escape—or, at any rate, delay—detection, I must land lower down, and preferably at some point where I could pull up the boat and hide it.

Page 113

With this in my mind, scanning the woods on the north bank for an opening, I drifted around the bend, and with a shock of surprise found myself in full view of the end of the creek. Worse than this, I was bearing straight for the *Espriella's* dinghy, which lay just above water on the foreshore, with her painter carried out to a tree above the bank. Worst of all, some one at that instant stepped back from the bank and under the shadow of the tree, as if to await me there. . . . Mr. Rogers, or the Captain? . . . Mr. Rogers certainly; for I remembered that the Captain wore white duck trousers, and, by my glimpse of him, this man's clothes were dark. His height and walk, too! Yes; no doubt of it, he was Mr. Rogers.

I stood—a culprit caught red-handed—and let the boat drift me down upon retributive justice. A while ago I had been mentally composing a number of effective retorts upon Captain Branscome for his tyrannical behaviour. Now, of a sudden, all this eloquence deserted me: I felt it leaking away and knew myself for a law-breaker. One lingering hope remained—that the Captain had pushed ahead into the woods, and that, as yet, Mr. Jack Rogers (whose good nature I might almost count upon) had alone detected me and would pack me home to the ship with nothing worse than a flea in my ear.

His silence encouraged this hope. Half a minute passed and still he forbore to lift his voice and summon me. He stood, deep in the shadow, his face screened by the boughs, and made no motion to advance to the bank.

Then suddenly—at, maybe, two hundred yards' distance—I saw him take another pace backwards and slip away among the trees.

“Good man!” thought I, and blessed him (after my first start of astonishment). “He has pretended not to see me.”

At any rate he had given me a pretty good hint to make myself scarce unless I wished to incur Captain Branscome's wrath. I slipped my paddle forward into a rowlock, picked up the other, and, dropping upon the thwart, jerked the cockboat right-about-face to head her back for the schooner.

But after a stroke or two I eased and let her drift back stern-foremost while I sat considering. Mr. Rogers had behaved like a trump; yet it seemed mean to deceive the old man; and, moreover, it amounted to striking my colours. I had broken orders deliberately and because I denied his right to give such orders. I might be a youngster; but, to say the least of it, I had as much interest in the success of this expedition as any member of the company. The shortest way to dissuade Captain Branscome from treating me as a child was to assert myself from the beginning. I had started with full intent to assert myself, and—yes, I was much obliged to Mr. Rogers, but this question between me and Branscome had best be settled, though it meant open mutiny. I felt pretty sure that Miss Belcher would support the tyrant; almost equally sure that Plinny would acquiesce, though

Page 114

her sympathy went with me; and strangely enough, and unjustly, I felt the angrier with Plinny. But even against Miss Belcher I had a card to play. "Captain Branscome may be an excellent leader," I would say; "but I beg you to remember that you gave me no vote in electing him. I will obey any leader I have my share in choosing, but until then I stand out." And I had an inkling that, though the public voice would be against me, I should establish my claim to be taken into any future counsels.

"In for a lamb, in for a sheep," thought I, and began to back the cockboat towards the corner where the dinghy lay. As I did so it occurred to me to wonder why the Captain and Mr. Rogers had been so dilatory. They must have started a full hour ahead of me; they had left the schooner at a brisk stroke, whereas I had merely floated up with the tide. Yet either I had all but surprised them in the act of stepping ashore, or, if they had landed at once, why had Mr. Rogers loitered on the bank until I was close on overtaking him?

They had landed at the extreme head of the creek. Therefore (I argued) their intent was to follow up the stream here indicated on the chart and search for the clump of trees which guarded the secret of No. 3 *cache*.

Sure enough, having beached my boat alongside the dinghy and climbed the green knoll above the foreshore, I spied their footprints on the sandy edge of the stream which here fetched a loop before joining the tidal waters of the creek. They led me along a flat meadow of exquisitely green turf, fringed with palmetto-trees, to the entrance of a narrow gorge through which the stream came tumbling in a series of cascades, spraying the ferns that overhung it. The forest with its undergrowth pressed so closely upon either bank that after scrambling up beside the first waterfall I was forced to take off shoes and stockings and work my way up the irregular bed, now wading knee-deep, now clambering or leaping from boulder to boulder; and, even so, to press from time to time through the meeting boughs, shielding my face from scratches. So, for at least a mile, I climbed as through a narrow green tunnel, and at the end of it found myself wet to the skin. Five waterfalls I had passed, and, beside the fourth, where the bank was muddy, had noted a long, smooth mark, and recent, such as a man's foot might make in slipping; so that I felt pretty confident of being on my companions' track, though I wondered how the Captain, with his lame leg, could sustain such a climb.

But above the fifth waterfall the stream divided into two branches, and at the fork of them I stood for a while in doubt which to choose. So far as volume of water went, there was, indeed, little or nothing to choose. If direction counted, the main stream would be that which came rushing down the gorge straight ahead of me—a gorge which, however, as my eye followed the V of its tree-tops up to the sky-line,

Page 115

promised to grow steeper and worse tangled. On the other hand, the tributary (as I shall call it), which poured down from a lateral valley on my left, ran with an easier flow, as though drawing its waters from less savage slopes. I could not see these slopes—a bend of the hills hid them; but I reasoned that if a clump of trees, separate and distinguishable, stood anywhere near the banks of either stream, it might possibly be found by this one. The other showed nothing but a close mass of vegetation.

Accordingly I turned my steps up the channel to the left, and was rewarded, after another twenty minutes' scramble, by emerging upon a break in the forest. On one side of the stream rose a reddish-coloured cliff, almost smooth of face and about seventy or eighty feet high, across the edge of which the last trees on the summit clutched with their naked roots, as though protesting against being thrust over the precipice by the crowd behind them. The other bank swelled up, from a little above the water's edge, to a fair green lawn, rounded, grassy, and smooth as a glade in an English park. At its widest I dare say that, from the stream's edge back to the steep slope where the forest started again and climbed to a tall ridge that shut in the glen on the south side, it measured something over two hundred yards.

"Here," thought I, glancing up the glade towards the westering sun, "is the very spot for our clump of trees;" and so it was—only no clump of trees happened to be in sight. The glade, however, stretched away and around a bend of the stream, and I was moving to the bank to explore it to its end when my eyes were arrested by something white not ten paces away. It was a piece of paper caught against one of the large boulders between which, as through a broken dam, the water poured into the ravine. I waded towards it and stooped, steadying myself against the current.

It was a paper boat.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE WOMEN IN THE GRAVEYARD.

I turned it over in my hand. Yes; it was a boat such as children make out of paper, many times folded, and "What on earth," thought I, "put such childishness into the head of Captain Branscome or Mr. Jack Rogers?"

Then it occurred to me that they might be caught in some peril higher up the stream, and had launched this message on the chance of its being carried down to the waters of the creek. A far-fetched explanation, to be sure! But what was I to think? If it were the explanation, doubtless the paper contained writing, and, carrying it to the bank, I seated myself and began to unfold it very carefully; for it was sodden, and threatened to fall to

pieces in my hands. Then I reflected that the two men carried no writing materials, or, at the best, a lead pencil, the marks of which would be obliterated before the paper had been two minutes in the water.

Yet, as I parted the folds, I saw that the paper had indeed been scribbled on, though the words were a smear; and, moreover, that the writing was in ink!

Page 116

In ink! My fingers trembled and involuntarily tore a small rent in the pulpy mass. I laid it on the grass to dry in the full sunshine, seated myself beside it, and looked around me with a shiver.

A paper boat—the paper written on—and the writing in ink! I could be sworn that neither Captain Branscome nor Mr. Rogers carried an inkbottle. The paper, too, was of a kind unfamiliar to me; thin, foreign paper, ruled with faint lines in watermark. Certainly no one on board the *Espriella* owned such writing-paper or the like of it. But again, the paper could not have been long in the water, and the writing seemed to be fresh. As the torn edges crinkled in the heat and curled themselves half-open, I peered between them and distinguished a capital “R,” followed by an “i”; but these letters ran into a long smear, impossible to decipher.

I had flung myself prone on the grass, and so lay, with chin propped on both palms, staring at the thing as if it had been some strange beetle—staring till my eyes ached. But now I took it in my fingers again and prised the edges a little wider. Below the smear came a blank space, and below this were five lines ruled in ink with a number of dotted marks between them. . . . A smudged stave of music? Yes, certainly it was music. I could distinguish the mark of the treble clef. Lastly, at the foot of the page, as I unwrapped it at length, came a blurred illegible signature.

But what mattered the sense of it? The writing was here, and recent. No one on board the *Espriella* could have penned it. The island, then, was inhabited—now, at this moment inhabited, and the inhabitants, whoever they might be, at this moment not far from me.

I crushed the paper into my pocket, and stood up, slowly looking about me. For a second or two panic had me by the hair. I turned to run, but the dense woods through which I had ascended so light-heartedly had suddenly become a jungle of God knows what terrors. I remembered that from the first cascade upward I had scarcely once had a view of more than a dozen yards ahead, so thickly the bushes closed in upon me. I saw myself retracing my steps through those bushes, in every one of which now lurked a pair of watching eyes. I glanced up at the cliff across the stream. For aught I knew, eyes were watching me from its summit.

Needless to say, I cursed the hour of my transgression, the fatal impulse that had prompted me to break ship. I knew myself for a fool; but how might I win back to repentance? As repent I certainly would and acknowledge my fault. Could I keep hold on my nerve to thread my way back and over those five separate and accursed waterfalls? If only I were given a clear space to run!

Page 117

At this point in the nexus of my fears it occurred to me, glancing along the green lawn ahead, that the ridge on its left must run almost parallel with the creek; that it was sparsely wooded in comparison with the ravine behind me, and that from the summit of it I might even look straight down upon the *Espriella's* anchorage. Be this as it might, I felt sure, considering the lie of the land, that here must be a short cut back to the creek; and once beside its waters I could head back along the beach and regain my boat. Down there I might dismiss my fears. The upper portion of the beach, if I mistook not, remained uncovered at the top of any ordinary tides, and it wanted yet a good two hours to high-water, so that I had not the smallest doubt of being able to reach the creek-head, no matter at what point of the foreshore I might descend. From the bank where I stood I had the whole ridge in view above the dense foliage, and could select the most promising point to make for; but this would sink out of sight as I approached the first belt of trees, and beyond them I must find my way by guesswork.

I now observed a sharp notch breaking the line of the ridge, about a mile to the westward, and walked some few hundred yards forward on the chance that it might widen as I drew more nearly abreast of it, and open into a passage between the hills. Widen it did, but very gradually—the stream curving away from it all the while; and by and by I halted again, in two minds whether to break straight across for it or continue this slow process of making sure.

I had now reached a point where the tall cliff on the opposite shore either ended abruptly or took a sharp turn back from the stream. I could not determine which, and walked forward yet another two hundred yards to satisfy myself. This brought me in view of a grove of palmettos, clustering under the very lee of the rock—or so it appeared at first, but a second look told me that here the stream again divided, and that the new confluent swept by the base of the rock, between it and the palmettos, three or four of which (their roots, maybe, sapped by bygone floods) leaned sideways and almost hid the junction.

I was turning away, resolved now to steer straight for the notch in the hills, when for the second time a gleam of something white arrested me, and I stood still, my heart in my mouth. The white object, whatever it was, stood within the circle of the palmetto stems, yet not very deep within it—a dozen yards at farthest from the stream's edge. I stared at it, and the longer I stared the more I was puzzled, until I plunged into the water and waded across for a closer look.

Page 118

Gaining the bank, I saw, first, that the white object was but one of many, disposed behind it in two rows as regular as the tree-stems allowed; next, that these objects were wooden boards, painted white. And with that, as I stepped towards the foremost, my foot slipped and I fell, twisting my ankle and narrowly saving myself from an ugly sprain. I had stumbled in a hollow, shallow depression between the mounds. Picking myself up, I saw that to left and right and all around me the turf was ridged with similar mounds, the whole enclosure full of them. In a flash I read the meaning of the white-painted boards. Yes—and there was writing on them, too—no words, but single letters and dates, roughly painted in black—“O. M., 1796”—“R. A. S., 1796”—“P d. V. and A. M. d. V., 1800”—these, and perhaps two score of others. The shape of the mounds interpreted these inscriptions.

I was in a graveyard.

I sat helpless for a minute, dreadfully scanning the gloom through which the massed palmetto-tops admitted but a shaft of light here and there. The flies, which had been a nuisance across the stream, here swarmed in myriads so thick that they seemed to hang in clusters from the boughs; and their incessant buzzing added to the horror of the place a hint of something foul, sinister, almost obscene.

I had a mind to creep away on all-fours, but suddenly forgot my ankle and sprang erect, on the defensive, at the sound of voices. A grassy path led through the enclosure, between the graves, and at the end of it appeared two figures.

They were two women; the first a negress, short, squat, and ugly, wearing a frock of the gaudiest yellow, and for head-dress a scarlet handkerchief, bound closely about her scalp and tied in front with an immense bow; the other—but how shall I describe the other?

She was white, and she wore a dress of fresh white muslin; a short dress, tied about the waist with a pale-blue sash, and above the shoulders with narrow ribbons of the same colour. Her figure was that of a girl; her ringlets hung loose like a girl's. She walked with a girlish step; and until she came close I took her for a girl of sixteen or seventeen.

Then, with a shock, I found myself staring into the face, which might well belong to a woman between sixty and seventy, so faded it was and reticulated with wrinkles; and into a pair of eyes that wavered between ingenuousness and a childish cunning; and from them down to her slim ankles and a pair of dancing-shoes, so fairy-like and diminutive that they seemed scarcely to press the grass underfoot.

The pair had drawn to a halt, while I stood uncertain whether to brave them or make a bid for escape. I heard the negress cry aloud in a foreign tongue, at the same time flinging up her hands; but the other pushed past her and walked straight down upon me, albeit with a mincing, tripping motion, as if she was pacing a dance.

Page 119

Twice she spoke, and in two different languages (as I recognized, though able to make nothing of either), and then, halting before me, she tried for the third time in English.

“Boy”—she looked at me inquiringly—“what you do here—will you tell?”

“I come from the ship, ma’am,” said I, finding my tongue.

“The sheep? He bring a sheep? But why?—and why he bring you?”

I stared at her, not understanding. “Ma’am,” said I, pointing over my shoulder, “we came here in a ship—a schooner; and she is lying in the creek yonder. I landed and climbed up through the woods. On my way I found this.”

I held out the paper boat. She caught it out of my hand with a sharp cry. But the black woman, at the same instant, turned on her and began to scold her volubly. The words were unintelligible to me, but her tone, full of angry remonstrance, could not be mistaken.

“I am not sorry,” said the white woman, speaking in English, with a glance at me. “No, I do not care for his orders. It was by this that you came to me?” she asked, turning to me again, and pointing mincingly at the paper.

“I found it in the stream,” I replied; “almost a mile below this.”

“Yes, yes; you found it in the stream. And you opened it, and read the writing?”

I shook my head. “The writing, ma’am, was blotted—I could read nothing.”

“Not even my little song?” She peered into the paper, threw up her head and piped a note or two, for all the world as a bird chirrup, lifting his bill, after taking a drink. “La-la-la—you did not understand, hey? But, nevertheless, you came, and of your own will. *He* did not bring you?”

I shook my head again, having no clue to her meaning.

“So best,” she said, changing her tone of a sudden to one of extreme gravity. “For if he found you here—here of all places—he would kill you. Yes”—she nodded impressively “for sure we would kill you. He kill all these.”

She waved a hand, indicating the grave-mounds. Her voice, at these dreadful words, ran up to an almost more dreadful airiness; and still she continued nodding, but now with a sort of simpering pride. “All these,” she repeated, waving her hand again towards the mounds.

“Did you see him kill them?” I asked, wondering whom “he” might be, and scarcely knowing what I said.

“Some,” she answered, with a final nod and a glance of extreme childish cunning. “But why you not talking, Rosa?” she demanded, turning on the negress. “You speak English; it is no use to pretend.”

The black woman stared at me for a moment from under her loose-hanging lids.

“You go ’way,” she said slowly. “You get no good in these parts.”

“Very well, ma’am,” said I, steadying my voice, “and the sooner the better, if you will kindly tell me the shortest cut back to the creek.”

“*And*,” the woman went on, not seeming to heed the interruption, “you tell the same to your friends, that they get no good in these parts. But, of us—and of this”—she pointed to the sodden paper which she had snatched from her mistress’s hands—“you will say nothing. It might bring mischief.”

Page 120

“Mischief?” I echoed.

“Mischief—upon *her*.”

“But this is nonsense you talk, Rosa!” broke in the little lady. “At the most, what have I written?—a little song from Gluck, the divine Gluck! Just a little song of Eurydice calling to Orfeo. Ah! you should have heard me sing it—in the days before my voice left me; in the opera, boy, and the King himself splitting his gloves to applaud us! Eh, but you are young, very young. I should not wonder to hear you were born after I left the stage. And you are pretty, but not old enough to be Orfeo yet. I must wait—I must wait, though I wait till I doubt if I am not changed to Proserpine with her cracked voice. Boy, if I kissed you—”

She advanced a step, but the negress caught her by the wrist violently, at the same moment waving me off. I felt faint and giddy, as though some exhalation from the graveyard—not wholly repellent, but sickly, overpowering, like the scent of a hothouse lily—had been suddenly wafted under my nostrils. I fell back a pace as the negress motioned me away. Her hand pointed across the stream, and across the meadow, to the gap in the ridge.

“Fast as you can run,” she panted; “and never come this way again.”

The strong scent yet hung around me and seemed to bind me like a spell, pressing on my arms and legs. I plunged knee-deep into the stream. The cool touch of the water brought me to my senses. I splashed across, waded up the bank, and set off running towards the gap.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE MAN IN BLACK.

Before ever I gained the gap I was panting, and as I panted the blood ran into my mouth from a deep scratch across the eyebrows. I tasted it as I ran. My shirt hung in strips, and one stocking flapped open on a rip from knee to ankle. But on the farther side of the ridge I ran no longer. I flung myself and fell through the matted ferns that, veiling the trough of a half-dry watercourse, now checked my descent as I clutched at them, now parted and let me drop and bruise myself on the rocky bottom. In the end, I found myself on soft sand beside the blessed water of the creek, bloodied indeed—for I had taken a shrewd knock on the bridge of the nose—but with a wrenched shoulder and a jarred knee-pan for the worst of my hurts. I valued them nothing in comparison with the terrors left behind in the woods. The schooner lay in sight, scarcely half a mile below, and I sobbed with gratitude as I dipped my face in the tide and washed off its bloodstains.



The tide was still at flood, and wanted (as I guessed) less than an hour of high water; but it left an almost continuous stretch of sand between me and the creek-head, and I found that the short intervals where it narrowed to nothing could be waded with ease. At first the curve of the foreshore and the overhanging woods concealed the spit of beach where I had made fast my punt beside the dinghy; but at the corner which brought the boats in sight I was aware of two figures standing beside them—Captain Branscome and Mr. Rogers.

Page 121

I walked forward hardily enough; I had drunk my fill of terror, and could have faced the Captain had he been thrice as formidable. He did not help me at all, but stood with a thunderous frown, very quiet and self-restrained, while I plodded my way up to him, over the sand.

I think that, as I drew close, my battered appearance must have shocked him a little. But his frown did not relax, and the muscles of his mouth grew, if anything, tenser.

"You appear to have been in the wars," he said quietly. "Has anything happened to the schooner?"

"No, sir; at least not to my knowledge," was my answer; and he must have; expected it, or he would have shown more perturbation. "I saw her, not five minutes ago, lying at her moorings," I added, with a nod towards the bend of the creek which hid her from us.

"Then why has Miss Belcher sent you?"

"She did not send me, sir."

"In other words, you have chosen to disobey orders?"

I suppose he read some sullenness in my attitude, for he repeated the words sharply, in a tone that demanded an answer.

"I am sorry, sir; but all the same, it didn't seem fair to me to be left on board without being consulted."

I heard him take a short breath, as though my impudence hit him in the wind. For a full half a minute eyed me slowly up and down.

"Get into your boat, sir, and return to the ship at once! Mr. Rogers, this child is impossible. I must do what I would gladly have avoided, and ask the ladies to give me more authority over him, since they will not exercise it themselves."

At the implied sneer—and perhaps even more at the tone of it, so foreign to the Captain Branscome that I knew—I blazed up wrathfully.

"If you mean by that," said I, "to threaten me with the rope's-end, I advise you to try it. And if you mean that I'm child enough to be tied to apron-strings of a couple of women, that's just of a piece with the whole mistake you're making. No one's disputing your right to give orders—"

"Thank you," he put in sarcastically.

“—To those,” I went on, “who appointed you captain. But I wasn’t consulted, and until that happens, I shall obey or not, as I choose.”

Now, this, no doubt, was extremely childish, even wickedly foolish, and the more foolish, perhaps, because a few minutes ago I would have given all I possessed, including my prospective share in the treasure, for Captain Branscome’s protection. But somehow, since sighting the island, I had lost hold of myself, and my temper seemed to be running all askew. Strange to tell, the Captain appeared to be affected in much the same way.

“Why, you little fool,” said he, “are you mistaking this for a picnic?”

“No,” I retorted; “I am not. And, if you’ll remember, it wasn’t I who led the ladies to look forward to one.”

He planted himself before me, and said he, looking at me sternly—

Page 122

"See here, my boy, I don't want to make unpleasantness, and if you force me to appeal to the whole ship's company, you know very well you will find yourself in a minority of one."

"I don't care for that, sir. You'll be acting unfairly, all the same."

"We'll let that pass. You tell here in the act of breaking ship, that you're of an age to be consulted. Well, you shall have the benefit of the doubt. You want to know, then, why I'm careful about letting you run ashore? What would you say if I told you the island has people upon it?"

"Why, first of all, sir, that if you found it out before dropping anchor, it seems strange—your going ashore with Mr. Rogers and leaving the rest to take care of themselves. But if you've discovered it since—"

"I have not. I am not sure the island is inhabited; but as we were running down the coast I saw something through my glasses—a coil of smoke beyond the hills on the eastern side. Now, if, as seems certain, this fire was lit by human beings, it almost stands to reason they must have sighted our ship. Next comes the question Why did I go ashore and take Mr. Rogers? Well, in the first place, we didn't come here to lie at anchor and sail away again; and if the island happened to be inhabited, and by people who don't want us, why, then, the sooner we nipped ashore and prospected, the better, for the spot where I sighted the smoke must lie a good five miles from here as the crow flies, and by the shape of the hills and the amount of scrub between 'em, those five miles must be equal to fifteen. But why (say you) did I take Mr. Rogers? I took Mr. Rogers, after consulting with Miss Belcher—"

"Does *she* know there are people on the island?"

"She does. I took Mr. Rogers because, if danger there be, it seemed likelier we should find it ashore than on board the schooner; and because, as the shortest way to make sure if these strangers were after our treasure, we had agreed to make straight for the clump of trees described on the back of the chart and examine whether the ground thereabouts had been visited lately or disturbed; and, further, because our search might require more strength and agility than I alone, with my lame leg, could command. I felt pretty easy about the schooner. She can only be attacked by boat, and I searched the coast pretty narrowly on our way down without sighting one. If these men possess a boat, she probably lies somewhere on the eastern side, not far from their camp fire. If she lies nearer, it must be somewhere under the cliffs to the south, in which case her owners would have a long journey to reach her, and that journey must take them around the head of the creek here. But (say you) there may be two parties on the island—one by the camp fire northward, and another under the south shore. I'll grant this, though I think it unlikely; but, even so, to attack the schooner they must bring their boat up the whole length of the entrance, where our people would have her in view for at least two

miles. This would give ample time for a signal to recall us, and on the chance of it I left Goodfellow in charge of two rockets with instructions to touch them off on a hint of danger.”

Page 123

"Oh, oh!" said I. "So Mr. Goodfellow, too, knew of this? And Plinny, I suppose? And, in fact, you told every one but me?"

"No, sir," said Captain Branscome, gravely; "I did not trouble Miss Plinlimmon with these perhaps unnecessary fears. To a lady of her sensitive nature—"

"Oh, well, sir," I interrupted and, turning aside pettishly, began to haul my cockboat down to the water, "since you choose to treat me like a baby of six, I suppose it's no wonder you take Plinny for a timorous old fool."

"Sir!" exploded Captain Branscome, and glancing back over my shoulder I saw him leaning on his stick and fairly trembling with wrath. "This disrespectful language! And of a lady for whom—for whom—"

"Disrespect?"—I whistled. "Is it worse to speak disrespect or to act it? I have known Plinny for years—you for a month or two; and one of these days, if this expedition gets into a mess—as it likely will with such handling—that sensitive lady will make you see stars."

I knew, while I uttered it, that my speech was abominably ill-conditioned; that Captain Branscome had, in fact, been holding out the olive-branch, and that in common decency I ought to have caught at it. In short, I felt my boyish temper going from bad to worse, and yet, somehow, that I could not apply the brake to it.

"Why, confound the boy!" ejaculated Mr. Rogers. "What ever bee has stung him?" And gripping me by the shoulder as I heaved at the boat, he swung me round to face him. "Look here, young Harry Brooks! Do you happen to be sickening for something, that you talk like a gutter-snipe to a gentleman old enough to be your grandfather? Or, damme, have you and Goodfellow been coming to blows? By the nose of you and the state of your shirt a man would say you've come from a street fight; and by your talk, that your head was knocked silly."

"It's all very well, Mr. Rogers," said I, sulkily, "and I know I oughtn't to have spoken like that, but I hate to be tyrannized over. That's why I didn't take your warning first along and pull back to the ship—though I thank you for it all the same."

"Eh?" said Mr. Rogers. "My warning? What in thunder is the boy talking about?"

"When you saw me sculling for shore, here, about an hour ago," I explained, "you pretended not to see me, and went after Captain Branscome; but I saw you, fast enough, standing on the bank yonder, under the trees."

"For a certainty the child is mad!" Mr. Rogers stared at me round-eyed. "I saw you? I pretended not to? Why, man alive, from the time we left the ship I never set eyes on you (how should I?), nor ever guessed you were ashore till we came back and found



your boat beside the dinghy. And as for standing under those trees, I was never on the bank there for one second—no, nor for the half of one. The Captain and I walked around the spit together—the tide has covered our footmarks or I could show 'em to you.”

Page 124

"At any rate there *was* a man," I persisted. "And he couldn't have been the Captain either, for he was wearing dark clothes—"

"The devil! I say, Branscome, listen to this—"

"I am listening," answered the Captain, gravely, taking, as he stepped forward, a long look at the bank above us and at the dense forest to right and left. "Did you see the man's face, Harry?"

"No, sir, or I should not have mistaken him for Mr. Rogers. He was standing there, under the boughs, and seemed to be looking through them and watching me. I was sculling the boat along with a paddle slipped in the stern notch, and he let me come pretty close—I couldn't have been two hundred yards away—when he slipped to the back of the trees, and I lost him."

"You didn't see him again?"

"No, sir; I didn't land just at once. I had a mind at first to put about and row to the schooner, thinking that Mr. Rogers had meant it for a hint. When I brought the boat ashore, five minutes later, he was gone."

"Which way did you take, then?"

"I went straight after you, sir, up the waterfalls; but couldn't find any trace of you except at one spot just beside a waterfall—the fourth, it was—where some one had slipped a foot—"

"Mr. Rogers," the Captain interrupted, "we had best get back to the *Espriella* with all speed. I may tell you, Harry, that we never went up by the waterfalls at all. It was a climb, and my half-pay leg didn't like the look of it. But, jump into your boat, boy, and pull ahead of us. You and I must do a little serious talking later on."

We pulled back briskly for the *Espriella* and reached her just as she began to swing with the turn of the tide. As we drew close—the cockboat leading—I glanced over my shoulder and spied Plinny leaning against the bulwarks by the starboard quarter, in the attitude of one gently enjoying the sunset scene; but at the sight of my torn shirt all her composure left her, and she came running to the accommodation ladder, where she met me with a string of agitated questions.

"Excuse me, ma'am," said Captain Branscome, as the dinghy fell alongside and he climbed on deck. "I have no wish to alarm you, and, indeed, there may be no cause at all for alarm. But Harry has brought us some serious news. He reports that there is a man—a stranger—on the Island."

"How could Harry have known?" was Plinny's unexpected response.

“He is confident that he saw a man, somewhat more than an hour since, standing at the head of the creek.”

“Now, that is very curious,” said Plinny; “for the gentleman told me he had borrowed Harry’s boat without being observed.”

“I—I beg your pardon, ma’am!” Captain Branscome stared about him. “A gentleman, did you say?”

“Yes, and such distinguished manners! He left a message for you—and, dear me, you should have heard how he praised my coffee!”



Page 125

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE MASTER OF THE ISLAND.

But here, as Captain Branscome leaned back and caught feebly at the main rigging for support, there appeared above the after companion (like a cognisance above an escutcheon) a bent fore-arm, the hand grasping a beaver hat. It was presently followed by the head of Miss Belcher, who nodded cheerfully, blinking a little in the level light of the sunset.

"Hallo!" said she, addressing Plinny, while she adjusted the hat upon her brow. "Have you been telling the Captain about our visitor?"

"Miss Plinlimmon, ma'am, has given me a shock, and I won't deny it," answered the Captain, recovering himself.

Miss Belcher continued to nod like a china mandarin.

"I don't wonder," she agreed. "For my part, you might have knocked me down with a feather. The fellow came down the creek, cool as you please, and pulling a nice easy stroke, in Harry's cockboat. Where is Harry, by the way?"—her eyes lit and fastened upon me—"Good Lord! what have you been doing to the child?"

"Nothing, ma'am. He has been exploring, and lost his way; that's all."

"H'm! he seems to have lost it pretty badly. Well, he deserved it. But, as I was saying, along comes my gentleman, pulling with just the easy jerk which is the way to make a boat of that sort travel. Goodfellow was keeping watch. They say that a sailor will recognize a boat half a mile further off than he'll recognize the man in it, but Goodfellow isn't a sailor, so that explanation won't fit. We'll say that he was prepared for the boat returning, but not to find an entire stranger pulling her. At all events, he let her come within a couple of gunshots before calling down to the cabin and giving the alarm. I had my legs up on a locker, and was taking a siesta over a book—'Parkinson *On The Dog*'—and, by the way, we were a set of fools not to bring a dog; but I ran up the companion in a jiffy, and had the sense to catch up your spyglass as I went. Goodfellow by this time had begun to dance about the deck in a flutter. He had the tinder-box in his hand, and wanted to know if he should touch off a rocket. I ordered him to drop it, and fetch me a musket, which he did. By this time I could see that the man in the boat was unarmed, so I put up the musket at the 'present,' got the sight on him, and called out to know his business.

"The man jerked the cockboat round with her stern to the schooner— these boats come right-about with a single twist—and says he, very politely lifting his hat, 'You'll pardon me, ma'am, but (as you see) I have borrowed your young friend's boat. My own was



not handy, and this seemed the quickest way to pay my respects.' 'Indeed?' said I, 'and who may you be?' 'My name, ma'am,' said he, 'is Beauregard—Dr. Beauregard.' 'I never heard of you,' said I. 'That, ma'am, is entirely my misfortune,' said he, lifting his hat again; 'but allow me to say that I am the proprietor of this island, and very much at your service.'

Page 126

"Well, this was a facer. It never occurred to any of us—eh?—that this island might have an owner. To tell the truth, I'm a stickler for the rights of property, at home; but somehow the notion of an island like this belonging to any one had never entered my head. Yet the thing is reasonable enough when you come to think it over; and, of course, I saw that it put an entirely different complexion upon our business here."

"My dear Lydia," put in Mr. Rogers, impatiently, "the man's claim must be absurd. Why, the island is right in the tropics!"

"You wouldn't have thought it a bit absurd if you had heard him," retorted Miss Belcher. "He appeared to be quite sure of his ground. Very pleasant about it, too, he was; said that few visitors ever honoured his out-of-the way home, but that as soon as any arrived he always made it a matter of—of punctilio (yes, that was the word) to put off and bid them welcome. He spoke with the slightest possible foreign accent, but used admirable English: and, I don't know why," wound up Miss Belcher, ingenuously, "but he seemed to divine from the first that I was an Englishwoman."

"And it wasn't as if we had come here flaunting British colours," added Plinny.

"But what sort of man was he?" asked the Captain.

"Height, six foot two or three in his stockings; age, about sixty; face, clean shaven and fleshy; the features extraordinarily powerful; hair, jet black, and dyed (if at all) by a process that would make his fortune if he sold the secret; clothes, black alpaca and well cut, with silk stockings that would be cheap at two guineas, and shoes with gold buckles on 'em. I couldn't take my eyes off—no display about 'em—and yet I doubt if King Louis of France over wore the like before they cut his head off. Complexion, pale for this climate, with a sort of silvery shine about it. Manner charming, voice charming, bearing fit for a grand seigneur; and that's what he is, or something like it, unless, as I rather incline to suspect, he's the biggest scoundrel unhung."

"Oh, Miss Belcher!" protested Plinny. "When you agreed with me that he might have sat for a portrait of a gentleman of the old school!"

"Tut, my dear! When I saw that you had lost your heart to him as soon as he set foot on deck! Did I say 'of the old school'? Yes, indeed, and of the very oldest; and, in fact, quite possibly the Old Gentleman himself."

Now, either I had spoiled Captain Branscome's temper for the day, or something in this speech of Miss Belcher's especially rasped it.

"But who is this man?" he demanded, in a sharp, authoritative voice.

Miss Belcher stepped back half a pace. I saw her chin go up, and it seemed to grow square as she answered him with a dangerous coldness.

“I beg your pardon. I thought I told you that he gave his name as Dr. Beauregard.”

“You had no business, ma’am, to allow him on board the ship.”

Page 127

"No business?"

"No business, ma'am. I have just been having words with young Harry, here, over his disobedience this afternoon; but this is infinitely more serious. We are here to search for treasure. We no sooner drop anchor than a man visits us, who claims that the island is his. This at once presupposes his claim upon any treasure that may be hidden upon it, and consequently that, as soon as he discovers our purpose, he will be our enemy. It follows, I should imagine, that of all steps the most fatal was to admit him on board to discover our weakness."

"Our weakness, sir?" asked Miss Belcher, carelessly, as though but half attending.

"Our weakness, ma'am; as it was doubtless to discover our weakness that he came."

"Now, I rather thought," murmured Miss Belcher, "that Miss Plinlimmon and I had spent a great part of this afternoon in impressing him with our strength."

"To be sure," pursued Captain Branscome, "with such a company as he found on board, he can scarcely have suspected a treasure hunt. Still, when he does suspect it—as sooner or later he must—he will know our weakness."

"He could scarcely have dealt with us more frankly than he did, at any rate," said Miss Belcher, with an air of simplicity; "for he assured us he was alone on the island."

"And you believed him, ma'am?"

"I forget, sir, if I believed him; but he certainly knows that we are here in search of treasure, for I told him so myself."

Captain Branscome gasped. "You—you told him so?" he echoed.

"I did, and he replied that it scarcely surprised him to hear it, that of the few vessels which found their way to Mortallone, quite an appreciable proportion came with some idea of discovering treasure. The proportion, he added, had fallen off of late years, and the most of them nowadays put in to water, but there was a time when the treasure-seekers threatened to become a positive nuisance. He said this with a smile which disarmed all suspicion. In fact, it was impossible to take offence with the man."

But at this point Plinny, frightened perhaps at the warnings of apoplexy in Captain Branscome's face, laid a hand gently on Miss Belcher's arm.

"Are we treating our good friend quite fairly?" she asked.

Miss Belcher glanced at her and broke into a ringing laugh.

“You dear creature! No, to be sure, we are not; but from a child I always turned mischievous under correction. Captain Branscome, I beg your pardon.”

“It is granted, ma’am.”

“And—for I take you to be on the point of resigning, here and now—”

“Ma’am, you have guessed correctly.”

“I am going to beg you to do nothing of the sort. No, I am not going to ask it only as a favour, but to appeal to your reason. You think it extremely rash of me to have entertained this man and talked with him so frankly? Well, but consider. To begin with, if I had not told him that we were after the treasure, he would probably have guessed it; nay, I make bold to say that he guessed it already, for—I forgot to mention it—he knows Harry Brooks.”

Page 128

"Knows *me*, ma'am?" I cried out, as all the company turned and stared at me.

"He says so, and that he recognized you as you were sculling up the creek."

"Knows *me*?" I echoed. "But who on earth can he be, then? Not—not the man Aaron Glass, surely?"

"I was wondering," said Miss Belcher.

"But—but Aaron Glass wasn't a bit like this man, as you make him out; a thin, foxy-looking fellow, with sandy hair and a face full of wrinkles, about the middling height, with sloping shoulders—"

"Then he can't be Aaron Glass. But whoever he is, he knows you— that's the important point—and pretty certainly connects you with the treasure. He didn't seem to have met Goodfellow before. Well, now, if he lives alone here—which, I admit, is not likely—we ought to be more than a match for him. If, on the other hand, he has men at his call—and I ask your particular attention here, Captain— it was surely no folly at all, but the plainest common sense, to admit him on board. He will go off and report that our ship's company consists of two middle-aged maiden ladies (I occupied myself with tatting a chair-cover while he conversed); a boy; Mr. Goodfellow (whatever he may have made of Goodfellow); and two gentlemen ashore to whose mental and physical powers I was careful to do some injustice. You will pardon me, Captain, but I laid more than warrantable stress on your lameness; and us for you, Jack, I depicted you as a mere country booby"—here Mr. Rogers bowed amiably—"and added by way of confirmation that I had known you from childhood. He will go back and report all this, with the certain consequence that he and his confederates will mistake us for a crew of crack-brained eccentrics."

When she had done, the Captain stood considering for a moment, rubbing his chin.

"Yes," he admitted slowly, "there seems reason in that, ma'am; reason and method. But 'tis a kind of reason and method outside all my experience, and you must excuse me if I get the grip of it slowly. I should like a good look at the man before saying more."

"As to that," answered Miss Belcher, "you won't have long to wait for it. He has invited us all ashore to-morrow, for a picnic. He charged me to say—if he did not happen to run against you as he was returning the cockboat—that he would be at the creek-head punctually at nine-thirty to await us."

Two hours later Captain Branscome sent word for me to attend him in his cabin.

"I want to tell you, Harry Brooks," said the old man, turning away from me while he lit his pipe, "that I have been thinking over what happened this afternoon."

“I was in the wrong, sir.”

Page 129

"You were; and I am glad to hear you acknowledge it. Now, what I want to say is this. Had affairs gone in the least as I expected, I should have held you to 'strict service,' as we used to say on the old packets. I never tolerated a favourite on board, and never shall. But these ladies don't make a favourite of you; that's not the trouble. The trouble—no, I won't call it even that—is that you and they all cannot help taking the bit between your teeth. It don't appear to be your fault; you wasn't bred to the sea, and can't tumble to sea-fashions. 'So much the worse,' a man might say. The plague of it is, I can't be sure; and after casting it up and down, I've determined to let you have your way."

"You don't mean, sir, that you're going to resign!" said I, confounded.

"No, I don't. Saving your objections, boy, I was elected captain, and it don't do away with my responsibility that I choose to let discipline go to the winds. If mischief comes I shall be to blame, because I might have stopped it but didn't."

I was silent. This should have been the time for me to tell what I had discovered that afternoon; of the graveyard and the two strange women. But shame tied my tongue. I saw that this noble gentleman, in imparting his thoughts to me, was really condescending to ask my pardon; and the injustice of it was so monstrous that I felt a delicacy in letting him know the extent of my unworthiness. I temporized, and promised myself a better occasion.

"But are you quite sure, sir, that yours was not the wisest plan, after all?"

"The question is not worth considering," he answered. "My policy— you would hardly call it a plan, for it wholly depended on circumstances—no longer exists. The ladies, you see, have forced my hand."

I forbore to tell him that if the ladies had forced his hand his accepting full responsibility was simply quixotic.

"She's a wonderful woman," said I, by way of filling up the pause.

"And so womanly!" assented Captain Branscome, to my entire surprise.

"Indeed, sir," I stammered. "Well, I *have* heard people say—Mr. Rogers for one—that Miss Belcher ought to have been born a man."

"Miss Belcher? Why, heavens alive, boy, I was referring to Miss Plinlimmon!"

He dismissed me with a wave of the hand, but called me back as I turned to the door.

"Oh, by the way," said he, "I had almost forgotten the reason why I sent for you. This man—have you any notion who he can be?"

“None, sir.”

“You’ve thought over every possible person of your acquaintance? Well”—as I nodded —“we shall know to-morrow morning, if he keeps his word. Mr. Rogers has kindly undertaken to stay and look after the schooner. He has a sense of discipline, by the way, has Mr. Rogers.”

“If you wish me, sir, to stay with him-”

“Thank you,” he interrupted dryly, “but we shall need you ashore; in the first place to indentify this mysterious stranger, and also to help protect the ladies. Their escort, Heaven knows, is not excessive. We take the gig, and if the man fails to appear, or brings even so much as one companion, I give the word to return.”

Page 130

But these apprehensions proved to be groundless. As we rowed around the bend next morning into view of the creek-head the man stood there alone, awaiting us. He saw us at once, and lifted his hat in welcome.

"Do you know him, Harry?" asked Miss Belcher.

"No," said I, pretty confidently, and then—"But, yes—in the garden, that evening—the day you went up to Plymouth for the sale!"

"Eh? The garden at Minden Cottage? What on earth was he doing there?"

"Nothing, ma'am—at least, I don't know. He seemed to be taking measurements, and he gave me a guinea. I rather think, ma'am, he was the man that attended the auction."

"You never saw him until that evening?"

"No."

"Nor afterwards?"

"Only that once, ma'am."

"Oh!" said Miss Belcher.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A BOAT ON THE BEACH.

As we drew to shore the stranger stepped down the beach and lifted his hat again.

"Welcome, ladies; and let me thank you and all your party for this confidence. The boy here—bless my soul, how he has grown in these few months!—the boy and I have had the pleasure of meeting before. Eh, Harry Brooks? You remember me? To the Captain I must introduce myself. Shake hands, Captain Branscome. I am proud to make your acquaintance. . . . But what is the meaning of these baskets? You have brought your own provisions? Come, Miss Belcher, that is unkind of you, when we agreed—yes, surely we agreed?—that you were to be my guests."

"We were not sure, sir—" began Miss Belcher.

"That I should keep my word? Worse and worse! Or possibly you distrusted the entertainment of a solitary bachelor on a desert island? But I must prove that you did me an injustice." He pointed to a goodly hamper on the beach and to a frail or carpenter's basket from which half a dozen bottles protruded their necks, topped with

red and green seals. “As proprietor of Mortallone—you will forgive my laying stress on it—I may surely claim the right to do the honours. Stay a moment, my good man,” he added, as Mr. Goodfellow made a motion to lift out our own hamper. “Miss Plinlimmon, I believe, is an admirer of natural scenery, and, if the ladies will step ashore for a few minutes, there is a waterfall above which may reward her inspection; not by any means, ma’am, the grandest our island can show, yet charming in its way and distant but a short five minutes’ walk. Captain Branscome will bear me out, and Harry, too— yes, Harry, too, if I mistake not, visited it yesterday.”

He put out a hand to assist the ladies to disembark, at the same time hitching back the gun on his bandolier.

Page 131

"You will excuse my having brought a musket. You have brought your own, I see. Quite right. I carry it habitually; for, to tell you the truth, the island contains a few wild boars who dispute possession with me. A very few—we are not likely to meet with one, so the ladies may reassure themselves! But, as I was about to say, with the Captain's permission we will not unload here. Rather, after visiting the waterfall, I would suggest that we row round to the eastern side, where, if I may guide you, you will find choice of a dozen delightful spots for a picnic. In this way, too, we shall cover more ground and get a more general view of the beauties of the island, which, as I dare say my friend Harry discovered yesterday, is somewhat too thickly overgrown for easy travelling."

The man's manner—at once frank, chatty, and easily polite— completely disconcerted me, and I could see it disconcerted the Captain. It seemed to reduce the whole expedition to an ordinary picnic; and (more astonishing yet) the ladies accepted it for that. They fell in, one on each side of him, as he led the way to the waterfall, and for a climax Miss Belcher shook out a parasol which she had been carrying under her arm and spread it above her beaver hat!

At the waterfall our host surpassed himself. The landscape hereabouts (he declared) always reminded him of Nicholas Poussin. He would like Miss Plinlimmon's opinion on the rock-drawing of Salvator Rosa, a painter whom he gently depreciated. Had Miss Plinlimmon ever visited the Apennines? He plucked a few of the ferns growing in the spray and discoursed on them, comparing them with the common European polypody. He turned to music, and challenged his fair visitors to guess the note made by the falling water: it hummed on E natural, rising now and then by something less than a semitone.

With all this it was not easy to suspect him of acting, as it was next to impossible to mistake him for a trifle. His tall figure, his carriage, the fine pose of his head, his resonant manly voice, all forbade it, no less than did the wild scenery to which he drew our attention with an easy proprietary wave of the hand. I observed that Captain Branscome listened to him with a puzzled frown.

The waterfall having been duly admired, we retraced our steps to the shore. The gig carried a small mast and lugsail, and, the faint wind blowing fair down the creek, the Captain suggested our hoisting them. I think it annoyed him to find himself appealing to Dr. Beauregard.

"By all means," said the Doctor, affably. "It will save labour till we reach open water, when I will ask you to lower them. We had best use the paddles after rounding the point to eastward, and keep close inshore. I have my reasons for recommending this—reasons which I shall be happy to explain to you, sir, at the proper time." Here he bowed to Captain Branscome.

Accordingly we hoisted sail, and in a few minutes opened the view of the lower reach, with the *Espriella* swinging softly at her cables, her masts reflected on the scarcely

rippled water. Miss Belcher broke into a laugh at sight of Mr. Rogers wistfully eyeing us from the deck. Dr. Beauregard echoed it, just audibly.



Page 132

"Well, well, ma'am; it is hard upon Mr.—Rogers, did you tell me? But we must not blame the Captain for taking precautions. A very neat craft, Captain, and Jamaica-built, by the look of her."

"We picked her up at Savannah-la-Mar," announced Miss Belcher.

"After burning your boats, madam? Pardon me, but I find your frankness as admirable as it is unexpected. Moreover, though Captain Branscome deprecates it, no policy could be wiser."

"I see no reason, sir, for being less than candid with you," said Miss Belcher. "You know whence we come and you know why we are here. How we came is a trifling matter in comparison."

"Believe me, ma'am, your frankness is all in your favour. I may repeat what I told you yesterday, that several expeditions have come to this island seeking treasure; crews of merely avaricious men, mad with greed, whom I have made it my business to baffle. *You*, on the contrary, may almost count on my help; though whether the treasure will do you much good when you have found it is another question altogether. But we are not treasure-seeking just now, and I shall grudge even the pleasure of talking if it steal your admiration from my island."

The shore by which we steered was, indeed, entrancing, and grew yet more entrancing as we rounded Cape Fea and, downing sail, headed the gig for the north-east, pulling almost in the shadow of the cliffs; for the sea lay calm as a pond, and broke in feeblest ripples even on the beaches recessed here and there in the chasms. We passed Try-again Inlet, and our wonder grew; for the cliffs now were mere cliffs no longer but the bases of a range of mountains, broken into rock slides with matted vines like curtains overhanging their scars; and in the water, ten fathoms deep below us, we could watch the coloured fishes at play.

Mr. Goodfellow and I were at the oars; and we had been pulling, as I judged, for something over an hour, but easily, for the tide could hardly be felt, when Dr. Beauregard, who had taken the tiller, steered us in towards a beach which he announced to be the, perhaps, very choicest in the island for a picnic.

Certainly it was a fairy-like spot, with white sand underfoot, green creepers overhanging, and through the creepers a rill of water splashing down the cliff; yet we had passed at least a dozen other beaches, which to me had looked no less inviting.

"We will leave the ladies to unpack the hampers," said Dr. Beauregard. "I speak as a bachelor, but in my experience there is a half-hour before lunch in which that man is best appreciated who makes himself scarce. Captain Branscome, if you will not mind a

short scramble over the rocks here, to the left, I can promise you something worth seeing.”

He led the way at once, and we followed, the Captain (who appeared to have lost his temper again) growling that he took no stock in views. But the distance was not far. We scrambled over two low ledges of rock and found ourselves looking down upon a beach even prettier and more fairy-like than the one we had left—and upon something more—a ship’s boat, drawn about thirty feet above high-water, and resting there on her side.



Page 133

"Yours?" asked Captain Branscome, after a long stare at her.

"Certainly not," answered Dr. Beauregard. "And that is why I brought you here."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE SCREAM ON THE CLIFF.

"A boat?" said Captain Branscome, staring again, and slowly rubbing the back of his head.

He took a step forward, to descend to the beach and examine her, but Dr. Beauregard laid a hand on his arm.

"Not so fast, my friend! *Qui dit canot dit canotier*—a glance will assure you that she did not beach herself in that position, above high-water mark, still less furl her own sail and stow it. Further, if you study the country behind us, you will see that, while we came unobserved and stand at this moment in excellent cover, by crossing the beach we expose ourselves to observation and the risk of a bullet."

"I take it, sir," answered Captain Branscome, still puzzled, "you knew this boat to be here, and have brought us with some purpose."

"I knew it, to be sure, and my purpose is simple. We cannot have a rival party of treasure-seekers on the island. We have ladies in our charge—gentle, well-bred ladies—and of the crew of that boat, one man, to my knowledge, is a pretty desperate ruffian. The other two—"

"You have seen them, then?"

Dr. Beauregard lifted his shoulders slightly, and took snuff.

"My good friend," he answered, "as lord proprietor of Mortallone, I pay attention to all my visitors. Well, as I was saying, to cross the beach just now would be venturesome and foolish to boot, seeing that we hold all the cards and have only to wait."

"What of the ladies?" asked the Captain.

"We can return at once and join them at luncheon. But the ladies, as you remind me, complicate the affair. Before you arrived, I had laid my plans to let these rascals have the run of the island and amuse me by their activities. I had, in fact, prepared a little deception for them—oh, a very innocent little trick! I don't know, my dear sir, if it has struck you how much simpler our amusements tend to become as we grow older. I had promised myself to watch them, lying perdu, and in the end to dismiss them with a quiet

chuckle. You have read your *Tempest*, Captain Branscome? Well, I have no obedient Ariel to play will-o'-the-wisp with such gentry; yet I would have led them a very pretty dance. But the ladies—the ladies, to be sure! We cannot expose them to dangers, nor even to alarms. We must use more summary methods.” He stood for a moment or two reflective, tapping his snuff-box. “Mr. Goodfellow is a carpenter, I understand.”

“At your service, sir.”

Mr. Goodfellow’s hand went halfway to his waistcoat pocket, as if to produce his business card.

“I seem to remember, Mr. Goodfellow that you carry a bag of tools in the boat?”

Page 134

"Yes, sir."

"Including, no doubt, an auger, or, at any rate, a fair-sized gimlet?"

"Both, sir."

"You will greatly oblige me, then, Mr. Goodfellow—always with Captain Branscome's leave—by returning to the boat and fetching your auger; if possible, without attracting the ladies' observation. With this instead of returning direct to us, you will make your way to the left, towards the head of the beach, keeping well under the rocks, which will serve you from landward. At the head of the beach you will bring us into sight a pace or two before you come abreast of the boat. There, at a signal from me, you will creep down to the boat—on hands and knees, or on your stomach if you will—and bore me three small holes close alongside her keelson, using as much expedition as may consist with neatness. You understand? Then the quicker you set about it, the less will be the risk."

Mr. Goodfellow touched his forelock, and sped on his errand. Dr. Beauregard seated himself on the rocks, and loosing the gun from his bandolier, laid it across his knees.

"A simple job," he remarked. "Any one of us could do it as well as Goodfellow. But it is a practice of mine to take the smallest risks into account; and if the honest fellow *should* be detected, why, I imagine he can be the most easily spared of the party."

Mr. Goodfellow, however, reached the boat without misadventure.

"Ah, he displays intelligence!" commented Dr. Beauregard, watching him as, before setting to work, he lifted the boat's gunwale and heaved her over on her other side, exposing the bilgepiece on which she had been resting. "Yes, decidedly, he displays intelligence."

Mr. Goodfellow having stripped off his coat, picked up his auger and bored his three holes very neatly. This done he rubbed them over with a handful of sand, and smoothed over with sand all traces of sawdust, heaved the boat back, so that she rested again in her original position; and retired, sweeping his coat behind him, and obliterating his footprints as he went.

"Couldn't be bettered!" said Dr. Beauregard, smiling cheerfully and smoothing his gun-barrel. "And now I think we may rejoin the ladies and pray that these rascals will put off disturbing us until after luncheon. At one time I feared they might have taken a panic yesterday morning at sight of your schooner; but they calculated, maybe, that the chances were all against your discovering their presence, which, of course, you never suspected."

"I suspected something fast enough," said Captain Branscome, "for in running along the coast I caught sight of smoke rising among the hills—from a camp-fire, as I reckoned—and no doubt from here or hereabouts, though I should have put it a mile or two farther south."

"The born fools!" said Dr. Beau-regard, laughing. "Well, it's even possible that in their furious preoccupation they let the schooner come close without spying her. Ah, Captain, you can hardly imagine— you, fresh from a civilized country, where folks must keep up appearances, while they prey upon one another—how this lust of gold brutalizes a man when, as here, he pursues it without restraint. And what, after all, will gold purchase?"

Page 135

"Not happiness, I verily believe," said the Captain, "though to the poor—and I speak as one who has been bitterly poor—it may bring happiness for a while in the shape of relief from grinding discomfort."

"Yes, yes; as pleasure lies in mere cessation from pain. But that does not meet my question. We will take Master Harry here, who seems a good, ordinary healthy boy. We will suppose him in possession of the treasure you are here to seek. What in the end can he purchase with it better than the fun he is getting out of this expedition? He can indulge all his senses, but for a while only; in the end indulgence brings satiety, dulls the appetite, takes the savour from the feast, and so destroys itself. He can purchase power, you say? But that again moves one difficulty but a step further. For what will his power give him when he has won it? These are questions, Captain, which I have asked myself daily here on this island. I have been asking them ever since, and while I was yet a young man they came to wear for me a personal application. 'Vanity of vanities,' Captain—what the Preacher discovered long ago I discovered again and of my own experience."

"The Christian religion, sir—" began Captain Branscome. But here our strange host laid a hand on his arm.

"We forget our politeness," he interrupted, yet gently, and without suspicion of offence. "We keep the ladies waiting."

"Captain Branscome and I," said our host, as he seated himself beside Miss Belcher, and uncorked one of the green-sealed bottles, "have been talking platitudes, to which, however, our present business lends a certain fresh interest. You are here, many thousands of miles from home, on a hunt for treasure. Now, Heaven forbid that I should criticise your intentions, seeing that incidentally I am in debt to them for this delightful picnic; but before I help you—as, believe me, I am disposed to help—may I ask what you propose to do with this wealth when you get it?"

"Why, sir," answered Miss Belcher, candidly, "we discussed that, you may be sure, before starting. The bulk of it, after paying expenses, was to go to young Brooks, here. Circumstances had given him, as we supposed—and for the matter of that, as we still believe—the clue to the treasure—"

"Pardon me, ma'am, for interrupting you; but did that clue take the form of a map of the island?"

"It did, sir."

"A map with three red crosses upon it and some writing on the back? Nay, I will not press the question. Your faces answer it."

“I ought to tell you, Dr. Beauregard, in justice to the boy, that he came by it honestly, though in very tragic circumstances.”

Page 136

“Again, ma’am, your faces would answer for the honesty of your business. As for the circumstances you speak of, it may save time if I tell you that I know the whole story. Why, truly,” he went on, as we stared, “there is no mystery about it. I dare say, ma’am, the boy has found an opportunity to whisper to you that he and I have met before. It was at Minden Cottage, in his father’s garden, and by the very spot where his father was murdered. He found me there taking measurements; for I had a theory about the crime—a theory of which I need only say here that, though right in the main, it missed certain details of which Harry’s engaging conversation put me on the scent. I had read of the murder quite accidentally; but it happened that I knew something of Coffin—enough to explain his fate—and of the man who had murdered him. But of Major Brooks I knew nothing; and what I gathered by inquiry made the whole affair more and more puzzling. At length I hit on the explanation that Coffin—who had reasons, and strong ones, for going in deadly terror of Aaron Glass—had in some way chosen this Major Brooks for his confessor, and journeyed to Minden Cottage to deposit the secret with him; and that Glass, following in pursuit, had surprised and murdered the both of them. The exact catena of the two crimes mattered less to me than the question: Had Glass possessed himself of the secret before making off? At first I saw no room to doubt it. But your young friend’s account of himself sent me to Falmouth, and at Falmouth I began to have my doubts. My earliest inquiries there were addressed to the pedagogue—the Reverend Something-or-other Stimcoe—a drunken idiot, who yielded no information at all; and to his wife, a lady who persisted in regarding me as sent from heaven for no other purpose than to discharge her small debts. From her, again, I learned nothing. But from a talk with one of her pupils—his name was Bates, if I remember—I discovered that Master Harry had been a particular crony of Coffin’s, and this, of course, threw light on Coffin’s visit to Minden Cottage. Still, there remained the question: Had Glass managed to lay hands on the chart, or had it found its way, after all, into the possession of Master Harry Brooks? You’ll excuse me, young sir”—Dr. Beauregard turned to me—“but during our talk in the garden, your manner suggested to me that you had a card up your sleeve. Well, whatever the answer, my obvious course was to return to Mortallone and await it, as for fifteen years already I have been awaiting it, though question and answer were but now beginning to take definite form. Here you are then at last, and here am I— *tout vient a point a qui sait attendre*.”

“Then our arrival, sir, did not altogether surprise you?” said Miss Belcher.

“On the contrary, ma’am—though for reasons you will not easily guess—it surprised me as I have never been surprised in all my life before; it confounded me, dumfounded me, made chaos of my plans, and—and—I am delighted to welcome you, ma’am! I desire to be allowed the honour of taking wine with you.”



Page 137

"Willingly!" assented Miss Belcher, holding out her glass to be replenished; "and the more so because I never drank better Rhone wine in my life."

Dr. Beauregard stood up and bowed, his fine features overspread with a flush of pleased astonishment.

"Madam—" began Dr. Beauregard, and I have no doubt he had a compliment on his lips. But at that moment the hills and the amphitheatre of cliff behind us, rang out—rang out and echoed—with two terrible screams.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AARON GLASS.

The second scream followed the first almost before we could lift our faces to the cliff. Dr. Beauregard had risen to his feet quickly, without fuss, and was unstrapping his gun. But Miss Belcher was quicker. A couple of muskets lay on the sand close beside the luncheon-cloth, and in a trice she had snatched up one of them, and held our host covered.

"You have deceived us, sir," she said quietly.

Dr. Beauregard looked along the barrel and into her eyes with an admiring, half-quizzical smile.

"Good," said he. "Good, but unnecessary. That the island is inhabited I supposed you to know, since Captain Branscome tells me he reported catching sight of smoke yesterday when off the western coast; but the fellows—there are, or were, three of them, by the way—are no friends of mine."

"We have only your word for it," said Miss Belcher, without lowering her musket.

"True, ma'am," the Doctor assented, with a bow. "I am about to give you proof. But first of all oblige me by listening for another moment."

He held up his hand, and while we all listened I looked around from face to face. Captain Branscome had unslipped his gun, and stood eyeing the Doctor with a puzzled frown. Plinny stared up at the cliffs. She was white to the lips, but the lips were firmly set; whereas Mr. Goodfellow's jaw hung as though loosed from its tacklings.

So we waited for twenty seconds, maybe; but no third scream came down from the heights.

“That makes one accounted for,” said Dr. Beauregard. “I have known, first and last, eleven parties who hunted treasure on this island. They all quarrelled. They quarrelled, moreover, every one of them, before getting their stuff—such as it was—to the boats. Now, if you will permit me to say so, your own success—when you obtain it— will be a fluke and an absurd fluke. It will stultify every rule of precaution and violate every law of chance. I have studied this game for close upon twenty years, and reduced it almost to mathematics; and I foresee that you will play—nay, you have already played— ninepins with my most certain conclusions. But you have as gentlefolks, with all the disabilities of gentlefolks, the one thing that all these experts have fatally lacked. You have self-command.”

“It appears to me that we need it, at any rate,” said Miss Belcher, tartly, “if we are to be favoured just now with a lecture.”

Page 138

Dr. Beauregard smiled. "The purport of my lecture, ma'am, was to prepare you for a question which I have to put. When these men arrive, Captain Branscome, Mr. Goodfellow, and I must deal with them. Are you ladies prepared to exercise strong self-control? Will you, with Harry Brooks, await us here until our business is over?"

"Excuse me, sir, but I must first know what your business is."

"That, ma'am, will depend upon circumstances; but it is more than likely to be serious."

"I must trouble you, now and always, to speak to me definitely. If you propose to shoot these men, kindly say so."

"I do not, ma'am. But their boat lies on the next beach, and as soon as they launch her they will discover us; and as soon as they discover us it will be life for life."

"But they need not discover us. In five minutes we can embark ourselves and our belongings; in less than fifteen we can round the point to the south'ard, and beyond it lie two or three small coves where, as I judged in passing, a boat can lie reasonably safe from observation."

"Admirably reasoned, ma'am. By all means take the boat—take Harry Brooks with you, and Mr. Goodfellow for protection. But Captain Branscome and I must stay and see it out with these men."

"For my part," put in Plinny, "I cannot see why these men have not as much right as we to the treasure; and, in any case, if we let them go they leave us a clear coast to hunt for the rest."

"Captain Branscome"—Dr. Beauregard turned to him—"do these ladies, as a rule, assert a voice in your dispositions?"

"They do, sir," answered the Captain, with a tired smile; "and if you will take my advice, the only way with them is to make a clean breast of everything."

"I will." The Doctor faced about, with a smile. "You must know then, ladies, that these two ruffians—for by this time there are two only—will presently be coming down to the next beach to launch their boat and leave the island. How do I know this? Because my study of treasure-hunters has given me a kind of instinct; or because, if you prefer it, I have observed that the moment—the crucial moment—when these fellows quarrel is always the moment when, having laid hands on as much as they can carry, they turn to retreat. You doubt my diagnosis, ma'am?" he asked, turning to Miss Belcher. "Then I can convince you even more simply. These men are not camping here to-night; they will not return to-morrow to fetch a second load; and for the sufficient reason that there is no second load. I know the amount of treasure hidden where they have been searching. Two men can lift and carry it easily."

“How do you happen to know this?” asked Miss Belcher, eyeing him from under contracted brows.

“For the excellent reason, ma’am, that I put the treasure there myself.”

The answer, staggering to the rest of us, seemed to brace her together. She had lowered her musket at the beginning of the discussion; but now, throwing up her head with a sharp jerk, she levelled her eyes on Dr. Beauregard’s, as straight as though they looked along a gun-barrel.

Page 139

"Then it can hardly be for the sake of the treasure, sir, that you propose to deal with these men."

"It is not, ma'am."

"Nor solely to protect us from them, since you have brought us here, where we need never have come."

"No, ma'am. I brought you here because I cannot be in two places at once, and it was necessary to keep both parties under my eye. Having brought you, I am bound to protect you; but my main business here, and yours—or at any rate Captain Branscome's—is to punish."

"To punish? But why to punish?"

Dr. Beauregard hesitated, with a glance at Plinny and at me, who stood beside her.

"A word in your ear, ma'am—if you will allow me?"

He stepped close to Miss Belcher, and spoke a sentence or two which I could not catch. But my eyes were on her face, and I saw it change colour. The next moment her square mouth shut like a trap.

"If that be so, I wait for him along with you," she announced. "Oh, you may trust me, sir! I have a fairly strong stomach with criminals, and no sentiment."

"It shall be as you please, ma'am. But, for the others, I would suggest their taking the boat and awaiting us around the point. See, the tide has risen, and within five minutes she will float. Mr. Goodfellow, will you accompany Miss Plinlimmon and the boy? Wait, please, until completely afloat before pushing off; for our friends must be near at hand by this time, and the grating of her keel might give them the alarm. For the same reason, ma'am, unless you have any particular question to ask, we had best start at once, and, when we have started, keep the strictest silence. Shall I lead the way?"

They set off very cautiously, the Doctor leading, Miss Belcher close at his heels. Captain Branscome a couple of paces behind her; gained the ridge, and passed out of sight around an angle of the rocks. Now, to be left in this fashion was not at all to my mind. It seemed to me that, when serious business was on hand, every one conspired to treat me as a baby. I had told Captain Branscome yesterday that I would not put up with it; and though I stood in far greater awe of Dr. Beauregard than of the Captain, I felt none the less mutinous now. Plinny, who in moments of agitation invariably had recourse to some familiar work for a sedative, was on her knees repacking the luncheon-baskets. Her back was turned to me, and from her I glanced towards Mr. Goodfellow, who had stepped down to the boat, and was leaning over the gunwale to rearrange the gear. From him I looked up the beach, to the ridge behind which the

others had disappeared, and to the creepers overhanging the cliff. Suddenly it came into my head that by gaining the upper end of the ridge, where it met the cliff, I could wriggle under these creepers, and observe from behind them all that went on, as well on the next beach as on this. And with another glance at Plinny's back I tiptoed away.

Page 140

I moved as swiftly as I dared, making no noise, nor looked behind me until I reached the rocks under the cliff—the path by which Mr. Goodfellow had crept round to scuttle the boat.

I calculated that by working my way along for fifty yards between them and the rock-face I should gain an opening which, observed from below, had seemed to promise me an excellent view of the next beach. But they hung so heavily that I found myself struggling in an almost impenetrable thicket; and when at length I gained the opening, and drew breath, above the splash of waves on the beach I heard a sound which caused me to huddle back like a rabbit surprised in the mouth of its burrow.

Some three yards from my hiding the bank of low cliff bounding the beach shelved upward and inland in a stretch of short turf, and from the head of this slope came the thud of footsteps—of heavy footsteps descending closer and closer.

I drew back under the creepers, and held my breath. Between their thick woven strands my eyes caught only, to the right, a twinkle of the sea; in front, a yard or two of white shingle glittering beyond the green shade; and, five seconds later, this patch was blotted out as two men plunged past my spyhole. They walked abreast, and carried a box between them. I could hear them panting, so closely they passed.

They halted on the edge of the bank.

"The boat's all right," said one; and I heard him jump down upon the shingle. It seemed to me that I knew his voice. "Here, pass down the blamed thing . . . d—n it all, man!"

"*I can't!*" whimpered the other. "S'help me, Bill, I can't. . . . I'm not used to it, and I ain't got the nerve."

"Nerve? An' you call yourself a seaman! An' a plucky lot you boasted the night we signed articles. . . . Nerve? Why, you was the very man to find fault with him. 'Couldn't stand his temper another day,' you said; and must do something desprit. Those were your very words."

"I know it. I didn't think—"

"Oh, to hell with your 'didn't think'! The man's dead, an' cryin' won't bring him back. Much you'd welcome him, if he *did* come back!"

"*Don't*, Bill!"

"Now, look you here, Jim Lucky! Stand you up, and help me get this lot in the boat, and the boat to sea. After that you can lie quiet and cry yourself sick. . . . You'll be all right to-morrow, fit as a fiddle. I've been in this business before, and seen how it takes men, even the strongest. It's the sight o' blood; but the stomach gets accustomed. . . . By

this day week you'll be lively as a flea in a rug, and lookin' forward to drivin' in your carriage-an'-pair. I promise you that; but what you've to do at this moment is to stand up, and help me get down the boat. For if *he's* anywhere on this island, God help the pair of us!"

"*He!*" quavered Jim Lucky.

"I shouldn't wonder."

Page 141

"But you told me he was dead!"

"Did I? Well, perhaps I did. That was to keep your spirits up. But now I don't mind tellin' you that I'm not sure. He *ought* to be dead by this time; but 'tis a question if the likes of him ever die. He's own cousin to the devil, I tell you; and if he's anywhere alive, like as not he's watching us at this moment."

Whatever this meant, it appeared to rouse Jim Lucky, and start him in a panic. I heard him sob as he helped to lower their burden upon the beach. All this time they had been standing immediately beneath me, and I dared not lift my head for a look. But now, as they went staggering down the beach, I parted the creepers, and stared in their wake. They carried a heavy sea-chest between them, but my eyes were neither for the chest nor for Jim Lucky, but for his companion, the man he called Bill.

I knew him before I looked; and as I had recognized his voice, so now I recognized his narrow, foxy head, and sloping shoulders.

It was Aaron Glass.

The two men carried the chest along at a rate that perhaps came easily enough to Jim Lucky, who was a young giant of a seaman, but was astonishing for a thin, windlestraw of a man such as Glass. He ploughed his way across the sands like a demon, and had scarcely set down the chest, a little above the water's edge, before he was tugging at the boat. I heard him call to Lucky to help, and the pair heave-y-hoe'd together as they strained at the gunwale to lift her and run her down.

From this ridge, as yet, came no sign.

Presently from the boat—they had pulled her down to the water, and were both stooping over her with their shoulders well inside, busy in arranging her bottom board—I heard a fearful oath; an oath that rose in a scream, as the two men faced each other, scared, incredulous.

"*Scuttled, by God!*"

It was Glass who screamed it out, and with the sound of it a host of sea-birds rose from the neighbouring rocks, whitening the sky. But Jim Lucky cast up both hands and ran.

"Stop, you fool! Stop!"

I think the poor creature had no notion whither he ran; that he was merely demented. But, in fact, he headed straight for the ridge, not turning his head. Twice Glass called after him; then, in a sudden fury, whipped out a pistol and fired. For the moment I supposed that he had missed, for the man ran for another six strides without seeming to falter, then his knees weakened, and he pitched forward on his face.

I believe, on my word, that Glass had either fired in blind passion or with intent to stop the man rather than to kill him. He stood and stared; and, while the pistol yet smoked in his hand, I saw Dr. Beauregard step forth from his shelter, step delicately past the corpse, and raise his musket; and heard his clear, resonant voice call out—

“Both hands up, Mr. Glass, if you please!”

Page 142

CHAPTER XXXII.

WE COME TO DR. BEAUREGARD'S HOUSE.

Glass's arm fell limp by his side, as though Dr. Beauregard had actually pulled the trigger and winged him. He turned half-about as the pistol slid from his fingers. He gave no cry; only there leached us a loose, throttling sound such as a steam whistle makes before fetching its note. It came to us in the lull between two waves that broke and raised up the sands to ripple round his feet.

"Both hands up, Mr. Glass!"

Dr. Beauregard advanced a step.

But instead of lifting his arms, the man curved them before him, and held them so, as if to protect his treasure, while he sank on his knees beside the box. His face was yellow with terror.

"You fool!" The Doctor, still holding him covered, advanced step by step to the box, and bent over it, staring down at him. The rest of us—that is to say, Miss Belcher, Captain Branscome, and I—under I know not what compulsion, followed and came to a halt a few paces behind him. Standing so, I felt, rather than saw, that Plinny and Mr. Goodfellow, attracted by the report of the pistol, were peering at us over the ridge of rocks on the right.

"You fool!" Dr. Beauregard repeated, and suddenly dropped the butt of his musket upon the loose cover of the chest.

"You fool!" said he, a third time, and tearing aside a splintered board, dipped his hand and held it up full of sparkling stones. Opening his fingers slowly, he let a few jewels rattle back upon the heap, and held out a moderate fistful towards the cowering Glass. "Did you actually suppose, having proved me once, that I would suffer such a common cut-throat as you to march off with my treasure? Look up at me, man! I charge you with having murdered Coffin, even as you have just murdered that other poor blockhead who trusted you." He nodded sideways—but still keeping his eyes upon Glass—towards the body, which lay as it had fallen. "Answer me. Are you guilty? Yes or no?"

The man's mouth worked, but his tongue crackled in his mouth like a parched leaf.

"Yes, I know what you would say; that you had some excuse—that Coffin in his time had stuck at nothing to be quit of you; that he sold you to the press-gang; that through Coffin you spent eight, ten—how many years?'—in the war-prisons; that he believed you dead, as he had taken pains to kill you. Well, we'll grant it. As between two scoundrels I'll not trouble to weigh the rights against the wrongs. But look at this boy, here. You

recognize him, hey? I charge you with having murdered his father, Major Brooks, as you murdered Coffin. You have run up a pretty long account, my friend, for so clumsy a performer; but I think you have reached the end of it.”

Aaron Glass looked at me and blinked. Terror of the man confronting him had twisted his dumb mouth into a kind of grin horrible to see. It lifted his lip, like the snarl of a dog, over his yellow teeth. Dr. Beauregard laughed softly.

Page 143

"And all for what? For an imperfect chart—and for *these!*" He thrust his hand close up to Glass's face, and spread his fingers wide, letting the gems drip between them, and rain back into the treasure-chest. "What's wrong with them? That's what you'd be asking—eh?—if your poor tongue could find the words. Well, only this, my friend—yes, look well at them—that I hid them myself, and every one of them is false."

"False!" I could see Glass's mouth at work, his lips forming to the echo of the word, as it struck across his terror like a whip. But he achieved no articulate sound.

"I give you my word—" resumed Dr. Beauregard; but a thud interrupted him. Glass had fallen forward in a faint, striking his forehead against the edge of the chest, and lay face downward—with the blood oozing from his temple and discolouring the sand. As the Doctor paused and bent over him, another wave came rippling up the beach, throwing a long, thin curve of foam before it, and washed out the stain.

"Is—is he dead?" I heard Plinny's voice quavering.

"Not yet, ma'am," answered the Doctor, grimly; and, taking the inanimate body by the collar, he drew it above reach of the waves, and turned it over.

"You are a doctor, sir?"

"Yes, ma'am, and have some small skill." He put up a hand to his breast-pocket, half withdrew it, and hesitated. "You have baulked me of a pretty little scheme," he said quietly. And still while he addressed us he seemed to be considering. "Think of this fellow's face when he got his treasure across to the mainland and attempted to trade it! To be sure, he gave us some fun for our pains—"

"If you call it fun, sir," protested Plinny.

"Well, yes, ma'am," he answered quietly, kneeling and lifting Glass's head, and resting it across his thigh. "My humour may be of a primitive sort, but I confess it tickled by shocking a murderer into a fainting fit." He felt in his breast-pocket and drew forth a small phial. "No, sir,"—he turned to Captain Branscome, who had stepped forward to offer his help—"let me alone, please. I prefer to treat my patient in my own way. It will be best, on the whole, for everybody."

He forced Glass's mouth wide open, and with one hand poured about half of the contents of the phial between the patient's teeth, drop by drop, very patiently, with the other smoothing the gullet between finger and thumb.

We all stood watching while he administered the dose, Miss Belcher close beside me, with her hand on my shoulder. At the twentieth drop or so I felt her give a start, as though a thought had suddenly occurred to her, and I looked up into her face. Her eyes



were fixed inquiringly on Dr. Beauregard, and he, happening also to look up, met them with a smile.

“You will see in a moment,” he said, as if answering her thought, and, reaching forward, he laid two fingers on Glass’s pulse. “Yes, in a moment now.”

Page 144

Sure enough, in a moment Glass's eyelids fluttered a little, and he came back to life with an audible catch of the breath.

"In two minutes' time, sir"—the Doctor turned to Captain Branscome—"I shall be glad of your services, and of Mr. Goodfellow's, to carry the fellow down to the boat—that is to say, if, in deference to the ladies, you have really decided not to leave him here to his fate. He will sleep after this; nay, if you will listen, he is sleeping already. The other man is dead, I suppose?"

"He must have died instantly," answered Captain Branscome, who had stepped across to the body to assure himself.

"I had no doubt of it, by the way he dropped. Well, there is no need to fetch a spade. Their thoughtfulness provided one. You will find it in the boat there."

Half an hour later we embarked, leaving behind us on the beach a scuttled boat, a mound of sand, and a chest of false jewellery, over the top of which the rising tide had already begun to lap.

Aaron Glass lay along the bottom boards, asleep and breathing apoplectically. I pulled the stroke paddle, Mr. Goodfellow the bow, and the Captain steered. Dr. Beauregard addressed himself to the ladies, of whom Miss Belcher sat with a corrugated brow, as though turning a thought over and over in her mind, and Plinny with scared eyes, staring into vacancy.

"I am sorry, indeed, ladies," said the Doctor, "that I could not have spared you this. The fool shot his mate—you saw it yourselves—without rhyme or reason. Against madness, and the impulses of madness, no man can calculate. I might plead, too, that in an undertaking like this you match yourselves against forces with which it is not given to ladies to cope. I grant admiringly the courage that brought you across thousands of miles to Mortallone, as I grant, and again admiringly, the steadiness of your behaviour this afternoon. But one thing you did not know—that in the nature of things you were bound to meet with such men and see such things done. I have not lived beside treasure all these years without learning that it attracts such men as carrion attracts the vultures. Hide it where you will, from the end of the earth *some* bird of prey will spy it out, or at least some scent of it will lie and draw such prowlers as this fellow." Dr. Beauregard touched the sleeping man contemptuously with the toe of his boot. "I myself have been—shall we say?—fortunate. I have emptied, or assisted to empty, two caches of treasure in this island. A third remains, of which you have the secret, and I believe it to be the richest of all. But before you attempt it, I have a mind to tell you something of the other two, that at least you may not attempt it unwarned."

“You may spare yourself the pains, sir,” said Miss Belcher, decisively; “since our minds are made up. You might, I doubt not, succeed in frightening us; but since you will not deter us, I suggest that the less we hear the better.”

Page 145

The Doctor bowed. "Ah, madam," sighed he, "if only Fate had timed your adventure two years ago; or if, departing with the treasure, you could even now leave me to regrets—in peace!"

"My good sir," said Miss Belcher, sharply, "I haven't a doubt you mean something or other; but what precisely it is, I cannot conceive."

"You will go, madam, leaving my island twice empty. That is Fate, and I consent with Fate. But the devil of it is, ma'am—if I may use the expression—your removing the treasure will not prevent others coming to look for it, and annoying an old age which has ceased to set store on wealth, or on anything that wealth can purchase."

She looked at him oddly. "Well, now," she confessed, "you are a mystery to me in half a dozen ways; but if on top of all you mean to turn pious—"

He laughed, and when the laugh was done it seemed to prolong itself inside him for fully half a minute.

"You are right, ma'am. Let us be practical again; and, as the first practical question, let me ask you, or Captain Branscome, what you propose to do with this man? Obviously, we cannot take him along with us after the treasure."

"Well, I imagine we are returning to the schooner. He can be left on board, in charge of Mr. Rogers."

"But I was about to suggest that we take Mr. Rogers along with us. In some ways, he is the most active of the party, and we can hardly spare him."

"Of Goodfellow, then, or whomsoever Captain Branscome may appoint to take charge of the ship."

The Doctor sat silent, as though busy with a thought that had suddenly occurred to him. After a minute, he lifted his head and threw a quick glance upward at the sky.

"The breeze is freshening again, Captain," he announced. "If you care to hoist sail, the rowers can take a rest, at least until we reach Cape Fea."

Captain Branscome gave permission to hoist sail, and soon we were running homeward with as much as we could carry. There was no danger, however, for beyond the northern point of Try-again Inlet the water lay smooth all along the shore. Dr. Beauregard here called on Plinny to admire the scenery, and, borrowing her sketchbook and pencil, dashed off a bold drawing of Cape Fea as, rounding a little to the westward, we caught sight of it standing out boldly against the afternoon sun. As he drew it, he guided the talk gently back to ordinary topics—to England and English scenery, to the

charm of English domestic architecture, and particularly of our great country seats, to gardens and gardening, of which he professed himself a devotee.

“Ah,” he sighed at length, drawing a long breath; “if you, my friends, only knew how much of what is happiest in life you carry in your own breasts! I used—forgive me—to laugh at such pleasures as I am enjoying at this moment, I see that nothing but gaiety and a simple heart can bring a man peace at the last—and now it is too late to begin!”

Page 146

Plinny, not understanding in the least, opened wide eyes upon him. His tone seemed to ask for her pity.

“Yes, yes. I have sought hard for pleasure and grudged no price for it; but the stuff I bought was all flash and sham—like this fool’s diamonds—flash and sham, and the end of it weariness. Well, there is money left. You shall take it and endow a hospital if you choose, and that no doubt will increase your happiness and make it thrive. But the root of the plant lies within you. Pardon me, ma’am”—he looked towards Miss Belcher—“the question sounds an impudent one, I know, but are you not, even for England, a well-to-do lady?”

“I have a trifle more than my neighbours,” owned Miss Belcher. “But it’s almost more plague than blessing; at least I call it so, sometimes, which is a different thing from being ready to give it up.”

“And you, ma’am?” He turned to Plinny.

“I have enough for my needs, I thank God,” she answered. “But I have known what it is to be poor.”

“Quite so,” he nodded. “And yet you have come thousands of miles, you two, in search of treasure!”

At the entrance of Gow’s Gulf we downed sail and took to our paddles again. The tide helped us against the breeze and within half an hour we came in sight of the schooner lying peacefully at anchor as we had left her.

So, at least, and at first glance, it seemed; but as we drew near, Captain Branscome stood up suddenly, the tiller-lines in his hands.

“Hallo! Where’s the dinghy?”

It was gone; and—what was worse—our repeated hails fetched no answering hail from the ship. But just as we were beginning to feel seriously alarmed a voice shouted from the opposite shore, and Mr. Rogers came sculling out from the shadow of the woods, working the dinghy towards us with a single paddle over stern.

“Sorry, Captain!” he hailed. “Two deserters in two days! Oh, we’re a cheerful team to drive! But I have my excuse ready. The fact is—” Here, catching sight of Dr. Beauregard, Mr. Rogers stopped short.

“I fancy,” said the Doctor, amiably, turning to Captain Branscome, “your friend has not his excuse so ready as he supposed. Doubtless he’ll impart it to you later on. Meanwhile, I would suggest that we take him along with us.”

“But where are we going?” asked Captain Branscome.

“To my house. Ah, it is news to you that I have one? You supposed, perhaps, that the Lord Proprietor of Mortallone roosted at night in the trees? But where, in that case, would he stack his wine? My dear sir, I have a house, *and* cellarage, to the both of which you shall be made welcome. Even if you decline my hospitality we have the invalid here to dispose of, and surely you won’t condemn a man of my years to carry him home pick-a-back!”

“But the schooner—”

“I give you my word of honour, sir, that your ship shall not be visited nor tampered with in any way. Return when you will, you shall find her precisely as she lies now. In another two hours even this faint breeze will have died down, as you are seamen enough to know. The anchorage is land-locked; the bottom is perfect holding; and as for unwelcome visitors, there can be none. I am the sole resident on this island!”

Page 147

I looked up at Dr. Beauregard sharply; and so, it seemed to me, did Mr. Rogers, who had fallen alongside.

"That is to say," continued the Doctor, quietly, without regarding either of us, "the only male resident."

"All the same I don't like it," persisted the Captain, and shook his head, at the same time lifting his eyes towards Miss Belcher; "and it's clear against my rule."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Miss Belcher. "We ought to be grateful to Dr. Beauregard for taking this creature Glass off our hands. I was thinking a moment ago that for a thousand pounds I'd rather he was anywhere than on board our ship. The least we can do is to bear a hand with him; and if we don't like the house we can come away."

"And before nightfall, if you insist," added Dr. Beauregard, genially. "But the afternoon is young, and between now and nightfall you may all have made your fortunes. Who knows?"

Captain Branscome yielded, after a look at Plinny, who backed up Miss Belcher, declaring herself ardent for new adventures. I began to see that the Captain was wax in the hands of these two, and it puzzled me, who had some experience of him both in school and on shipboard.

Instead, then, of heading for the ship, we rowed past her and up the creek—Mr. Rogers following in his dinghy—and disembarked at the landing-place under the green knoll. While Dr. Beauregard and Mr. Goodfellow lifted out Aaron Glass, and while the Captain explained to Mr. Rogers where and how we came by such a passenger, I stared about me, wondering where the Doctor's house might be and where the approach to it. For I remembered the narrow gorge leading up to the waterfalls and the thick, precipitous woods on either hand; and how, such a party as ours, including two ladies and a sick man, could hope to penetrate those woods or climb those waterfalls was a puzzle.

In ten minutes Mr. Goodfellow had patched up a fairly serviceable litter with the boat's sail and a couple of paddles. Dr. Beauregard bestowed the patient in it carefully enough, and when all was ready, led the way. The two carriers, Mr. Rogers and Mr. Goodfellow, came next with the litter between them, and at a nod from the former I fell in beside him. The Captain and the two ladies brought up the rear.

"Harry," whispered Mr. Rogers, as we wound our way round the knoll, "is this really the man who—"

"This is Aaron Glass," I said.

He stared down—for he carried the hinder end of the litter—upon the villainous, unconscious face.

“He looks a pretty bad one,” said Mr. Rogers, after a pause.

“You should have seen him on the beach,” said I.

“I’ve seen something myself,” said he. “Closer, boy—there was a woman came down to the shore just now, waving to the ship and crying. At first I took her for a child. She was dressed all in white—white muslin and ribbons, you know—the sort of rig you see at a children’s party; but when I rowed over close to her—”

Page 148

"I know her," I said. "I met her in the woods yesterday."

"That explains; though I call it an infernal shame you didn't tell. I rowed across to find out what ailed her: she stood waving her arms so, and crying—like a child in distress. When I came near she called on to me to stop. 'Not you,' she said, 'the little boy! Where is the little boy?' I told her that we had a boy on board, but that just now you were off on a cruise; and with that she turned right about, and ran up through the woods and out of sight; but for some way I could hear her crying and calling out just as before: 'The little boy!' it was; 'Where is the little boy?'—meaning you, I suppose."

We were now come to the foot of the first waterfall, an obvious *cul de sac* for a party which included two ladies and a sick man on a litter. I stood gazing up at the wet, slippery rocks by which I had made my ascent yesterday, and searching in vain for a more practicable path. Dr. Beauregard halted and turned upon me with a smile.

"A moment," said he, "and you will grant that my privacy is rather neatly protected. But first"—he pointed to the water pouring past us from the pool beneath the fall—"you may remark that the stream here has more than twice the volume of the stream you see coming down the rocks."

I looked. The difference was plain enough, and I had been a fool in failing to observe it.

"The reason being," he went on, "that a second and larger stream flows into the pool under the very stones on which you are standing. I myself laid that channel for it, almost ten years ago, and Nature has very kindly helped to disguise it. Now, if you will follow me—"

He drew aside a mat of creepers overhanging a bush to the left of the path, and, stooping, disappeared into a dim, green tunnel, so artfully contrived that even without its curtain of creepers it suggested no more than a chance gap in the undergrowth. The tunnel zigzagged twice at a sharp angle, and then, quite suddenly, the dimness changed to warm sunlight, and we emerged at his heels upon a prospect that well excused my gasp of astonishment.

We stood at the lower end of a smooth, green glade, through which a broad stream—a river, almost—came swirling, its murmur drowned in the thunder of the waterfall behind us, which the bushes now concealed. The glade was, in fact, a valley-bottom, thinned of undergrowth and set with tall trees; and the stream such a stream as tumbles through many an English deer-park. The whole scene might have been transplanted from England but for a wall of naked cliff, sharply serrated, which enclosed the valley on the left. And under it, like a smooth military terrace at the foot of a fortress, the glade curved upward and out of sight.

The scene, I have said, was almost typically English—but to the eye only.

“Faugh!” exclaimed Miss Belcher, looking about her and sniffing suspiciously. “A pretty place enough, but full of malaria, or I’m a Dutchwoman! And what a horrible silence!”

Page 149

"Malaria?" said Mr. Rogers, quietly. "There's better scent than malaria in this valley, and we're hot on it. Here's the river, and— What does the chart say, boy? Five trees, a mile and a half from the creek-head? We must have come a mile already. Keep your eyes skinned, and give me a nudge if you see such a clump."

But there was no need to keep my eyes skinned. At the next bend of the glade he and I caught sight of it simultaneously—a clump of noble pines that would have challenged notice even had we not been searching for them. My heart stood still as I counted them. Yes; there were five!

"I haven't often wanted to put a knife into a man's back," grunted Mr. Rogers, with a gloomy glance ahead at Dr. Beauregard.

For an instant I made sure the Doctor had overheard him. He halted suddenly, and turned to us with a proprietary wave of the hand towards the trees.

"A fine group, sirs, is it not? I have often regretted that the cliff yonder just cuts off the view of it from my windows. Indeed, I had almost altered the site of the house to include it. But health before everything—hey, ladies? There is always a certain amount of fever in these valleys, and you will own, presently, that the site I prepared has its compensations."

He resumed his way past the trees, and—a quarter of a mile beyond them—past an angle of the cliff where the ridge bent sharply back from the river and revealed a narrow gorge, its entrance choked with pines, running up towards the mountain. Here he paused again, and with another wave of the hand.

High on the right of the gorge, on a plateau above the dark pine-tops, a white-painted house looked down on us—a long, low house with a generous spread of shadow under its verandah and a dazzle of light where the upper windows took the sun.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WE FIND THE TREASURE.

"I've a strong sense of the right of property," said Miss Belcher, sipping her tea.

We had gathered in Dr. Beauregard's deep verandah, at the corner where it took the late afternoon sunshine. The level rays sparkled on the silver and delicate Worcester china of the Doctor's tea equipage, and fell through the open French window into the Doctor's drawing-room. A wonderful room it was, as everything in the house was wonderful, a spacious, airy room, furnished in white and gold, with Dresden figures on the mantelshelf; Venetian mirrors, dainty water-colours sunk into the panels, cases of rare books (among them, as I remember, a set of the *Cabinet des Fees*, bound in rose-



coloured morocco and stamped with the Royal arms of France), stands of music, and a priceless harpsichord inlaid with ivory. Next to the airiness of the house, which stood high above reach of the valley mists with their malaria, what most sharply impressed me, and the ladies in particular, was its exquisite cleanliness. Yet Dr. Beauregard assured us that he kept but one servant—the negress Rosa.

Page 150

At her master's call she had appeared in the verandah above us as we mounted the last terrace towards the house, and had stood there watching our ascent with no trace of surprise, or, indeed, of any emotion whatever, on her black, inscrutable face. Her eyes met mine as though she had never seen me before. To her care Dr. Beauregard had given over the still unconscious Glass, and, with a sign to Mr. Rogers and Mr. Goodfellow to follow her with their burden, she had led the way through the house to the bedroom at the back. There, in a bed between spotlessly clean sheets, they had laid the patient, and been dismissed by her. It was she who, less than ten minutes later, had brought our tea to us in the verandah, and with our tea many little plates heaped with small cakes and sweetmeats— all fresh, as though she had been expecting us for hours, and could command the resources of a city. I kept a sharp look-out, but of the strange lady—the lady of the graveyard—I could detect no trace. Nothing indicated her presence, unless it were the dainty feminine furniture of the drawing-room.

"I've a strong sense of the right of property," said Miss Belcher, sipping her tea and touching the oilskin wrapper, which lay in her lap unopened as Captain Branscome had handed it to her; and so has Jack Rogers here. You tell me, sir, that you hold Mortallone by grant, and doubtless you can show your title."

"Willingly, madam." Dr. Beauregard rose, and stepped to the French window. "You can read Spanish?" he asked, turning there and pausing.

"Not a word", answered Miss Belcher. The Doctor smiled. "It would impart nothing it you could," said he, with a smile, "for I will own to you frankly that Mortallone has always been under suspicion of containing treasure, and in the grant all treasure-trove is expressly reserved. I cannot say," he added, smiling again, "that I have strictly observed the clause; but, as between you and me, it legally disposes of my claim."

"Thank you," said Miss Belcher; "but I don't own an equally tender conscience towards Governments." Here Mr. Rogers winked at me, for as a patron of smugglers Miss Belcher enjoyed some reputation, even for a Cornish landowner. "We will leave Government out of the question; but as proprietor—lord of the manor, as we should say at home—you have a right to your share; and that, by English law—which I suggest we follow—is one-third."

Dr. Beauregard bowed. "I'm infinitely obliged to you, ma'am, and I make no doubt that what you so generously promise you will as honourably give—when I claim it. In truth, I have something more than enough for my needs. There was a time (I will confess) when I had sold my soul, if I possessed such a thing, for a glimpse of what lies written on that parchment. But I am old; and old age—" He broke off the sentence and did not resume it, but went on presently, with a change of tone: "However, I still keep a sporting interest in the treasure, which has baffled me all these years, the more so because I have a shrewd suspicion that it has lain all the while within a mile or so of where we sit at this moment."

Page 151

"It does, sir," said Miss Belcher, unfolding the chart and pointing.

Dr. Beauregard adjusted a pair of gold-rimmed eyeglasses and bent towards it. The writing was indistinct, and he put out a hand as if to take hold of the edge of the parchment and steady it. The hand, I noticed, did not tremble at all.

"Stay a moment, sir." Miss Belcher turned the chart over. "The clue is given here, upon the back. Listen." And she translated:—

"Right bank of river a mile and a half up from Gow Creek.
Centre tree in clump of five: branch bearing north and half a
point east: two forks—"

"My trees!" exclaimed the Doctor. "You remember my halting and pointing them out to you? Ah, yes, and I, too, remember now that you appeared to be disconcerted. You recognized them, of course?"

"Yes, we recognized them," Miss Belcher admitted. But let me finish:—"

"Right fork, four feet. Red cave under hill, four hundred and
seventy-five yards from foot of tree, N.N.W. The stones here,
under rock four spans, left side"

"—Which means, I suppose, that the cave lies some way up the face of the rock, and can only be seen by climbing out upon the right fork of the tree; and that the stones—that is to say, the jewels—are hidden under a rock to the left; which rock either measures four spans or lies, four spans within the entrance of the cave."

"I know of no such cave, ma'am," said Dr. Beauregard, bending his brows. "Though, to be sure, the cliff is of a reddish colour thereabouts, due to a drip of water and the growth of some small fungus."

"I was a fool," said Captain Branscome, "to leave the tools in the gig. If we go back to fetch them, sunset will be upon us before we get to work."

The Doctor rose, with a smile.

"You might have guessed, sir, that I am not unprovided with spades and picks, or with ropes and a ladder, which also I foresee we shall need. Come; if you have drunk your tea, I will ask you to follow me into the house—the ladies included—and choose your outfit."

They went in after him. I was in the act of following—I had, in fact, taken a couple of steps towards the French window—when a slight shiver seemed to run through my hair, and I stood still.

“Little boy!”

The words came in a whisper from the end of the verandah. I stole back, and, leaning well across the rail, peered around the corner of the house.

“Little boy!” whispered the voice again, and I saw the little lady of the graveyard. She was standing close back against the side-boarding, her body almost flattened against it. “Come,” she whispered, beckoning with a timid glance over her shoulder towards the rear of the house.

I looked at her for a second or two, and shook my head.

“But you must come,” she insisted, still in a whisper, and took a step or two as if to entice me after her. Then she halted, and, seeing that I made no motion to follow, came tip-toeing back.

Page 152

"If you do not come," she said, "he will kill you! He will sar-tain-ly kill you all!"

She nodded vehemently, and so, after another glance to right and left, beckoned to me once again. Her face was white, almost as her muslin frock, and something in it persuaded me to climb over the verandah-rail and follow her.

About thirty yards from the corner of the house stood a clump of odorous laurels, the scent of which we had been inhaling while we sat at tea. For these she broke away at a run, nor looked back until she was well within their shadow and I had overtaken her.

"Good boy!" she said, nodding again and smiling at me with her desperately anxious face. "I would wish—I would very much wish—to kiss you. But you mus' not come a-near"—she sighed—"it is not healthy. Only you come with me. I dream of you, sometimes, all las' night. 'What a pity!' I dream, 'and you so pe-ritty boy!' Now you come with me, and I take you away so he never find you."

The woman was evidently mad.

"Please tell me what you have to say," I urged, "and let me go back. They will be missing me in a minute or so."

"If they miss you, it is no matter now. He will kill them all, he is so strong . . . as he killed all those others . . . you remember? See, now, pe-ritty boy, what I have done for you, to save you from him! He shut me up, in his other house—he has another house away up in the woods, beyond where we met." She waved a hand towards the hills. "But I break out, and come here to save you. He would kill me also, if he knew."

Mad though I believed her, I was growing pretty thoroughly frightened, remembering the graveyard under the trees. "You forget my friends," said I, speaking very simply, as to a child. "If he means to kill them, I ought to carry them warning."

"He will not kill them till to-night," she answered, shaking her head. "It is always at night-time, when they are at supper. There is no hurry, little boy; but he will sar-tain-ly kill them, all the same."

I turned my head, preparing to run, for I heard Captain Branscome's voice in the verandah, calling my name.

"They are starting after the treasure. I must go," I stammered.

She drew close, and laid a hand on my arm. Again a dreadful odour was wafted under my nostrils—an odour as of tuberoses, and I know not what of corruption—and, as before in the graveyard, it turned me both sick and giddy.

“They will not find it,” she said, nodding with an air of childish triumph. “Shall I tell you why? *I* have hidden it!” Here she fell back on her old litany. “He would kill me if he knew . . . I hid it—oh, years ago! But come, and I will show you; and you shall take a great deal—yes, as much as you can carry—if only you will go away, and never be rash again.”

A second time I heard Captain Branscome’s voice calling to me, demanding to know where I had disappeared.

Page 153

She put a finger to her lips, smiling. "Such treasure you never did see. . . . Even Rosa does not know. . . . Come, little boy!"

She pushed her way through the laurels, and I followed her. The edge of the shrubbery overhung the dry bed of a torrent, in the cleft of which, when we had lowered ourselves over the edge, we were completely hidden from the house. From the edge a slope of loose stones ran down to the bottom of the cleft, where a thin stream of water trickled. The stones slid with me, but not dangerously; and as we scurried down—I in my thick boots, she in her diminutive dancing-shoes—I heard Plinny's voice join with Captain Branscome's in calling my name. But by this time I was committed to the adventure, and by-and-by they desisted, supposing (as Plinny told me later) that I had taken French leave again, and run off to be first at the clump of trees.

We might not climb the slope directly in face of us; for, by so doing (even if it had been accessible, which I doubt), we should have emerged into view. We therefore bent our way to the right up the bottom of the gorge, to a narrow tongue of rock dividing it, in the shelter of which we mounted the rough stairway of the torrent bed from one flat rock to another until we stepped out upon a shallow plateau where the contour of the hills shut off the house and its terraces. We stood, as I judged, upon the reverse or northern side of that ridge which to the south and west overlooked the valley of the treasure. Above the plateau a stone-strewn scarp of earth led to the forest, which reached to the very summit of the ridge; and towards the summit, after pausing for a second or two to pant and catch her breath, my strange guide continued her climb.

"What is your name, little boy?"

I told her, and she repeated it once or twice, to get it by heart.

"You may call me 'Metta," she said. "*He* calls me 'Metta always, when he is pleased with me, and that is almost every day. He is kind to me; oh, yes, very kind—though terrible, of course. . . . Keep on my left hand, Harry Brooks; so the breeze here will not blow from me to you."

I drew up in a kind of giddiness, for that dreadful scent of death had touched me again. She, too, halted with a little cry of dismay, and a feeble motion of the hands, as if to wring them.

"Ah, you must keep wide of me. . . . That is my suffering, Harry Brooks. I cannot bend over a flower but it withers, and the butterflies die if they come near my breath . . . and that, too, is *his* doing. He would be kind to me, he said, and would een-oculate me; yes, that is his word—een-oculate me, so that no poison could ever harm me. He knows the secrets of all the plants, and why people die of disease. Months at a time he used to leave me alone with Rosa, and go to Havana, to the hospitals; and there he would study till his body was wasted away with work; but

Page 154

at the end he would come back, bringing visitors. Oh, many visitors! for he was rich, and the house had room for all. There were singers—he loves music—and men who played all day at cards, and women who made me jealous. But he would only laugh and say, ‘Wait, little one.’ So I waited, and in the end they all died. Rosa said it was the yellow fever; but no.” She held up both hands, and made pretence to pour something from an imaginary bottle into an imaginary glass. “He can kill with one tiny drop. In his study he keeps a machine which makes water into ice. Rosa would carry round the ice with little glasses of curacoa, after the coffee was served; and all would say: ‘What wonders are these? Ice in Mortallone!’ and would drink his health. But *he* never touched the ice. You tell that to your friends, little boy. But it will not save them: for he will find some other way.”

As we went up the woods these awful confidences poured from her like childish prattle, interrupted only by little ripples of laughter, half shy, half silly, and altogether horrible to hear. I hung back, divided between the impulse to tear myself away and the fearful fascination of listening—between the urgent need to find and warn my friends, and the forlorn hope to extract from her something that might save them. The toil of the climb had bathed me in sweat, and yet I shivered.

I halted. We were close under the summit of the ridge, and had reached a passing clearing where, between the trees, as I turned about, I could see the whole gorge in shadow at my feet, the sunlight warm on its upper eastern slopes, and beyond these the sea. In half an hour—in twenty minutes, maybe—I might reach the valley there below, and at least cry my warning. I faced round again to my companion.

She had vanished.

My mouth grew dry of a sudden. Was she a ghost? And her prattling talk—the voice yet singing in my brain—

“Little boy! Little boy!”

I parted the tall ferns. Beyond them a small hand beckoned, and, following it, I came face to face with a wall of naked rock from which she lifted aside the creepers over a deep cleft—a cleft wide enough to admit a man’s body if he turned sideways and stooped a little.

She clapped her hands at my astonishment. “You like my bower?” she asked gleefully. “Ah, but wait, and I will show you wonders! No one knows of it, not even Rosa.”

She wriggled her way through the cleft. I peered in, and went after her cautiously, expecting, as the curtain of creepers fell behind me, to find myself in a dark cave or



grotto. Dark it was, to be sure, but not utterly dark; and to my amazement, as my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, the faint light came from ahead of me and seemed to strike upwards from the bowels of the earth.

“Do not be afraid, little boy! But hold your head low; and look to your feet now, for it is steep hereabouts.”

Page 155

Steep indeed it was. A kind of shaft, floored for the most part with slippery earth, but here and there with an irregular stairway of rock; and still at the lower end of the tunnel shone a faint light. I would have given worlds by this time to retrace my steps. A slight draught, blowing up the tunnel from my companion to me, bore the odour of death upwards under my nostrils; but this, while it dizzied and sickened me, seemed to clog my feet and take away all will to escape. I had nearly swooned, indeed, when my feet encountered level earth again, and she put out a hand to steady me.

“Is—is—this the end?”

“It goes down—down, little boy; but we need not follow it. See, there is light, to the left of you; light, and fresh air, *and* my pretty bower.”

I turned as her hand guided me. A puff of wind blew on my cheek, cold and infinitely pure. I stood blinking in a short gallery that ended suddenly in blue sky, and, staggering forward, I cast myself down on the brink.

It was as though I lay on the sill of a great open window. Below me—far below—waved great masses of forest, and beyond these—far beyond—shone the blue sea. I cannot say to what depth the cliff fell away below me. It was more than sheer—it was undercut. I lay as one suspended over the void.

“But see, pe-ritty boy! did I not promise you wonders?”

As I faced around to the darkness of the gallery, she held aloft something which, for the moment, I mistook for a great green snake with lines of fire running from scale to scale and sparkling as she waved it before me. I rolled over upon my elbow and stared. It was a rope of emeralds.

She flung an end over one shoulder and looped it low over her breast; then, passing the other end about her neck, she brought it forward over the same shoulder and let it dangle. It reached almost to her feet.

“Does it become me, little boy?” She made me a mock curtsy that set the gems dancing with fire. “Come and choose, then!” She put out both hands to the darkness by the wall, and a whole cascade of jewels came sliding down and poured themselves with a rush about her feet and across the floor of the gallery. She laughed and thrust her hands again into the heap.

“All these I found—I myself—and carried up here from the darkness. Take what you will, little boy, and run back to your ship. Is it diamonds you will choose, or rubies, or—see here—this chain of pearls? I do not like pearls, for my part; they mean sorrow. But—see here, again!—there were boxes and boxes, all heaped to the brim, and long robes sown all over with pearls. Take what you like—*he* will not know. He gives me

diamonds sometimes. I adored them in the old days, in opera. And he remembers and gives me a stone from time to time, to keep me amused. I laugh to myself, then, when I think of the store I keep, here in my bower. And he so clever! But he does not guess. Ah, child, if I had had but these to wear when I used to sing Eurydice!"

Page 156

She held out two handfuls of diamonds, and began to sing in a high, cracked voice, while she let them rain through her fingers.

“But listen!” I cried suddenly.

She ceased at once, and stood with her face half turned to the darkness behind her, her arms rigid at her sides, the gems dropping as her hand slowly unclasped them. Below, where the tunnel ran down into darkness, a voice hailed—

“Metta! Is that 'Metta?”

It was the voice of Dr. Beauregard. The poor creature gazed at me helplessly and ran for the stairway. But her feet sank in the loose heap of jewels; she stumbled; and, as she picked herself up, I saw that she was too late; for already a light shone up from the tunnel below, and before she could gain the exit the Doctor stood there, lifting a torch, in the light of which I saw Mr. Rogers close behind his shoulder.

“Metta!”

I do not think he would have hurt her. But as the torch flared in her face and lit up the shining heap of jewels, she threw up both hands and doubled back screaming. I believed that she called to me to hide. I put out a hand to catch her by the skirt, seeing that she ran madly; but the thin muslin tore in my clutch.

“Metta!”

On the ledge, against the sky, the voice seemed to overtake and steady her for a second; but too late. With a choking cry, she put out both hands against the void, and toppled forward; and in the entrance was nothing but the blue, empty sky.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DOCTOR BEAUREGARD.

“Glass? My dear madam, pardon my remissness; he is dead. Rosa brought me the news before we sat down to table.”

I opened my eyes. In the words, as I came back to consciousness, I found nothing remarkable, nor for a few seconds did it surprise me that the dark gallery had changed into a panelled, lighted room, with candles shining on a long, white table, and on flowers and crystal decanters, and dishes heaped with fruit. The candles were shaded, and from the sofa where I lay I saw across the cloth the faces of Miss Belcher and Captain Branscome intent on the Doctor. He was leaning forward from the head of the table and speaking to Plinny, who sat with her back to me, darkly silhouetted against the light. Mr.

Rogers, on Plinny's left, had turned his chair sideways and was listening too; and at the lower end of the board a tall eperguez of silver partially hid the form of Mr. Goodfellow.

"Yes, indeed, I ought to have told you," went on the Doctor's voice. "But really no recovery could be expected. The man's heart was utterly diseased."

His gaze, travelling past Plinny, wandered as if casually towards me, where I lay in the penumbra. I felt it coming, and closed my eyes; and on the instant my brain cleared.

Yes; Glass was dead, of course, poisoned by this man as ruthlessly as these my friends would be poisoned if I cried out no warning. . . . Or perhaps it had happened already.

Page 157

I opened my eyes again, cautiously, little by little. The Doctor was filling Plinny's glass. Having filled it, he pushed the decanters towards Mr. Rogers, and turned to say a word to Miss Belcher, on his right. No; there was time. *It* had not happened—yet.

I wanted to start up and scream aloud. But some power, stronger than my will, held me down against the sofa-cushion. I had lost all grip of myself—of my voice and limbs alike. I could neither stir nor speak, but lay watching with half-closed eyes, while the room swam and in my ears I heard a thin voice buzzing: “Tell your friends—the ice—he never touches the ice. But it will not save them. He will find some other way.”

The door opened, and its opening broke the spell. On the threshold stood the tall negress with a tray of coffee-cups, and on the tray a salver with a number of little glasses and a glass bowl—a bowl of ice. Her master pushed back the decanters to make room for the tray before him. She set it down, and the little glasses jingled softly.

“Upon my word, sir,” said Miss Belcher, “what wonder upon wonders is this? Ice? And in Mortallone?”

“It is Rosa's little surprise, madame, and she will be gratified by your—”

He pushed back his chair and, leaving the sentence unfinished, rose swiftly and came to me as I staggered up from the sofa. A cry worked in my throat, but before I could utter it his two hands were on my shoulders, and he had appealed to the company with a triumphant little laugh.

“Did I not tell you the child would come to himself all right? A simple sedative—after the fright he had. He's trembling now, poor boy. No, ma'am”—he turned to Plinny, who had risen, and was coming forward solicitously; “let him sit upright for a moment, while he comes to his bearings. Or, better still, when you have finished your coffee—if Miss Belcher will be kind enough to pour it out for me—we will take him out into the fresh air. Yes, yes, and the sooner the better, for I see that Mr. Rogers is fidgeting to be out and assure himself that the treasure has not taken wings.”

He forced me gently back to my seat, and walked to the table.

“What were we saying? Ah, yes—to be sure—about the ice.” He lifted his coffee-cup with a steady hand, and, his eyes travelling over it, fixed themselves on me, as though to make sure I was recovering. “The ice is a surprise of Rosa's, and I assure you she is proud of it. But (you may go, Rosa) I advise you to content yourselves with wondering; for the water on these hills, strange to say, is not healthy.”

They voted the Doctor's advice to be good, and, having finished their coffee, wandered out into the fresh air. Plinny took my arm, and, leading me to the verandah, found me a comfortable seat, where I could recline and compose myself, for I was trembling yet.

Page 158

"They have stacked the treasure there beyond the last window," Plinny informed me, nodding towards the end of the verandah, where Captain Branscome, Mr. Rogers, and Mr. Goodfellow were already gathered and busy in conversation. "In bulk it is less than we expected, but in value (the Doctor says) it goes beyond everything. Three hundredweight, they say, and in pure gems! He is to choose his share, by-and-by; and then we have to contrive how to take it down to the ship."

"Miss Plinlimmon," said the Captain, coming towards us, "you promised me a word yesterday. I should wish to claim it now—that is, if Harry can spare you."

I observed that his voice shook a little, but this I set down to excitement.

"Did I? Yes, I remember."

Miss Plinlimmon's voice, too, was tremulous. She hesitated, and her eyes in the dim light seemed to seek mine.

I assured her that I was recovering fast, here in the fresh air, and that it would be a kindness, indeed, to leave me alone. She bent quickly and kissed me. I wondered why, as she stepped past the Captain and he followed her down the verandah steps.

I wished to be left alone. I was puzzled, and what puzzled me was that neither Miss Belcher nor Dr. Beauregard had left the dining-room. In fact, as I passed out through the window, happening to turn my head, I had caught sight of his face, and it had signalled to her to stay. I knew not why he should intend harm to Miss Belcher rather than to any other of our party. But I distrusted the man; and Plinny had scarcely left me before, having made sure that Mr. Rogers and Mr. Goodfellow were within easy call, I rose up softly, crept to the dining-room window, and, dropping upon hands and knees close by the wall, peered into the room.

The Doctor and Miss Belcher had reseated themselves, He had poured himself out another glass of wine and was holding it up to the light with a steady hand, while she watched him, her elbows on the table and her firm jaw resting on her clasped fingers. Her face, though it showed no sign of fear, was pallid.

"Yes," he was saying slowly; "it is too late at this hour to be discussing what the priests would call the sin of it. You would never convince me; and if you convinced me, I am too old—and too weary—for what the priests call repentance. I am Martin—the same man that outwitted Melhuish and his crew—the same that played Harry with this Glass, and the man Coffin, and a drunken old ruffian they brought with them from Whydah! The fools! to think to frighten *me*, that had started by laying out a whole ship's crew! And now you come along; and I hold you all in the hollow of my palm. But I open my hand—so—and let you go."

“Why?”

“Why? I have told you. I am tired.”

“That is not all the truth,” answered Miss Belcher, eyeing him steadily.

“No; it is not all the truth. No one tells all the truth in this world. But I am glad you challenge me, for you shall have a little more of the truth. I let you go because you were simpletons, and I had not dealt with simpletons before.”

Page 159

"Is *that* the truth?" she persisted.

He laughed and sipped his wine.

"No; I let you go because I saw in you—I who have killed many for wealth and more for the mere pleasure of power—something which told me that, after all, I had missed the secret. From an outcast child in Havana I had made myself the sole king of this treasure of Mortallone. I went back and made slaves of men and women who had tossed that child their coppers in contemptuous pity. I brought them here, to Mortallone, to play with them; and as soon as they tired me, they—went. It was power I wanted; power I achieved; and in power, as I thought, lay the secret. The tools in this world say that a poisoner is always a coward: it is one of the phrases with which fools cheat themselves. For long I was sure of myself; and then, when the thought began to haunt me that, after all, I had missed the secret, I sought out the man who, in Europe, had made himself more powerful than kings; and I found that *he* had missed the secret too. Then I guessed that the secret is beyond a man's power to achieve, unless it be innate in him; that the gods themselves cannot help a man born in bastardy, as I was, or born with a vulgar soul, as was Napoleon. One chance of redemption he has—to mate with a woman who has, and has known from birth, the secret which he has missed. I guessed it—I that had wasted my days with singing-women, such as poor 'Metta! Then I met you, and I knew. Yes, madam, you—you, whose life to-night I had almost taken with a touch—taught me that I had left women out of account. Ah, madam, if the world were twenty years younger! . . . Will you do me the honour to touch glasses and drink with me?"

"Not on any account," said Miss Belcher, rising. "Not to put too fine a point upon it, you make me feel thoroughly sick; but"—she hesitated on the threshold of the window—the worst of it is, I think I understand you a little."

I drew back into the shadow. Her stiff skirt almost struck me on the cheek as she passed, and, crossing the verandah, leant with both hands on the rail, while her face went up to the sky and the newly risen moon.

A voice spoke to her from the moonlit terrace below.

"Hallo!" she answered. "Is that Captain Branscome?"

"It is, ma'am: *and* Miss Plinlimmon—Amelia—as she allows me to call her."

Miss Belcher cut him short with a laugh. It rang out frank and free enough, and only I, crouching by the wall, understood the hysterical springs of it.

"You two geese!" she exclaimed, and ran down the steps to them.

“Was that Lydia?” demanded Mr. Rogers, a moment later, as he came along the verandah.

“It was,” I answered.

“I don’t understand these people,” grumbled Mr. Rogers, pausing and scratching his head. “There was to have been a meeting outside here, directly after supper, to divide off Doctor Beauregard’s share; but confound it if every one don’t seem to be playing hide-and-seek! Where’s the Doctor?”

Page 160

“In the dining-room,” said I, nodding towards the window. . . .

He stepped towards it. At that moment I heard a dull thud within the room, and Mr. Rogers, his foot already on the threshold, drew back with a cry. I ran to his elbow.

On the floor, stretched at her master’s feet, lay the negress Rosa. Dr. Beauregard stood by the corner of the table, and poured himself a small glassful of curacoa. While we gazed at him he reached out a hand to the icebowl, selected a small piece, and dropped it delicately into the glass. I heard it tingle against the rim.

“Your good health, sirs!” said Dr. Beauregard.

He sat back rigid in his chair.

THE END.