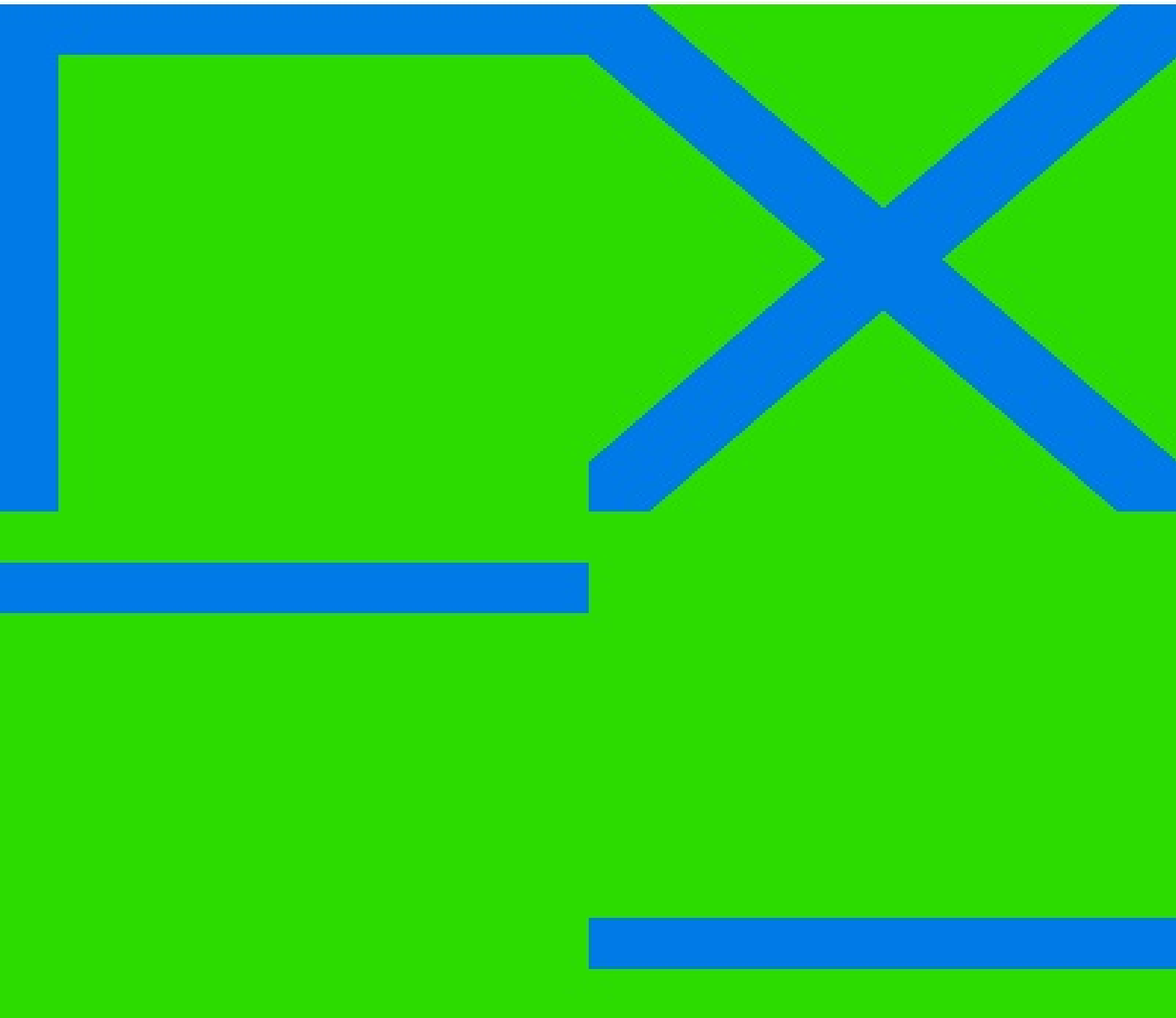
Overdue

The Story of a Missing Ship

Harry Collingwood



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       The Story of a Missing Ship

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Chapter One.

The “Mercury” appears.

This is a yarn of the days when the clipper sailing-ship was at the zenith of her glory and renown; when she was the recognised medium for the transport of passengers—ay, and, very frequently, of mails between Great Britain and the Colonies; and when steamers were, comparatively speaking, rare objects on the high seas. True, a few of the great steamship lines, such as the Cunard and the Peninsular and Oriental, were already in existence; but their fleets were only just beginning to compete, and with but a very limited measure of success, against the superb specimens of marine architecture owned by the Black Ball and other famous lines of sailing clippers. For the Suez Canal had not yet been dug, and—apart from the overland journeys to India—travellers bound to the East were compelled to go south-about round the Cape of Good Hope, whether they journeyed by steamer or by sailing-ship; and it was no very uncommon thing for the latter to beat the former on the passage to India, China, or Australia. Moreover, the marine steam engine was, at that period, a very expensive piece of machinery to operate, developing only a very moderate amount of power upon an exceedingly heavy consumption of coal; hence it was only the nabobs who could afford to indulge in the then costly luxury of ocean travel by steam.

The occurrence which I regard as the starting-point of my extraordinary yarn happened on the 27th day of October, in the year of grace 18—; the *Salamis*—which was the ship in which it originated—being, at noon of that day, in latitude 30 degrees south, and longitude 23 degrees west, or thereabout; thirty days out from London, on a voyage to Melbourne.

The *Salamis*, I may explain, was a full-rigged clipper ship of 1497 tons register, classed 100 A 1; being one of the crack vessels of the celebrated Gold Star Line, outward bound to Melbourne, as I have said, with a full complement of saloon and steerage passengers, and a general cargo that, while it filled her to the hatches, was so largely composed of light merchandise that it only sank her in the water to her very finest sailing trim; of which circumstance Captain Martin, her commander, was taking the fullest possible advantage, by “carrying on” day and night, in the hope of making a record passage. I, Philip Troubridge, was one of her midshipman-apprentices, of whom she carried six, and I was seventeen years of age on the day when the occurrence happened which I have alluded to above, and which I will now relate.

The *Salamis* carried three mates: chief, second, and third; and the accident happened in the first watch, when Mr Moore, the second mate, had charge of the deck. The wind was out from about nor’-nor’-west, and had been blowing very fresh all day, notwithstanding which the ship was under all three royals, and fore and main topgallant studdingsails, her course being south-east. There was a heavy and steep sea following the ship on her port quarter, which not only made her motions exceedingly uneasy, but also caused her to yaw wildly from time to time,

despite the utmost efforts of two men at the wheel to keep her true to her course.

It was during one of these wild sheers that the main topgallant studdingsail-boom snapped short off by the boom-iron; and there was immediately a tremendous hullabaloo aloft of madly slatting canvas and threshing boom, as the studdingsail flapped furiously in the freshening breeze, momentarily threatening to spring the topgallant yard, if, indeed, it did not whip the topgallant-mast out of the ship. Then something fouled aloft, rendering it impossible to take in the sail; and, the skipper being on deck and manifesting some impatience at what he conceived to be the clumsiness of the men who had gone up on the topsail yard, Mr Moore, the second mate, sprang into the main rigging and went aloft to lend a hand. Just precisely what happened nobody ever knew; one of the men aloft said that the broken boom, in its wild threshing, struck the mate and knocked him off the yard; but, be that as it may, one thing certain is, that the poor fellow suddenly went whirling down, and, without a cry, fell into the boiling smother raised by the bow wave, and was never seen again! I happened to be on the poop at the moment, and, despite the darkness, saw the falling body of the mate just as it flashed down into the water, and guessed what had happened even before the thrilling cry of “Man overboard!” came pealing-down from aloft. I therefore made a dash for one of the lifebuoys that were stopped to the poop rail, cut it adrift, and hove it, as nearly as I could guess, at the spot where the mate had disappeared, while one of the men on the forecastle, anticipating the skipper’s order, called all hands to shorten sail. The whole ship was of course instantly in a tremendous commotion, fore and aft. The rest of the studdingsails were taken in as quickly as possible, the royals and topgallantsails were clewed up, a reef was taken in the topsails, and the ship was brought to the wind and worked back, as nearly as could be, to the spot where the accident had happened, and a boat was lowered. Although the skipper had displayed such nice judgment in determining the precise spot where the search should begin, that the crew of the boat dispatched to search for the mate actually found and recovered the lifebuoy that I had thrown, no sign of the lost man was ever discovered. The assumption was that he had been stunned by the blow that had knocked him overboard, and had sunk at once. This occurrence cast a gloom over the ship for several days; for poor Moore was probably the most popular man in the ship, highly esteemed by the passengers, and as nearly beloved by the crew as one of the afterguard can ever reasonably hope to be. The skipper, in particular, took the loss of this very promising officer deeply to heart, not only because of the esteem in which he held him, but also, I fancy, because he was worried by the conviction that the accident was very largely due to his own propensity to “carry on” rather too recklessly.

On the ninth day after this unfortunate occurrence, and on our thirty-ninth day out from London, we found ourselves in the longitude of the Cape of Good Hope, and in latitude 37 degrees 20 minutes south, with a whole gale of wind chasing us, which blew us into latitude 39 degrees south, and longitude 60 degrees east before it left us, ten days later, stark becalmed. The calm, however, lasted but a few hours, and was succeeded by a light northerly breeze, under the impulse of which, with all plain sail set, the *Salamis* could barely log six knots to the hour. This lasted all night, and all the next day; but before that day had sped, the second incident occurred, that resulted in plumping me into the adventure which is the subject of this yarn.

The heavy sea which had been kicked up by the gale subsided with extraordinary rapidity, and when I went on duty at eight bells (eight o’clock) on this particular morning the weather was everything that the most fastidious person could possibly desire, saving that the sun struck

along the weather side of the deck—when he squinted at us past the weather leach of the mainsail as the ship rolled gently to the heave of the swell—with a fierceness that threatened a roasting hot day, what time he should have worked his way a point or two farther round to the nor'ard. The swell which lingered, to remind us of the recent breeze, was subsiding fast, and the ocean presented one vast surface of long, solemn-sweeping undulations of the deepest, purest sapphire, gently ruffled by the breathing of the languid breeze, and ablaze in the wake of the sun with a dazzle that brought tears to the eye that attempted to gaze upon it. The ship's morning toilet had been completed, and the decks, darkened by the sluicing to which they had been lavishly subjected by the acting second mate and his watch, were drying fast and recovering their sand-white colour in the process. The brasswork, freshly scoured and polished, and the glass of the skylights, shot out a thousand flashes of white fire, where the sun's rays searched out the glittering surfaces as the ship rolled. The awning had already been spread upon the poop, in readiness for the advent of those energetic occupants of the cuddy who made a point of promenading for half an hour in order to generate an appetite for breakfast; the running gear had all been bowsed taut and neatly coiled down; and the canvas, from which the dew had already evaporated, soared aloft toward the deep, rich azure of the zenith in great, gleaming, milk-white cloths of so soft, so tender, so ethereal an aspect, that one would scarcely have been surprised to see the skysails dissolve in vapour and go drifting away to leeward upon the languid breeze. The main deck was lively with the coming and going of the steerage passengers as they went to the galley to fetch their breakfast; and there must have been between twenty and thirty children chasing each other fore and aft, and dodging round their elders in their play, filling the rich, sweet, morning air with the music of their voices. There was a soft, seething sound over the side as the ship slid gently along, accompanied by a constant iridescent gleam and flash of the tiny bubbles that slipped along the bends and vanished at last in the smooth, oil-like wake with its tiny whirlpools; and at frequent intervals a shoal of flying-fish would spark out from under the bows and go skimming and glittering away to port or starboard, like a shower of brand-new silver dollars hove broadcast by the hand of old Father Neptune himself. The cuddy breakfast was fairly under way, and a great clattering of cups and saucers, knives and forks, and the hum of lively conversation, accompanied by sundry savoury odours, came floating up through the open skylights, when the chief mate's eye happened to be attracted toward a gasket, streaming loose like an Irish pennant from the fore topgallant yard, and he sang out to one of the ordinary seamen to jump aloft and put it right. The fellow made his way up the ratlines with extreme deliberation—for, indeed, a journey aloft in such scorching heat was no joke—made up the loose gasket, and was in the very act of swinging himself off the yard when, happening to be watching him, I saw him suddenly pause and stiffen into an attitude of attention as, holding on to the jackstay with one hand, he flung the other up to his forehead and peered ahead under the sharp of it. For a full minute he stood thus; then, twisting his body until he faced aft, he hailed:

"On deck there!"

"Hillo!" answered the mate.

"There's a biggish ship away out yonder, sir," reported the man, "under her three taups'ls and fore topmast staysail; and by the way that she comes to and falls off again I'd say that she was hove-to."

“How far off is she?” demanded the mate.

“’Bout a dozen mile, I reckon, sir,” answered the man.

“Um!” remarked the mate, as much to himself as to me, it seemed. “She is probably a whaler on the lookout for ‘fish’. I believe they sometimes meet with rare streaks of luck just about here. All right,” he added, hailing the man aloft; “you can come down.”

Shortly afterward we made out the stranger’s upper spars from the deck; and from the rapidity with which we raised them it soon became apparent that, if she had really been hove-to when first seen, she had soon filled away, and was now standing in our direction. By five bells she was hull-up; and while the skipper and mate were standing together eyeing her from the break of the poop—the latter with the ship’s telescope at his eye - I saw the ensign of the stranger float out over her rail and go creeping up to her gaff-end.

“There goes her ensign, sir,” I shouted to the mate, who responded by remarking dryly:

“Yes; I see it.” Then, turning to the skipper, he said:

“There’s something wrong aboard that craft, sir; they’ve just hoisted their ensign, jack downward!” This, it may be explained to the uninitiated, is a signal of distress.

“The dickens they have!” exclaimed the skipper. “Just let me have a look at her, Mr Bryce.”

The mate handed over the telescope, and the skipper raised it to his eye, adjusting the focus to his sight.

“Ay, you are quite right,” he agreed, with his eye still peering through the tube. “The jack’s downward, right enough. Wonder what’s wrong aboard of her? her hull and spars seem to be all right, and I don’t see any water pouring from her scuppers, as there would be if she had sprung a leak and the hands were working at the pumps. Well, we shall soon know, I suppose. Let our own ensign be hoisted in acknowledgment, Mr Bryce.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” answered the mate. “Troubridge,”—to me—“jump aft and run our ensign up to the peak, will ye?”

I went aft to the flag locker, drew out the big ensign, bent it on to the halyards, and ran it up to the gaff-end, where there was just wind enough to blow it out and make it distinguishable for what it was.

The news that the stranger in sight was flying a signal of distress soon spread among the passengers, and in a few minutes every telescope in the cuddy was upon the poop and being eagerly focused upon the approaching vessel, which had by this time revealed herself as a full-rigged ship of some 800 tons measurement, of wholesome, motherly build, but certainly not a whaler, as could be seen by the model of the boats which she carried, and by the absence of certain characteristics which proclaim the whaler, and are apparent almost from the moment when she heaves into full view. There was, naturally, a vast amount of speculation, not only on the part of the skipper and mate, but also among our passengers, as to the precise character

of her distress; but probably not one of us came anywhere near guessing at its extraordinary nature.

Approaching each other, as the two vessels were, it did not take us very long to close with the stranger; and as we drew near to her it became apparent that her people were preparing to lower a boat. At the proper moment, therefore, our mainyard was laid aback, the stranger followed suit, and a minute or two later the two craft came to a stand abreast of each other, the stranger about a hundred fathoms to windward of us, near enough, indeed, for us to read with the unaided eye the name *Mercury* upon her head-boards. Then one of her two port quarter boats was lowered and hauled to the gangway, and with three men pulling, and one in the stern-sheets grasping the yoke lines, she shoved off and pulled away towards us, the mate hailing them to come to the lee gangway, where a side ladder had been dropped over for their use. Her main deck was crowded with people—men and women—all hanging over the rail and staring at us with that idle curiosity which is so characteristic of the uneducated classes. Mr Bryce at once unhesitatingly pronounced them to be emigrants, an opinion which the skipper as unhesitatingly endorsed.

The men in the approaching boat were all forecastle hands, the one steering having the appearance of being either the boatswain or the carpenter of the ship, and this it was that gave me—and no doubt the skipper and mate also—the first specific hint of what was actually wrong aboard the stranger. Nothing, however, was said; and presently, when the boat came rounding under our stern, Captain Martin and Mr Bryce descended to the main deck and awaited our visitors at the gangway, our own steerage passengers, who had crowded the lee rail to see the strange boat come alongside, respectfully making way for them.

One only of the boat's crew—the man in the stern-sheets—ventured to come on deck, the other three staring up at the heads peering down at them from our rail, without saying a word in reply to the multitude of questions that were fired into them, beyond remarking that "the bo'sun will tell your skipper all about it."

The boatswain of the *Mercury*—for such the newcomer proved to be—passed through our gangway, pulled off the knitted woollen cap which decorated his head, and at once addressed himself to the skipper.

"Mornin', sir," he remarked. "My name's Polson—James Polson, and I'm bo'sun of the *Mercury*, which ship you see hove-to yonder,"—with a flourish of his hand in the direction of the vessel named.

"Yes?" said the skipper enquiringly, as the man paused, apparently waiting to be questioned after this introduction of himself. "I see you have a signal of distress flying. What's wrong with you?"

"Well, the fact is, sir, as we've lost our cap'n and both mates—" answered the man, when the skipper struck in amazedly:

"Lost your captain and both mates! How in the name of Fortune did that happen?"

"Well, sir, you see it was this way," was the reply. "When we'd been out about a week—we're

from Liverpool, bound to Sydney, New South Wales, with a general cargo and two hundred emigrants—ninety-seven days out—when we'd been out about a week, or thereabouts—I ain't certain to a day or two, but it's all wrote down in the log—Cap'n Somers were found dead in his bunk by the steward what took him in a cup o' coffee every mornin' at six bells; and Mr Townsend—that were our chief mate—he took command o' the ship. Then nothin' partic'lar happened until we was well this side o' the Line, when one day, when all hands of us was shortenin' sail to a heavy squall as had bust upon us, Jim Tarbutt, a hordinary seaman, comin' down off the main tops'l yard by way o' the backstays, lets go his hold and drops slap on top o' Mr Townsend, what happened to be standin' underneath, and, instead of hurtin' of hisself, broke t'other man's neck and killed him dead on the spot! Then," continued Polson, regardless of the ejaculations of astonishment and commiseration evoked by the recital of this extraordinary accident, "then Mr Masterman, what were origin'lly our second mate, he up and took charge, and navigated us to somewheres about where we are now. But four nights ago come last night—yes, that's right, it were four nights ago—'bout three bells in the middle watch, while it were blowin' hard from the west'ard and we were runnin' under single-reefed topsails, with a very heavy sea chasin' of us, the night bein' dark and thick with rain, somebody comes rushin' out of the poop cabin yellin' like mad, and, afore anybody could stop him, sprang on to the lee rail, just the fore side of the main riggin', and takes a header overboard!" More exclamations of astonishment from the listeners, amid which Polson triumphantly concluded his gruesome narrative by adding: "Of course we couldn't do nothin', and so the poor feller were lost. And when Chips and I comed to investigate we found that the unfortunit man were Mr Masterman, he bein' the only one that was missin'!"

"Well!" ejaculated the skipper, addressing himself to Mr Moore, our chief mate; "I've heard a good many queer yarns in my time, of maritime accident and disaster, but this one tops the lot. The captain and both mates lost in the same voyage, and, so far as the two last are concerned, by such queer accidents too! Did you,"—turning to Polson—"find anything in Mr—what's his name!—Masterman's cabin to account for his extraordinary behaviour in rushing out on deck and jumping overboard in the middle of the night?"

"No, sir," answered Polson with much simplicity. "He'd been drinkin' a goodish bit, and there were a half-empty bottle of rum under his piller; but—"

"A–ah!" ejaculated the skipper with a whole world of emphasis; "that may account for a good deal. Well, what happened next?"

"Oh, nothin' else haven't happened, thank God!" exclaimed the boatswain piously. "But ain't that what I've already told ye quite enough, sir? What's made it so terrible awk'ard for all hands of us is that we're now without a navigator, and have lost our reckonin'. So, after Chips and I had confabulated a bit, we comed to the conclusion that, knowin' as we was well in the track of ships bound to the east'ard, the best thing we could do was to heave-to and wait until somethin' comed along that could spare us somebody to navigate the ship for us to Sydney. Chips and I are men enough to take care of her—to know when to make and when to shorten sail—but we don't know nothin' about navigation, ye see, sir."

"Ay, I see," answered the skipper. "Well, I think you acted very wisely, boatswain, in heaving-to; I don't know that you could have done anything better, under the circumstances. But, as to

sparing an officer to navigate you—I have had the misfortune to lose one of my own mates this voyage, and,"—here his eye happened to fall on me, and he considered me attentively for several seconds, as though he felt he had seen me before somewhere, and was trying to remember who I was. Then his countenance lit up as an idea seemed to strike him, and he addressed me briskly:

"What d'ye say, Troubridge? You've heard this man's yarn, and understand the fix that they're in aboard the ship yonder. You are a perfectly reliable navigator, and a very fair seaman; moreover, the boatswain says that he and the carpenter are seamen enough to take care of the ship, which I do not for a moment doubt. Do you feel inclined to undertake the job of navigating the *Mercury* from here to Sydney? It ought to be a very good thing for you, you know. I have no doubt that the owners—"

I did not wait for him to finish; I knew enough to understand perfectly well what a splendid thing it would be for me, from a professional point of view, if I should succeed in safely navigating such a ship as the *Mercury* to Sydney; and I had no shadow of doubt of my ability to do so; I therefore cut in by eagerly expressing my readiness to undertake the task.

"Then that is all right," remarked the skipper.

Turning to Polson, he said: "This young gentleman is Mr Philip Troubridge, one of my midshipman-apprentices. He has been with me for a matter of three years; and he is, as you just now heard me say, an excellent navigator, and a very good seaman. I have not the least doubt that he will serve your purpose quite as well as anyone else that you are at all likely to pick up; and if you care to have him I shall be pleased to spare him to you. But that is the best that I can do for you; as I told you, a little while ago, I have lost one of my mates—"

"Say no more, sir; say no more," interrupted Polson. "Your recommendation's quite sufficient to satisfy me that Mr—er—Troubridge'll do very well; an' since he's willin' to come with us we'll have him most gratefully, sir, and with many thanks to you for sparin' of him to us."

"Very well, then; that is settled," exclaimed the skipper briskly. Then, turning to me, he said:

"Cut away at once, Troubridge, and get your chest over the side as quickly as possible. If you are smart you may get aboard your new ship in time to take an observation at noon and check your own reckoning by ours." Then, as I rushed off to the after-house, where we apprentices were berthed, he turned to Polson and proceeded to question him further relative to the extraordinary series of fatalities that had occurred on board the *Mercury*.

Chapter Two.

The shadow of coming events.

It took me less than ten minutes to bundle my traps into the waiting boat alongside; and then, having already said goodbye to my shipmates in the apprentices' berth, I stepped up to the skipper and chief mate to say the same, and to thank the former for giving me this splendid

chance. He was very kind in bidding me farewell; told me I had given him every satisfaction while I had been with him; gave me a few words of caution and advice; and wound up by saying:

"The boatswain, here, tells me that the chronometer aboard the *Mercury* has unfortunately been allowed to run down; when, therefore, you get aboard, and have taken your meridian altitude, you had better wind the chronometer and then set it to Greenwich time, which I will give you; after which you should experience no difficulty in finding your way to Sydney, to which port I wish you a prosperous and pleasant voyage. Of course I quite reckon upon arriving two or three weeks ahead of you; but unless you have an exceptionally protracted passage you ought to arrive in good time to return home with us. Unless, therefore, the *Mercury's* agent in Sydney wishes you to return to England in the ship, you had better make your way to Melbourne as soon as you have settled up, and go back with us."

I thanked him for the kindly send-off that he was giving me, and then, after a final shake of the hand, followed Polson down the side, seated myself in the stern-sheets, and—the boatswain pulling stroke while the other three oarsmen shifted one thwart forward—shoved off, the crew and passengers of the *Salamis* giving me a little cheer to speed me on my way. The cheer was at once vociferously responded to by the people crowding the *Mercury's* rail. No doubt they were greatly relieved at the thought that there was to be no more aimless drifting about the ocean for them, but that at last they were to find themselves again heading intelligently toward their port of destination.

By the time that I had arrived alongside the *Mercury* and mounted to her deck it was getting so close toward noon, that I had only barely time enough to get my traps out of the boat before the moment arrived when I must get to work with my sextant to secure the sun's meridian altitude, from which to deduce the ship's latitude. Then there was an even more important job to be done, namely, to start and set the chronometer; therefore, as soon as I had secured my meridian altitude and made it noon aboard the *Mercury*, we wore ship, and coming up alongside the *Salamis*—that lay patiently waiting for us with her main topsail aback—obtained the correct Greenwich time and set our chronometer to it. This done, Captain Martin swung his mainyard and made sail, and we followed suit as quickly as we could. Then I worked out my observations, pricked off the ship's position on the chart, wrote up the log, and took possession of the late captain's stateroom, by which time dinner was on the cabin table, and I sat down to my first meal on board the *Mercury*. The food, of course, was not quite so luxurious as that served up on the cuddy tables aboard the *Salamis*, but it was a long way better than what I had been accustomed to get in the apprentices' berth, and I appreciated the change accordingly.

At the conclusion of the meal, at which Polson joined me, uninvited, while the carpenter stumped the poop as officer of the watch, I went on deck to have a good look at my first command; and, on the whole, was very pleased with her. She was a big ship for her tonnage, having evidently been constructed with an eye to ample cargo stowage rather than speed; consequently she was inclined to be bluff in the bows and full in the run; yet when I looked ahead and saw that the *Salamis* had only drawn ahead of us by about a mile during the half-hour or so that I had been below, I was by no means dissatisfied. She was evidently an elderly ship, for everything about her in the way of fittings and equipment was old-fashioned; but she

was as strong as oak and iron could make her, her scantling being nearly twice as heavy as that of the *Salamis*. Her bulwarks were almost as high and solid as those of a frigate, and she was pierced to mount seven guns of a side, but no longer carried any artillery on her decks excepting two brass six-pounders for the purpose of signalling. She was very loftily and solidly rigged, and it did not take me long to ascertain that she had been most liberally maintained, much of her rigging, both standing and running, being new, while her ground tackle was ponderous enough to hold a ship of double her size. “Not much chance,” thought I, “of this old barkie dragging her anchors home and driving ashore in anything short of a hurricane!” She carried a full poop, the break of which came so far forward that there was scarcely room to pass comfortably between the foot of the poop ladders and the combing of the after hatch. The poop cabin was a very spacious affair, extending, for the greater part of its length, to the full width of the ship, and it was most comfortably fitted up, although, as might be expected, it lacked the luxurious finish of the *Salamis'* cuddy. It looked as though it might at one time have been fitted with staterooms on either side for the accommodation of saloon passengers; but, if so, they had all been removed, save two at the fore and two at the after end of the cabin. And even these were now unoccupied, the boatswain and carpenter occupying the staterooms at the fore end of the structure, in which the chief and second mate had originally been berthed.

The captain’s cabin was abaft the saloon, in the extreme after end of the ship, and was an unusually commodious and airy apartment, extending the entire width of the ship, and splendidly lighted and ventilated by a whole range of large stern windows. There was a fine, roomy, standing bed-place on the starboard side, with a splendid chest of drawers under it; a washstand and dressing-table at the foot of it; a large and well-stocked bookcase on the port side; a chart rack occupied the whole of the fore bulkhead; the floor or deck of the cabin was covered with a handsome Turkey carpet; and a mahogany table, big enough to accommodate a large chart, stood in the middle of the apartment. This was where I was to sleep, and to spend in privacy as much of my waking time as I chose. “Truly,” thought I, “this is an agreeable change from my cramped quarters aboard the *Salamis*!”

Having completed the establishment of myself in this luxurious cabin, by turning out my chest and hanging up such of my clothes as I was likely to want immediately, and so on, I went on deck again, where the carpenter, who told me that his name was Tudsbery—“Josiah Tudsbery, your honour, sir,”—was on duty, and requested him to conduct me below to the emigrants’ quarters, which, I found, occupied the whole of the ’tween-decks. Here again the liberality of the ship’s owners became manifest, for the whole fitting up of the place was vastly superior to what was at that time considered good enough accommodation for emigrants; the married quarters consisting of a number of quite comfortable and roomy cabins; while the spaces allotted to the accommodation of the single men and women ensured to their occupants such complete privacy as was deemed quite unnecessary in those days. I found that it was the duty of the emigrants to keep their own quarters clean, and this seemed to have been somewhat neglected of late. I therefore gave orders that all hands should at once turn-to and give the ’tween-decks a thorough cleansing, in readiness for another inspection by myself at eight bells in the afternoon watch.

The emigrants aboard the *Mercury* numbered two hundred all told; namely thirty-three married couples, twenty-eight unmarried women, forty-two unmarried men, and sixty-four children, of whom one—a sweet, good-tempered baby girl—had been born during the voyage. They, the

emigrants, seemed to be a very mixed lot, ranging from clod-hopping, agricultural labourers, whose intelligence seemed insufficient to enable them to appreciate the wonder of a flying-fish or the beauty of a golden, crimson, and purple sunset, to individuals of so refined and intellectual an appearance and so polished a behaviour, that the fact of their being 'tween-deck passengers seemed nothing short of a grotesque incongruity.

When I went below again, at eight bells, to inspect the emigrants' quarters, I found them sweet, clean, and altogether very much more wholesome than they had been upon the occasion of my first visit, and I expressed my gratification at the change, hinting pretty strongly that I should expect the place to be maintained in that condition for the remainder of the voyage; at which remark one of the occupants—a pale, delicate-looking girl—exclaimed:

"Oh, sir, I only hope that you will insist upon that! Some of the people here—especially the men—are shockingly lazy, and would never do a hand's turn of work if they were not made to."

"I am much obliged to you for the hint," said I. "I will find out the identity of those especially lazy ones, and see if I cannot imbue them with a good wholesome hatred of idleness before we arrive in the land, where those who won't work must starve."

By sunset that night the *Salamis* had slid so far ahead of us that only the heads of her courses were visible above the horizon; and with nightfall we saw the last of her that we were destined to see during that voyage.

I suppose it was only natural that I, a lad of barely seventeen years of age, should be full of business, and importance, and anxiety, for a few hours at least, upon finding myself thus unexpectedly placed in a position of such tremendous responsibility as was involved in the navigation, and therefore, to a large extent, the safety of this fine, wholesome old ship with her two hundred passengers, her crew of thirty, and her valuable cargo. At all events, that was the condition of mind in which I found myself as I paced the spacious poop, hour after hour, sometimes accompanied by Polson, sometimes conversing with Tudsbery, and occasionally alone. As I walked, my glances travelled, with the regularity of clockwork, first to windward, then ahead, then aloft, and finally—as I reached the binnacle—into the compass bowl; then away out to windward again, and so on, *ad infinitum*, until I was fairly bone-weary, and had completely walked off all my anxiety—to say nothing of my importance—and had convinced myself that I really might venture to leave the ship for a few hours to the care of the boatswain and the carpenter.

I have mentioned that, when bidding me farewell prior to my change over from the *Salamis* to the *Mercury*, Captain Martin was kind enough to give me a word or two of caution and advice; and one of the bits of advice which he most forcibly impressed upon me was that I should make a point of sighting either Saint Paul or Amsterdam island on my way to the eastward, and thus verify my reckoning. I recognised this as being a counsel of wisdom, and determined to shape a course that would enable me to sight both, they being only about fifty miles apart, and both standing high. I therefore very carefully laid off the compass course upon the chart, and found it to be south-east by east three-quarters east, the distance being eight hundred and forty miles; and this course I gave to the helmsman as soon as I had pricked it off and very carefully verified it, while he passed it on to his relief, and so on.

But when I turned out at six bells the next morning I found, to my disgust, that the wind had drawn round from the eastward and broken us some four points off our course; while, to add to my vexation, the boatswain and the carpenter—both of them illiterate men—had entered up the log slate in such an extraordinary manner that, so far as the dead reckoning was concerned, the information was not of the slightest use to me. Fortunately for my peace of mind the atmosphere was clear, and I was able to get sights during the forenoon which gave me the ship's longitude; while, a little later on, a meridian altitude of the sun fixed our latitude for us. Then, for nearly thirty hours, we found ourselves enveloped in one of the densest fogs I ever experienced, with light, baffling variable winds that made of our wake a continual zigzag, winding up with three days of thoroughly foul weather—a whole gale of wind from the north-east—during the greater part of which we lay hove-to under close-reefed fore and main topsails, with our head to the south-east. Then the weather cleared and moderated; the wind gradually worked round, first to east, and then to south-east; and at length I found the ship laying up, close-hauled under all plain sail, for the spot where, according to my reckoning, Saint Paul ought to be. I was now especially anxious to make that island, for the weather of the past three or four days had been of such a character as to baffle the most experienced of navigators, and I confess that I was beginning to feel rather more than a trifle nervous. The island, however, hove into view at the precise moment and in the precise quarter that it ought to do if my reckoning happened to be correct; and this test and verification of the accuracy of my working served to completely re-establish my confidence in myself, so that, from that time onward, I never experienced the least anxiety. I felt that so long as I could get tolerably regular sights of the sun, moon, or stars I was not at all likely to go wrong.

But before the island of Saint Paul had climbed up over the horizon that stretched athwart our bows, I had become aware of a certain matter that, while it struck me as being somewhat peculiar, seemed to bear no further significance for me.

One of the first persons among the emigrant passengers aboard the *Mercury* to attract my attention was a tall, thin, long-haired, sickly-looking man, of about thirty years of age, clad in a suit of rusty black, whose appearance and manner generally suggested to me the idea that he must be by profession a schoolmaster. There was a certain air of exaggerated earnestness of demeanour about him, and a wildness of expression in his flashing coal-black eyes, that caused me to set him down as being somewhat crack-brained. His name, I soon ascertained, was Algernon Marcus Wilde, and he was among the first of the emigrants to speak to me. He came to me, on the morning after I joined the ship, with a complaint as to the quality and quantity of the food served out to the occupants of the 'tween-decks; and I was as much struck by the correctness of his speech, as by the excessive indignation which he infused into his manner, when stating the nature of his alleged grievance. I pointed out to him the fact that, whatever the quality of the food might be, I was certainly not responsible for it, nor, in the event of its proving to be unsuitable, could I remedy the matter away out there in mid-ocean; but I promised to investigate the affair, and to do what might be possible to remove the grievance, should I find such to exist—of which I had my doubts after my brief but highly satisfactory experience of the viands served up in the cabin.

I accordingly requested the steward to produce the dietary list which formed the basis of the agreement between the owners and the emigrants; and, upon going through it, was certainly unable to find any just cause for complaint, so far as quantity was concerned. The question of

quality was of course a different matter; but here again, when, a day or two later, I unexpectedly examined the food as it was being served out at the galley, I was quite unable to discover any legitimate cause for complaint. On the contrary, the food, although plain, was as good as it was possible to obtain in those times aboard a ship that had been at sea a hundred days; and it was excellently prepared. When I sent for Wilde, and asked him to state specifically what he found wrong with the food that I had just examined, all he could say was that it was not so good or so varied in character as that which he had seen from time to time carried aft for use in the cabin; and that in his opinion no distinction whatever ought to be made in the treatment of persons occupying different parts of the ship; also that he considered I ought to give instructions for the emigrants to be fed henceforth from the stores provided for cabin use; nor would he be satisfied, although I pointed out that he was getting the food that the owners had undertaken to provide him with in exchange for his passage money. Of course to attempt to argue with so unreasonable an individual was obviously absurd, and I therefore dismissed him and thought nothing more about his complaints.

This, however, was not the matter of which I have spoken as gradually obtruding itself upon my attention, although, had I only been able to guess it, the two were not unconnected. What I noticed, almost from the first moment of boarding the *Mercury*, without attaching any particular importance to it, was that this man Wilde and a few of the other male emigrants were in the habit of spending practically the whole of the second dogwatch—which, in fine weather at all events, is usually a period of idleness and recreation for a ship's crew—on the forecastle-head, smoking and chatting animatedly with the forecastle hands; while at other times the ex-schoolmaster—as Wilde actually proved to be—seemed eternally engaged in earnest discussion with his fellow emigrants. I often wondered idly what the man could possibly find to talk about so incessantly; but usually found a sufficiently satisfactory explanation in the reflection that, being a man of education, he would naturally take pleasure in extracting the ideas of others, and also probably in correcting them according to his own notions. He was evidently very fond of talking; and I frequently amused myself by watching the impassioned earnestness and the eloquent gestures with which he would hold forth upon the subject—whatever it might be—that happened to be under discussion. I soon found that Polson and Tudsbery, the boatswain and carpenter of the ship, apparently found more pleasure in spending the second dogwatch on the forecastle with their shipmates and the emigrants than they did in promenading the poop with me; but this was not surprising, for not only were they both very illiterate men, but it quickly became apparent that they and I had scarcely a single interest or idea in common, and we were consequently often hard put to it to find a topic of congenial conversation; indeed, in the course of a few days, without the slightest ill-feeling on either side, our communications became almost exclusively restricted to matters connected with the business of the ship.

Looking back, from the summit of a matured experience, as I now can, upon that first fortnight aboard the *Mercury*, I often feel astonished that I never, for a single instant, caught the faintest premonition of what was looming ahead; for I can recall plenty of hints and suggestions, had I only been keen-sighted enough to observe them and smart enough to read their significance; but I believe the fact to be that at that time I had no room in my mind for any other thought than that of the navigation of the ship. It is true that for more than a year it had been part of my daily duty, as a midshipman-apprentice qualifying for the position of officer, to take observations of the various heavenly bodies simultaneously with those of Captain Martin and the mates, to work

them out independently, and to submit my calculations to the skipper—who examined and returned them with such written comments as he deemed called for—with the result that I had long since become proficient in the science of navigation. But this was a very different thing. If on board the *Salamis* I had chanced to make a mistake, the worst that could have happened would have been a sharp rebuke from the skipper for my carelessness, and an equally sharp injunction to be more careful in future; whereas now, aboard the *Mercury*, if I happened to make a miscalculation, there was nobody to correct it; and although subsequent observations might reveal the error, and no actual harm arise from its committal so long as the ship was in mid-ocean, a comparatively trivial mistake committed when the ship happened to be in the vicinity of rocks, or shoals, or approaching land, might easily make all the difference between perfect safety and her total loss, together with that of all hands. Hence, during those early days, when the sense of grave responsibility lay heavy upon my young shoulders, I could think of nothing but more or less abstruse astronomical problems.

Chapter Three.

An unpleasant surprise.

The revelation came upon me, with the stunning effect of a thunder-clap, on the day upon which we made the island of Saint Paul. The weather during the whole of the preceding day had been brilliantly fine, with a light air of wind that, breathing out from the south-east at daybreak, had gradually hauled round until by noon it had settled at south; so that when I took my meridian altitude of the sun for the determination of our latitude, the *Mercury* was heading straight for the spot where my calculations declared the island to be, with all plain sail set to her royals, and with the weather bracer slightly checked.

Upon working out my meridian altitude I found the ship's latitude to be 38 degrees 43 minutes south and we were steering true east; consequently if my calculations were accurate, we were at that moment on the exact parallel of Saint Paul, which—also according to my calculations—then lay in line with our jibboom, eighty miles distant. This result was confirmed by a further observation of the sun taken in the course of the afternoon watch; and a very simple calculation then informed me that, if I had made no mistake, and there occurred no change in the direction or strength of the wind, the island ought to be sighted, directly ahead, fourteen miles distant, at dawn of the next day. This anticipation I communicated, in my anxiety, to Polson and Tudsbery, the former of whom remarked:

"Well, Mr Troubridge, we shan't have very long to wait afore we're able to prove the haccuracy of your calculations; but let me tell ye this, sir—if you're able to hit off that there bit of a hiland anywhere near as close as you hopes to, a'ter all the box-haulin' about, breakin' off, heavin'-to, and driftin' to leeward that we've had these here last few days—well, all I can say is that you're a good enough navigator to take a ship anywhere, ay, if 'twas round the world and back."

"Y–e–es," said I, flattered a bit off my balance by the fulsome character of the compliment, "there will not be much fault to find, I fancy, after the traverse that we have been working. By the way, Polson, have you ever sighted Saint Paul? I never have, although this is my fifth trip in these seas."

“Well, no, sir; I can’t say as I have,” answered the boatswain. “But,” he continued, peering through the skylight at the cabin clock, “it’s eight bells. I’ll call Chips. I fancies I heard him say that he ’ad sighted it once or twice. I’ll ask him when he comes on deck.”

So saying, Polson walked to the bell, where it hung mounted on the rail that guarded the fore end of the poop, struck “eight bells” upon it, and then descended to call the carpenter, with whom he presently returned to the poop.

“Yes, Mr Troubridge,” continued the boatswain, as he preceded the carpenter up the weather poop ladder, “Chips, here, says he’ve sighted the hiland twice in his time; but only at a distance.”

“Ah!” said I. “Do you think you would recognise it again, Tudsbery?”

“Oh, yes, sir; no fear of that,” answered the carpenter confidently. “It’s a peculiar-lookin’ spot, not to be very easily mistook. I remembers that when we last sighted it I heard the mate say to the skipper that it looked pretty much like a dead whale floatin’ high out o’ the water; and he was right; it did. Oh yes, I’ll reckernize it again fast enough, if I claps my eyes upon it, never fear.”

“Well,” said I, “I expect it to heave in sight to-morrow at dawn, under the jibboom-end, some fourteen or fifteen miles distant, if the wind and weather last as they are now—which I believe will be the case, since the barometer remains steady. It is your morning watch, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir; my eight hours out to-night,” answered Chips.

“Then,” said I, turning to the boatswain, “when you call the carpenter to-morrow morning, at the end of the middle watch, please give me a call also; for, never yet having sighted the island, I should like to be on deck when it heaves into view, and get a good look at it.”

“All right, sir,” answered Polson; “I’ll rouse ye out, never fear.”

The weather held fine all through that night, with the breeze light but steady at south; when, having been duly called by the boatswain at four o’clock the next morning, I turned out and went on deck, the ship, with her spars almost upright, was sliding very gently along over a sea so smooth that her mastheads seemed scarcely to sway at all among the brilliant stars that thickly jewelled the deep indigo vault overhead. The silence of night lay heavy upon the breast of the placid deep, and seemed to be emphasised rather than broken by the faint sigh of the breeze through the maze of spars and rigging that towered aloft, the soft seething and plash of water along the bends, the light creak or cheep of some parral or sheave up in the velvet darkness, and the occasional clank of the tiller chains as the watchful helmsman, with his eye upon some star peering past the weather leach of the main-royal, found it necessary to give the ship a spoke of the wheel one way or the other. The watch had stowed themselves away somewhere about the fore deck, doubtless taking a quiet catnap somewhere out of reach of the heavy dew, and were not to be seen; but the figure of the lookout on the topgallant forecastle could be just made out, momentarily eclipsing first one low-lying star and then another, as he paced monotonously to and fro athwartships to keep himself awake.

As I stood there at the head of the weather poop ladder, abstractedly watching this man's movements, it suddenly struck me that there was one point upon the horizon, straight ahead, where the night gloom seemed to be the merest trifle deeper and more opaque than elsewhere, and I wondered whether it might perchance be the loom of the island, the highest point of which being, according to the chart, eight hundred and twenty feet above the sea level, should now be visible above the horizon if it were only daylight—and my reckoning happened to be correct. I fetched the ship's night-glass and took a good look through it at this spot, but at first could make nothing certain of it. However, while I still looked, a bright star suddenly swam into view above the spot, and my heart gave a great leap, and a heavy sigh escaped me; for I knew, from the sweep of the horizon and the height of other stars about it in the immediate neighbourhood, that the celestial body which had so suddenly sprung into the field of the telescope must have just risen above the topmost ridge of something solid blotting out a small space of sky in that quarter; and the something solid could only be the island of Saint Paul.

"The island is in sight, Tudsbery, as straight ahead as it is possible for a man to aim for it!" I exclaimed exultantly; for my feeling of relief from doubt and anxiety, and the swift conviction that I might henceforward confidently rely upon myself, were so great that I felt impelled to give audible expression to my satisfaction.

"You don't say so, Mr Troubridge!" exclaimed the carpenter, coming to my side. "Whereabouts do she lie, sir?"

"Come and stand where I am, and I will show you," answered I. "There, now, do you see that bright star, low down in the sky, just over the spot where the cathead passes out through the bulwarks?"

"Certainly, sir; I see it quite plainly," answered the carpenter.

"Then look immediately beneath it, and you will see the loom of the land," said I. "You can make it out more clearly with the naked eye than through the telescope. D'ye see it?"

"Well," exclaimed Chips doubtfully, "now that you comes to mention it, I admit that the gloom away down there do look a bit thicker than it do anywheres else; but I should never ha' noticed it if you hadn't drawed my attention to it. And, even now, I don't know as I should care to swear as to it bein' land."

"No," said I; "and neither should I, if I did not know it to be there. But wait until the day breaks, and you will see that I am right."

"I don't doubt it, sir; I don't doubt it at all," answered Chips soothingly; "but it's a wonder to me how you've been able to find your way to it; for it's only a little bit of a rock after all—a hextinc' volcano, I've heard some people say. How far d'ye reckon we are off from it, now, Mr Troubridge?"

"Probably about seventeen or eighteen miles," said I.

"Ah!" observed Chips. "Then we ought to be abreast of it soon a'ter breakfast." And therewith he fell into a reverie.

It was about an hour later that, preceded by a slight chilling of the air, the first faint pallor of dawn came filtering through the velvet darkness ahead, stealing imperceptibly higher and higher into the eastern sky, and causing the stars thereaway to dwindle and grow dim until, one after another, they vanished in the cold, colourless light that now stretched along the horizon beneath our jibboom-end, spreading right and left, even as one stood and watched it. Then a faint flush of palest primrose stole into the pallor, against which the horizon line ran black as ebony, with here and there a suspicion of a gleam coming and going between it and the ship, as the growing light fell upon the gently heaving swell. A moment later a great shaft of white light shot perpendicularly from the horizon far ahead toward the zenith, where the indigo was swiftly paling to purest ultramarine, the primrose hue became more pronounced, and there, in the very midst of it, where the colour was strongest, rose a hummock of softest, most delicate and ethereal amethyst, clean-cut as a cameo, and shaped—as the carpenter had said—like the back of a gigantic whale, with three well-marked protuberances growing out of it, while others showed just clear of the water, toward what might be supposed to be the tail end.

“There you are, Chips,” I exclaimed in a fever of exultation; “there is the island—”

“Land ho! straight ahead,” shouted the lookout at this moment, as he faced aft, pointing with his right hand over the bows.

“Ay, ay, Jimmy, my hearty, we sees it, plain enough,” answered the carpenter. Then he turned to me and continued:

“Yes, sir; there it is, as you says. Ay, and it’s Saint Paul, too; ne’er a doubt of it. I reckernizes them there hummicks a-stickin’ up out of the back of it. And I reckon that it’s just about fourteen mile away—which brings your calcilations right to a hapigraphy. Well, well, hedication’s a most wonderful thing, and no mistake. The bosun and I might ha’ searched for that there rock till all was blue, and never ha’ found it; but you comes along and gets aboard of us eight hunderd mile away, and—says you—‘we’ll sight Saint Paul as we runs down our eastin’’; and, although we’ve been headin’ all round the compass since then, there’s the hiland, right enough, and just where you said it would be, ay, to the very hinch.”

I was vastly tickled at the man’s enthusiastic admiration of my little twopenny-halfpenny feat of navigation, and—secretly—very proud of it myself; but, of course, in reality it was an exceedingly commonplace exploit, which any other navigator worthy of being so-called could have accomplished without the slightest difficulty, the only essentials to success being good instruments, clear skies, and correct arithmetic, all of which I fortunately possessed. But I was nevertheless highly elated at my success, chiefly, I think, because, it being my first independent attempt to navigate a ship, I had demonstrated to myself my ability to do so.

The day now grew fast in the east; the primrose hue softened away, right and left, into a tint of warm grey with a faint suggestion of rose in it; the stars had all vanished save one solitary gem that hung low in the western sky like a silver lamp; the zenith was a rich, pure ultramarine, that was fast spreading toward the western horizon and chasing the last lingering shadow of night before it. Great spokes of radiant light were darting aloft from behind the island and touching into gold a few small, scattered flakes of fleecy cloud that floated high over our mastheads. Then, all in a moment, the small, faintly-gleaming bit of land ahead became transformed, as it might be with a magician’s wand, into a block of deepest, richest purple, bristling with rays of

burning gold, a throbbing rim of molten gold swept into view from behind it, and in an instant it vanished amid a blinding blaze of sunlight that flashed across the ocean toward us, transfiguring its erstwhile surface of ebony into a tremble of turquoise and gold, outlining every spar and sail and rope in the ship with thin, golden wires, and causing every bit of glass and polished metal-work to blaze and scintillate with golden fire. The watch appeared, yawning and stretching as they emerged from their hiding places, blinking like owls as they stared over the bows endeavouring to pick out from the dazzle ahead the shape of land that the lookout was pointing to; and the carpenter emerged from his reverie to shout:

“Rig the head-pump there, for’ard, and lay along with your buckets and brushes!”

At two bells in the forenoon watch, when I mounted the poop after breakfast, we were square abreast and within a mile of the island, I having instructed the boatswain to pass as close to it as was prudent; for I had heard of shipwrecked people having found refuge there and on the neighbouring island of Amsterdam, and was desirous to see whether perchance there might be anyone there at the moment. But there was no one to be seen, at which I was not surprised, for our approach had been slow, affording ample opportunity to anyone on the island to observe it and make his presence known; yet no signal or sign of any kind indicating human occupation had been descried. True, as we drew nearer, a faint wreath of smoke here and there was occasionally seen; but our telescopes showed us that these issued from the soil itself, and not from fires kindled by human agency, being, no doubt, the result of volcanic action; also there were a few goats dotted about, browsing in groups of two or three; and their perfect placidity of demeanour was convincing evidence of the absence of man on the island. Having satisfied ourselves of the non-existence of human beings upon Saint Paul, I gave the order to bear away for Amsterdam, which lies due north and fifty miles distant from the smaller island, intending to subject it also to a similar inquisition. Five minutes later we were running off square before the flagging breeze, with the elusive, filmy shadow which was as much as we could see of the island at that distance, and under the existing atmospheric conditions hovering on the horizon over our figurehead.

I had just completed the making of a sketch of, and the jotting down of a few notes concerning, Saint Paul, which I thought might possibly be useful to me some time later on in life, when, somewhat to my surprise, the man Wilde, of whom I have already spoken, came up on to the poop and informed me that he had somewhat to say to me if I could spare the time to listen to him. Imagining that he might have some fresh complaint to make regarding the food supplied to the emigrants, I closed my notebook, returned it to my pocket, and requested him to say on.

“Thank you!” he said. “The fact is, Mr Troubridge, that I come to you this morning as the representative and spokesman of all on board this ship, crew as well as passengers; and it will perhaps simplify matters a great deal if I tell you at the outset that we are all absolutely of one mind regarding the matter which I have been deputed to lay before you.”

“I understand,” said I. “Pray proceed, Mr Wilde,” for the man had paused, as though to afford me an opportunity to speak.

He bowed slightly in acknowledgment of my permission to continue, and resumed:

“When Polson, the boatswain of this ship, boarded the *Salamis*, he informed your captain that

the *Mercury* was bound from Liverpool to Sydney, New South Wales, and in a sense the statement was true, inasmuch as that when the ship sailed from Liverpool her captain had instructions to navigate her to Australia. But since then many things have happened, as you are aware. One very important happening, however, of which as yet you know nothing, is this: After most carefully weighing every point, for and against, we have arrived, with absolute unanimity, at the determination that, instead of continuing our voyage to Australia, we will proceed to the Pacific Ocean, where, on some suitable island—for which we will search until we find it—we will establish ourselves as a little community, to be governed upon the simple, old-fashioned, patriarchal system of perfect equality. And my object in explaining this scheme of ours to you is to request that you will have the goodness to change the course of the ship accordingly."

This extraordinary statement, with its concluding request, was made in so perfectly calm and matter-of-fact a manner, and in a tone of such absolute finality, that for a space of several seconds I was rendered literally speechless with amazement. The colossal impudence and audacity of the proposal took my breath away. But I soon collected my scattered faculties, and forthwith proceeded vigorously to remonstrate with the visionary enthusiast who, I instantly recognised, must be the originator of the scheme.

"Sit down, Mr Wilde," said I, seating myself upon a hencoop, and signing to him to place himself beside me. "You have sprung upon me a matter that is not to be dealt with and dismissed in a breath; indeed, it involves so many momentous questions that I scarcely know where to begin. But, by way of a starter, let me ask you whether you are aware that you have no right whatever to make use of this ship for such a purpose as that which you have outlined to me? The contract of the owners was to convey you to Sydney, and land you there, and you can claim no more from them. In the next place—"

"Pardon me for interrupting you," broke in my companion with an indulgent smile and uplifted, protesting hand; "but I believe I know and could repeat to you every one of the somewhat musty arguments which are crowding each other upon the tip of your tongue; and it will perhaps save time—and possibly a certain amount of unpleasant friction—if I inform you at once—as indeed I have hinted to you already—that we have given them all our most careful and exhaustive consideration, and have quite settled among ourselves that none of them is anything like weighty enough to divert us from our purpose. We know, for example, that the appropriation of this ship and her cargo, in the carrying out of our plans, will involve a certain amount of hardship and loss to the owners; but no revolutionary scheme of any sort, great or small, was ever yet carried into effect without inflicting loss and hardship upon somebody. It would pass the wit of man to devise one that did not, and we are therefore prepared to regard that phase of the question with perfect complacency."

"I wonder whether you understand that what you contemplate is called piracy, and is punishable with death?" said I.

"Of course we do, my dear young friend," answered Wilde with a smile. "But perhaps I ought to have explained to you that the very root and foundation of our plan is to escape from man-made laws, which are compounded of tyranny and injustice of the grossest kind, and to revert to the old, simple, patriarchal, family idea—the idea of holding all things in common, of abolishing individualism and inequality of every description, and of submitting only to such simple laws as

are manifestly for the benefit and advantage of all. Besides, who will there be to punish us for our so-called act of piracy?"

"You may rest assured," said I, "that there is no spot on this globe so remote, so hidden away, that a British cruiser will not find it sooner or later; and when she happens to visit your island—if ever you reach it—her captain will insist upon an explanation of how you come to be there, and, in short, of having your whole story told to him. And then, Mr Wilde, the days of the originator of this mad scheme will be numbered."

"My dear boy," said Wilde, laying his hand soothingly upon my arm, "'the originator of this mad scheme', as you are pleased to put it, is more than willing to take his chance of such a happening as you suggest; so we need not discuss that point any farther, but may pass on to the next. The question now is: Will you, or will you not, help us to find the sort of island that we have in mind? No, no,"—as he saw that I was about to refuse hotly—"do not decide in the negative too hurriedly; take time to consider the matter, because it is a rather important one, both to you and to us. It is important to us, because, if you should decide in the negative, it will put us to all the trouble and inconvenience of finding another navigator; and it is important to you, because, if you should refuse, it will mean that, being opposed to us, you must be got rid of, for we will have no enemies, secret or open, among us; and I think that the best way to get rid of you, and at the same time to guard against the possibility of your doing us a bad turn in the future, will be to tie your hands and heels together, attach a good heavy weight to your neck, and drop you overboard sometime in the small hours when all the women and children are asleep, and cannot be shocked or distressed at the sight.

"You see, we have considered this matter so thoroughly, and have so completely made up our minds what we intend to do, that we cannot dream of allowing the qualms of conscience of a mere lad like yourself to stand in our way. If you had not been an expert navigator it would have been a different affair altogether. We should have said nothing to you, but should have put you ashore on one of these islands, had we chanced to find them, or have exchanged you with some ship for a better navigator; but you have proved your ability, and now you must either throw in your lot with us, or—accept the alternative. Think it over, my dear boy, and let me know your decision when you have fully made up your mind. You will be able to do this all the more easily since, as 'the originator of this mad scheme', and the accepted leader of all on board, it is my intention to take up my quarters in the cabin for the remainder of our voyage."

So saying, Wilde rose and, bestowing upon me a friendly smile, made his way down the poop ladder to the main deck; and a few minutes later I saw the stewards helping him to transfer his belongings from the steerage to the cabin.

Chapter Four.

Wilde explains.

The boatswain, whose watch it now was, and who had been making a pretence of superintending some job on the forecastle while Wilde was talking to me, presently slouched along the deck and came up on to the poop. Arrived at the head of the weather poop ladder, he paused and, facing forward, appeared to be regarding the set of the canvas attentively. Then, with a very sheepish air, he joined me and took the seat which Wilde had not long vacated. I saw that the fellow was dying of curiosity to learn what had passed between the ex-schoolmaster and myself, but was determined not to help him by opening the conversation; the result being a long—and apparently on the part of the boatswain an embarrassing pause. However, at length he broke ground by remarking with a conciliating smile:

"So I sees you've been havin' a yarn with Mr Wilde, eh, Mr Troubridge? Have he told ye, sir, of the plan that we've made up among us for startin' a new country?"

"He has told me—to my intense astonishment—that I have become shipmates with a round hundred or so of consummate idiots—leaving the women and children out of the question," I answered sharply.

"A–ah!" returned the boatswain, with a sorrowful shake of the head. "I felt, somehow, as you wouldn't see the thing as we sees it. All the same, sir, I hopes—yes, I most fervently hopes—as he've been able to persuade ye to jine in with us."

"He tells me that if I refuse to do so I am to be lashed up, neck and heels, and hove overboard with a sinker attached to my neck some fine night when the women and children are all below. Do you approve of that arrangement, Polson?" I demanded.

"Well—no—I can't say as I do; not altogether," answered the boatswain, fidgeting uneasily where he sat. "But I hopes it won't come to that, Mr Troubridge. I don't hold with forcin' anybody to do what they don't want to do; but I don't see as it'd do you no very serious harm for to agree to navigate this here ship to the spot where we wants her took to; and that's all as you're to be asked to do."

"And if I should choose to refuse, I suppose you would stand by and see me drowned, if indeed you did not lend a hand to lash me up?" I asked, infusing all the sarcasm I could into the question.

"No, no, Mr Troubridge!" exclaimed Polson, justly indignant that I should bring such a monstrous charge against him. "I wouldn't lift a finger to hurt ye, sir—I shouldn't have no need to, for there's lots o' chaps among them emigrants ready enough to do any mortal thing that Mr Wilde tells 'em to. I should just go below and have nothin' to do with the job."

"By which simple means you would secure the acquittal of the thing you call your conscience against the charge of murdering me!" I ejaculated scornfully. "Do you know, Polson, that the

man who consents to a murder is every whit as guilty as he who actually does the deed?"

"Well, I dunno," answered Polson; "I don't see how that can be, Mr Troubridge. If another man chooses to murder ye, what's that got to do wi' me? Besides, what can we do? All hands of us has already signed a paper agreein' to obey Mr Wilde's orders."

"Tut!" I exclaimed impatiently. "Do you seriously wish me to believe, Polson, that you are such an utter fool that you are unable to discriminate between right and wrong? With one breath you give me to understand that you would have no conscientious objection to permitting a man to murder me; and with the next you intimate that having, as I understand it, blindly pledged yourself to obey all Wilde's orders—whatever their nature may be—your conscience will not permit you to break your pledge! Let me tell you, man, that such a pledge as that is in nowise binding, and the law will hold you blameless if you choose to break it."

"Ay—yes—the law!" retorted the boatswain, spitting over the rail, the more strongly to mark his contempt of that system which was once tersely denounced as being "a hass". "I don't take no account of the law, Mr Troubridge. Mr Wilde have showed us that the law ain't justice. It have been made by rich men to grind down the poor, and keep 'em down; and there ain't goin' to be no law in this here new country what we're goin' to make. Everybody's goin' to be just as good as everybody else, and is goin' to do just what he jolly well likes."

"Just so!" I said. "I have heard that yarn before, and if I knew of a country where such a state of things existed I would take precious good care to steer clear of it. Can't you picture to yourself the joy of living in a place where, if a stronger man than you happened to take a fancy to your clothes, or your house, or anything else that belonged to you, he could compel you to give them up, and nobody would interfere to say him nay. That is the kind of thing that is to be expected in a country where there are no laws, and where everybody is at liberty to do 'just what he jolly well likes'. I am astonished to hear you talking such utter tomfoolery; I set you down as having more common sense!"

The poor man stared at me in silence, agape with perplexity.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he exclaimed at last, thumping the hencoop with his fist in his bewilderment; "what's a man to do? Here's that chap Wilde—a man of eddication, mind ye, Mr Troubridge—comes along and spins us a yarn of how we poor sailormen are ill-treated and kep' down, overworked and underpaid by rich owners; and of how the law won't do nothin' for us; and he shows us a plan how we can live in peace and happiness and enj'yment all the rest of our lives; and then you turns up and knocks the whole bag o' tricks into a cocked hat! Which of ye is right? If you're right, I stays as I am all my life, a poor, miserable shellback, endin' my days by sellin' matches in the streets, when I'm too old and too stiff wi' the rheumatics to go to sea any longer. That bein' the case, I'll give Mr Wilde's plan a trial for a spell; right or wrong."

"Very well," said I, "go your own way, if you will; but you will most certainly regret it some day when it is too late to retrace your steps. And let me tell you this, Polson, you are attributing your position and its accompanying hardships to the wrong cause altogether. The true state of the case is that you are an ignorant and unintelligent man through lack of education. Did you ever go to school?"

“No, never, Mr Troubridge,” answered my companion. “What little I knows I larned myself. My father, who was supposed to be a wharfinger, was too fond of the drink ever to be able to hold a job, the consekence bein’ that my poor mother had to keep things goin’ by takin’ in washin’; and, since there was seven of us young ’uns, it took her all her time to find us in grub and clo’es. She hadn’t no money to spare for eddication. Consekence was I didn’t have none. And when I was ’bout ’leven year old things got to such a pitch at home that I cut and run, goin’ to sea as cabin-boy in a Geordie to start with, and gradually workin’ my way up to bein’ a bosun, as I am now.”

“Ah!” said I. “Well, you have done a good deal better, Polson, than many others in like circumstances. But—and this is my point—if your father, instead of stupefying his brains with drink, had been a sober, steady, hard-working man, and had done his duty by you to the extent of sending you to school, you would have gained a vast amount of valuable knowledge. You would have cultivated your intellect; you would have learned to discriminate between right and wrong; you would have been able to reason, and to perceive that certain causes invariably produce certain effects. You would have discovered that knowledge is power, and that the more knowledge a man possesses the higher he is able to rise in the world. Instead of stopping at being a boatswain, you would have risen to be, first a mate, and then a master—and possibly an owner some day, as other men have done. Now, put that in your pipe and smoke it!”

And I jumped up and went below to fetch my sextant up on deck; for by this time it was drawing well on toward noon.

As the day wore on, the wind fell lighter, until by sunset the ship scarcely had steerage-way; consequently it was not until the next morning that we found ourselves off the island of Amsterdam, past which we drifted so slowly that, had there been anyone on the island, they would have had ample time to make their presence known. But we saw no one, nor anything in the least resembling a signal. After skirting the western side of the island to its northern extremity, I gave the order to bring the ship to the wind, and gave the officer of the watch a compass course of east-south-east for Cape Otway. I was not going to yield to Wilde at the first demand; and not at all, if I could possibly help it; although my talk with the boatswain was of anything but an encouraging character. There was still the carpenter, however; and I thought I would sound him as to his views on this visionary scheme of Wilde’s, the very first step toward the realisation of which involved an act of piracy. But when I came to talk to him I soon found that he was even worse to deal with than the boatswain; for although perhaps not quite so ignorant as the latter, he was still ignorant enough to be convinced by the specious arguments of the Socialist, to readily accept the doctrine of perfect equality between all men, and—like most of those whose labour is of an arduous character, and whose life is one of almost constant hardship and privation—to be dazzled by the alluring prospect of being able to live out the rest of his days on an island where—according to Wilde—Nature would do all the work, and man would only need to stretch forth his hand to gather in her bounties.

I will do Wilde the justice to say that he manifested no impatience while awaiting the announcement of my decision relative to the proposal which he had made to me; on the contrary, when I met him at the cabin table at meal-times he was very chatty and friendly, with a certain subtle suggestion of patronage in his tone, however, that rather went against the grain

with me; but he asked me no questions until I had set the course for Cape Otway, and the island of Amsterdam was melting into the haze astern of us. Then, being on the poop at the moment when I gave the course to the helmsman, and hearing its direction, he came up to me and said:

“Are you aiming for any point in particular in directing the helmsman to steer east-south-east, Mr Troubridge?”

“Yes,” said I. “If the wind will permit us to steer that course long enough it will eventually bring us within sight of Cape Otway.”

“Cape Otway!” he repeated. “Um! the name seems not altogether unfamiliar to me, and as a man who has been for some years a schoolmaster I suppose I ought to be able to say, offhand, exactly where it is. But my memory upon such matters is a trifle weak, I am afraid. Perhaps you will kindly tell me where Cape Otway is?”

“Cape Otway lies some sixty miles—more or less—south-west of Port Philip Heads,” said I, “and, excepting Wilson Promontory, is the most southerly headland of Australia.”

“Of course, of course,” he exclaimed with a little air of vexation. “Dear me! how marvellously easy it seems to forget such details. I am afraid our system of education does not attach nearly as much importance as it ought to the study of geography. Ah, well; what matters it? I have done with such trifles, I hope, for the remainder of my days. Does Cape Otway happen to be on our road to the Pacific, Mr Troubridge?”

“Yes,” I said; “that is to say, if one elects to go south-about. But the Pacific is a big sheet of water, and there are two or three ways of getting to it from here. All depends, of course, upon the particular part of the Pacific to which one is bound.”

“Yes, of course,” agreed Wilde. Then he turned suddenly, and, looking me keenly in the face, remarked: “Really, you know, Troubridge, you impress me very favourably—very favourably indeed! I shall be profoundly sorry if we are obliged to part with you, for you seem to me to be a lad of considerably more than average intelligence. That remark of yours touching ‘the particular part of the Pacific to which one is bound’—by the way, have you a tolerably intimate knowledge of the Pacific?”

“No,” said I; “I know nothing whatever of it except the part which lies between Australia and Cape Horn.”

“Which, I take it, comprises a very small portion of the whole?” questioned he.

“A very small portion indeed,” I agreed.

“Ah!” he commented. “Can you tell me whether there happens to be a map of the Pacific on board this ship?”

“It is quite possible,” I said. “She is pretty well-stocked with charts; and, now that you come to mention it, I believe there is a chart of the Pacific in the rack.”

“Let us go down and ascertain, shall we?” said he. And, placing his hand within my arm, he gently but firmly led me off the poop. It may, of course, have been pure imagination on my part, but his manner seemed to say as distinctly as words—“Don’t mistake my politeness and geniality for weakness. I believe in putting things pleasantly, but when I make a suggestion I intend it to be accepted as a command.”

We descended together to the captain’s cabin—which I now occupied—and he entered it with me, laughingly explaining that he was sure I would excuse the liberty he was taking in doing so, and at once fell to examining the labels of the charts in the rack.

“Ah! here we are,” he exclaimed, laying his hand upon a roll labelled “Pacific Ocean”. “Let us take it into the main cabin and study it together.”

He laid it out flat upon the cabin table and placed four weights at the corners to hold them down. Then he bent over the sheet and studied it with extraordinary interest.

“So this is what you call a chart, is it?” he exclaimed. “I see that it varies very materially from an ordinary map, in that it gives a great deal of information about the sea, and not much about the land, beyond its outline.” And he began his study of it by asking the meaning of certain mysterious lines and markings upon it. Then he asked a number of questions respecting the various small islands dotted about, more or less in patches, upon it, to answer which I had to hunt for a Pacific Directory, which I fortunately found in the bookcase; and finally, after we had thus been engaged for an hour or more, he said:

“It is perfectly clear to me that it would be idle for us to determine, at this distance, in what particular part of the Pacific we will search for our future home. That search must be conducted methodically; and after studying this chart very carefully, I have come to the conclusion that our best course will be to begin our search here,”—indicating with his finger a point about midway between the north-western extremity of New Guinea and the Pelew Islands—“and work our way in an easterly direction.”

“Have you read those notes?” I asked, drawing his attention to certain notes on the chart explaining that: “the Caroline, Marshall, and Solomon groups are almost entirely unknown, and are believed to have many dangers in their neighbourhood not marked upon the charts; navigators are therefore cautioned to exercise the most extreme vigilance when approaching or sailing among them.”

“Certainly I have, my boy,” he answered; “and it is to them that my choice of that part of the ocean is chiefly due. Those islands, you see, are ‘almost entirely unknown’; which means that if we can find one among them of a suitable character for our new settlement, we are not likely to be disturbed by the intrusion of curious and inquisitive visitors. Therefore, kindly take measures to navigate the ship to the spot that I have indicated.”

It was on the tip of my tongue flatly to refuse to have anything whatever to do with him or his scheme, and to defy him to do his worst, when the germ of an idea came floating into my mind, and I said instead:

“Do you leave the choice of route to me? Because, if so, I shall certainly go south-about past

Australia, as being much the safer route."

"Safer, possibly, but not nearly so direct," replied Wilde. "Therefore, since we are all anxious to begin our new life as early as possible, let us take the shorter and more direct route, past the north-west of Australia, and through the Banda Sea and Molucca Passage."

"That route positively bristles with dangers, as you might see if you understood a chart," I exclaimed, in tones of exasperation.

"I do not doubt your word for a moment, my dear boy," answered Wilde soothingly. "But we shall bear in mind the warning of the chart; we shall exercise 'the most extreme vigilance' in the midst of those dangers; and I have not the slightest doubt that everything will be all right. And now, to change the subject, have you made a choice between the two alternatives that I submitted to you yesterday?"

"You mean the alternative of joining you or of being drowned?" I asked with vindictive emphasis.

"Precisely," he answered with a smile of the utmost suavity. "And, understand me, youngster," he continued, with a sudden change to sternness in his manner, that disconcerted me a great deal more than I should have cared for him to know, "if you decide to join us you must do so wholeheartedly, and with no mental reservations. Those who are not with us must inevitably be against us; and the issues at stake with us are of far too grave a character to allow of our running any risk from secret enemies. No mercy will be shown to traitors, I assure you; so do not permit your mind to dwell upon any plan in which submission that is to be only apparent has a place."

"You do not leave me very much choice," I remarked. "If I refuse to throw in my lot with you, you drown me; and if I accept your alternative, and should be unlucky enough to incur the suspicion that I am not acting honestly with you, what happens?"

"We hang you," answered Wilde tersely.

"I see," I said. "The choice you offer me appears to lie between the certainty of drowning and the risk of hanging. I am by no means certain that it would not wiser on my part to choose the former, and get it over and done with at once. But I will think it over and let you know."

"Yes, pray do so," returned Wilde, in the same exasperating tone of suavity. "And, before we dismiss the subject," he continued, "let me give you a word of genuinely friendly advice. Get rid of that idiotic idea of choosing the alternative of being drowned, and getting it over and done with as soon as possible; because so long as you allow your imagination to dwell upon it, it will simply warp your judgment and prevent you from arriving at a sound, sensible conclusion. No young man possessing a sound mind in a sound body—as you appear to do—deliberately chooses death, and the annihilation which follows it, rather than the long years of ease, happiness, and comfort which will be yours if you join us; so why should you, eh?"

"I will think it over, and let you know as soon as I have arrived at a decision," I repeated. "But don't you make any mistake about the annihilation that comes after death. That is the atheist's notion; but, if you are reckoning upon anything of that kind, to save you from punishment for

your misdeeds in this present life, you are going to be badly undeceived; make no mistake about that."

"My boy," he said, laying his hand upon my shoulder, "if you possess any religious convictions, retain them by all means, and much good may they do you; but do not try to convert me. No scruples of what they term a religious character will ever be permitted to deter me from taking any steps, that may appear necessary to further and ensure the success of my schemes."

"Such, for instance, as committing murder," I retorted. "All right. But let me tell you that the hint—or threat, call it which you like—will not influence me a hairbreadth, one way or the other."

"Very well, my dear boy," he returned; "be it so. At least we thoroughly understand each other, don't we? And—don't be a fool!"

With which parting shot he left me, and, proceeding to the main deck, entered into conversation with some of the emigrants who were leaning over the bulwarks, idly watching the water as the ship drove slowly through it.

"Don't be a fool!" It was excellent advice, although given by a man whose folly I regarded as stupendous, and I determined to follow it. Then I proceeded to reason out the matter with myself, for it was evident that I should very soon have to come to a decision; and it appeared to me that there was nothing to be gained by delay. In the first place, I was compelled inwardly to admit that, intensely as I disliked Wilde, and stupendous as I considered his folly, there was sound sense in his suggestion that I should abandon the idea of throwing away my life. But when it came to his insisting that, if I decided to afford him that help, I must do so with no mental reservations, that was altogether a different affair. He was compelling me to do something to which I very strongly objected, leaving me no choice between that and death; and since he had no scruples about employing all the power he possessed to thus constrain me, I felt that I, too, must throw my scruples overboard in my endeavour to defeat him. He had the power to compel me to help him; and, that being the case, it seemed to me that it would be sound policy on my part to afford that help with as good a grace as I could muster; but, so far as "mental reservations" were concerned, I resolved that if I could find means to make known what had happened to the *Mercury*, and thus bring a British man-o'-war out to rescue the ship and cargo from the scoundrel who was so determinedly bent upon stealing them to carry out his own mad, visionary scheme, I would do so, and risk the consequences.

Chapter Five.

A conditional surrender.

I had just definitely arrived at the above conclusion when the boatswain joined me.

"I see Mr Wilde have been havin' another yarn with ye, Mr Troubridge," he remarked, as he seated himself at my side.

"Yes," I answered shortly.

“And is there any chance of his bein’ able to persuade ye to give us the help we wants?” he enquired in conciliatory tones.

“There might be, perhaps, if all hands of you were willing to agree to my terms,” I answered, stubbornly determined to drive the best bargain possible.

“Ah!” he exclaimed with an air of satisfaction; “that sounds better; yes, a good deal better, it do. You say what them terms of yours be, Mr Troubridge, and I dare say I could very soon give ye a hidea whether we’d be willin’ to agree to ’em. You won’t find us noways unreasonable, sir, I promise ye, because we wants your help badly, and there’s no use in pretendin’ that we don’t. You’ve proved yourself to be a hefficient navigator, and me and Chips has quite made up our minds that we might go farther and fare a precious sight worse in the way of findin’ somebody to take your place. Besides, we don’t want no murder if we can anyways help it, and I know that all hands in the fo’c’s’le’d be willin’ to agree to a’most anything in reason to dodge that sort of thing.”

“Do you really mean that, Polson?” I demanded. “Because, if so, it is a very great pity that you did not frankly say so when this matter was first broached. Besides, although you sailors may be inclined to listen to reason, you must remember that you cannot answer for Wilde and the rest of the emigrants—”

“Oh, but I think we can, Mr Troubridge!” interrupted the boatswain. “Ye see, sir, it’s this way,” he continued. “We sailormen are the masters of the sittyation, as the sayin’ is. Wilde and his lot can’t do nothin’ without our help; they can’t navigate the ship, and they can’t handle her; there ain’t one of ’em knows enough to be able so much as clew up a r’yal, or take in the flyin’ jib; so if they wants to carry out their plan, they’ll have to agree to the same as what we does, d’ye see? And we’re willin’ to agree to anything reasonable as you may want to propose.”

This sudden complaisance on the part of the boatswain put a very different complexion upon the whole affair, and was infinitely better than I had dared to hope. With the entire crew at my back I ought to have no difficulty in keeping Wilde and his lot in their proper places; and—well, the sea has many surprises for those who follow it, and who could know what might happen? But it was no part of my policy to betray to this man the extreme satisfaction which his words had given me, and thus, perhaps, subtly suggest to him the idea that he had displayed more flexibility than was actually necessary to secure my co-operation. I therefore said:

“Well, whichever way the affair goes, I am at least glad to hear you say that the ship’s crew are willing to agree to any reasonable proposition that I may make; but that still remains to be seen. You and I may differ in our ideas as to what is reasonable, you know.”

“Ay, of course we may; but I don’t think it’s at all likely as we shall, sir,” answered the boatswain. “You state your conditions, Mr Troubridge, and I’ll soon tell ye whether they seems reasonable or not.”

“Very well,” said I, “I will. If I understand the ins and outs of this affair, Wilde has persuaded all hands aboard this ship, seamen and emigrants alike, to seek out some suitable island, whereon you can try the experiment of living the ideal life of the Socialist. You are, one and all, absolutely determined to give this fantastic experiment a trial; and you desire me to help you to the extent

of finding the island for you. Is that it?"

"That's it, sir; yes, that's it; you've got it hit off to a happigraphy," agreed the boatswain.

"Then listen to the conditions upon which I am willing to do what you require of me," said I. "The sort of island that you people desire is only to be found—if found at all—in an ocean that is at present comparatively unknown, and is full of dangers in the shape of rocks, shoals, and islands, the position of which is doubtful, as shown by the charts, while there are doubtless many others that have never yet been sighted, and which a ship, bound upon such an errand as ours, is liable to blunder up against at any hour of the day or night. To navigate successfully a ship among such dangers as these it is imperative that there should be one person—and one only—as the supreme head, to whom all the rest shall render the most implicit, unquestioning obedience; and I demand to be that one, with you and the carpenter as first and second mates. I must command the ship, and nobody must presume to interfere with or dictate to me in any way. Secondly, the crew must undertake to observe and maintain strict discipline, both among themselves and also among the emigrants if need be. And, thirdly, I decline—nay, I absolutely refuse—to acknowledge Wilde's authority. He may be your king, or president, or whatever he chooses to call himself, as soon as your island is found and all hands are ashore; but until then—so far, at least, as I am concerned—he is only a passenger. Now, those are the terms upon which I am willing to undertake the service you require of me; and you may take them or leave them, just as you please."

"They seems reasonable enough, I won't deny it," admitted Polson, "and I dare say as everybody'll be willin' enough to agree to 'em, all except Wilde, I mean. I know he won't like the hidea of not bein' allowed to hinterfere until we arrives at the hiland. Can't ye make that there part a trifle easier, Mr Troubridge?"

"No," said I resolutely, "on no account whatever; on the contrary, that is the proviso upon which I shall insist most strongly. Wilde may be an excellent schoolmaster, for aught I know to the contrary, but he is neither a seaman nor a navigator; and I will never consent to his being allowed to interfere, either directly or indirectly, with matters of which he possesses no knowledge. You cannot have two captains to one ship, you know. If he is to be captain you will have no need of me; but if I am to be captain I will not allow anyone—and least of all a landsman—to interfere with me."

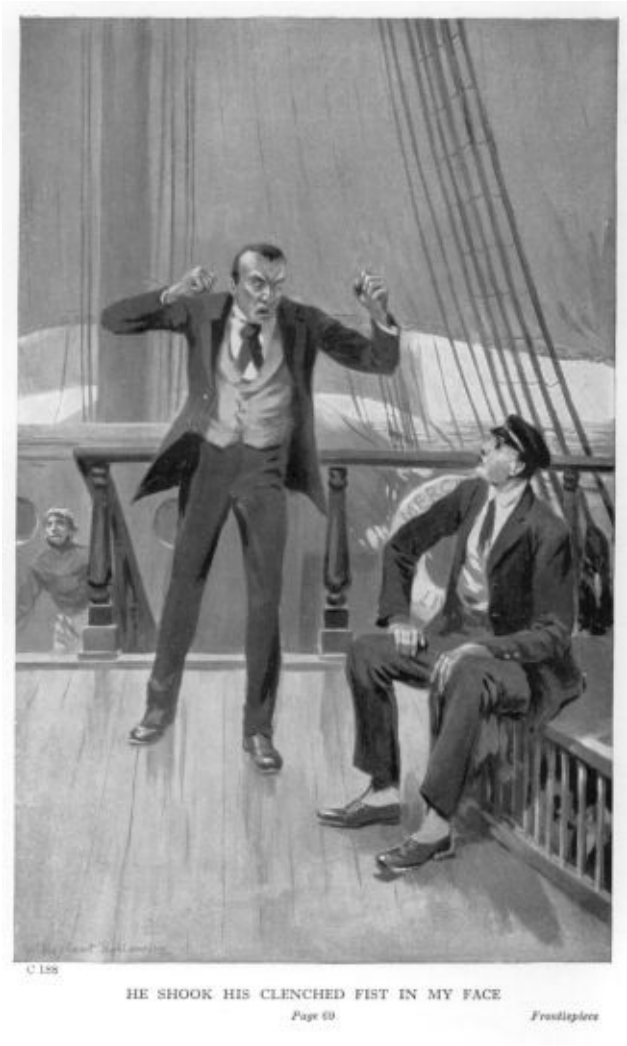
"Ay, ay, Mr Troubridge, yes, I can see now as you are quite right," agreed the boatswain. "It wouldn't never do to have him hinterferin' and givin' horders about things he don't understand. If he was allowed to do it there's others as would soon want to do the same, and then we should soon all be in a pretty mess. D'ye mind writin' them conditions of yours down upon a sheet of paper, so as I can read 'em out to all hands, sir? And if they agree to 'em I'll get 'em to sign the paper and then I'll hand it back to you."

"Very well," said I; "that arrangement will do excellently. And, see here, Polson, if all you seamen are willing to sign, I don't care a brass button whether the emigrants do or not. If you men for'ard are all agreed that those conditions of mine are just and reasonable, we need not trouble ourselves as to what the emigrants think of them, because, you know, they can't take the ship from us, however dissatisfied they may be."

“No, no, in course they can’t, Mr Troubridge,” agreed the boatswain, grinning appreciatively, as though the helplessness of the emigrants was a fact that had not hitherto occurred to him.

We had now thrashed the matter out, and I had succeeded in bringing Polson into a far more pliant frame of mind than I had ever dared to hope for. I therefore determined to clinch the matter at once, by putting my demands into black-and-white, and securing the signatures of the crew to them before the boatswain, who was evidently a man of influence among them, should find time to alter his view of the affair. I consequently sprang to my feet and, bidding my companion await my return, descended to my own cabin, and, carefully wording the document, drew up a form of agreement between myself on the one part and the crew and passengers of the *Mercury* on the other. Then, returning with it to the poop, I placed the paper in Polson’s hand, after reading it over to him, and requested him to obtain first the signatures of the crew to it, beginning with himself and the carpenter, and then those of the emigrants; afterwards returning the document to me. It cost him nearly three hours strenuous work to secure the signatures of the entire crew and the emigrants to the agreement; for in the first place he found the occupants of the forecastle, one and all, very unwilling—as is the case with most illiterate people—to pledge themselves by attaching their signatures or marks to my memorandum, although it was read over and explained to them at least half a dozen times, so that they thoroughly understood the nature of it, and verbally expressed themselves as fully approving of each of the conditions.

At length, however, by dint of much persuasion the boatswain secured the signature or mark of every occupant of the forecastle, after which he entered the ’tween-decks and, summoning the whole of the emigrants to meet him, fully explained the situation to them, read over the agreement, and then, laying the document upon the table, demanded their signatures to it. But here, again, he encountered a quite unexpected amount of opposition, Wilde stepping forward and not only refusing to attach his own signature to the paper, but also forbidding any of the other emigrants to do so. Polson argued, pleaded, and cajoled, but all in vain. Nothing that he could say appeared to have the slightest effect upon his audience, although several declared their perfect readiness to sign if their leader would but accord his permission. It was not until at length, with his patience completely exhausted, he suddenly determined upon the adoption of what, to him, seemed a thoroughly desperate expedient, that he



HE SHOOK HIS CLENCHED FIST IN MY FACE

Page 69 *Frontispiece*

achieved even a partial success. Dashing the paper down with vehemence upon the table, he exclaimed wrathfully:

“Now, listen to me, the lot of ye. Chips and me and all hands in the fo’c’s’le has signed this here doccyment because, havin’ thought it all over, we’re agreed that Mr Troubridge is quite right in demandin’ what he do. Mr Wilde there objects to it because he ain’t allowed to interfere with and dictate to Mr Troubridge, and none of you won’t sign because Mr Wilde won’t let ye. Now, I’ll give ye all ten minutes longer to make up your minds, and if you haven’t signed by that time we sailormen won’t have no more truck with ye, but’ll go to Mr Troubridge and tell ’im he can take the ship to Sydney, where she’s bound to.”

This announcement, coming quite unexpectedly, fell like a bombshell among Polson’s audience, who had dwelt upon the idea of life in an island where perpetual summer reigns, and where Nature offers many of her choicest gifts almost unsolicited, until it had taken such complete possession of them that it had come to represent to them the one desirable thing in the whole world, to lose which would be to lose everything. In a perfect passion of consternation they turned upon Wilde and not only claimed their right to sign, but also insisted that he should conform to Polson’s demand and be the first among them to affix his signature. Subjected to such pressure as this there was of course but one thing for him to do; and he did it; but the next moment he dashed up on deck, sprang up the poop ladder, and, approaching me, shook his clenched fist in my face as he exclaimed, almost foaming at the mouth:

“You young scoundrel! I have signed that precious document of yours because that fool Polson left me no option. But wait until we arrive at the island and my power begins, and then I’ll make

you—”

“Hold your tongue, sir, and go down off this poop!” I exclaimed, springing to my feet in a rage, for the fellow at the helm was grinning broadly at the scene. “And if you dare to come up here again without being sent for I’ll kick you down on to the main deck, and then have you put in irons. Ay, and I’ll do so now if you dare to answer me. Be off with you now, quick!”

I never in all my life saw a man so completely taken aback as was this crazy schoolmaster when I tackled him. Amazement, incredulity, wounded vanity, indignation, and bodily fear seemed all to be struggling together to assert themselves in his countenance and to find articulate expression upon his tongue; but fear was the strongest of them all—the fear that he might be actually subjected to the unspeakable indignity of personal violence. And when, as I uttered the final words, I advanced a step toward him, as though about to carry out my threat, he suddenly turned tail and slunk off like a whipped cur.

Some time later, when Polson, having at length accomplished his mission, brought me the signed agreement—which of course I knew was, as a binding document, not worth the paper upon which it was written, although I still hoped that it might be to some extent effective—I related to him the little incident that had occurred between Wilde and myself; at which he expressed some concern, although he fully agreed with me that the schoolmaster—at all events while aboard ship and at sea—must be held as amenable to discipline as anyone else, and that it would never do to give him the least bit more liberty than we were prepared to accord to every one of the other emigrants. Having secured which admission from the boatswain, I sent there and then for the steward and ordered him at once to bundle Wilde’s belongings out of the cabin back to the ’tween-decks.

During the second dogwatch, that same evening, Wilde sought out the boatswain and carpenter, and complained to them of what he termed my tyrannical conduct, which, he represented to his two listeners, was of so grossly humiliating a character that it was calculated very seriously to detract from his influence with his followers. So serious a grievance did he make of it that at length Polson and Tudsbery approached me with something in the nature of a remonstrance, accompanied by a mildly offered suggestion that I should concede something to enable Wilde to preserve his dignity. Probably I should have been wiser to have accepted and acted upon this suggestion; but I had got the idea into my head that the matter had resolved itself into a struggle for supremacy between Wilde and myself, and I obstinately refused to yield a hairbreadth, thereby exciting the permanent hostility not only of Wilde himself, but also—as I afterward found—of several of his followers. The boatswain and carpenter were at first disposed to regard me as unnecessarily firm, but this feeling soon yielded to one of quiet gratification that they had, as leader, one who, young as he was, would not submit to dictation from anybody. And I feel convinced that whatever I may have lost in popularity I more than regained in the shape of power and authority, thereby averting—as I soon had reason to believe—many a serious dispute and quarrel between the widely conflicting elements that were confined so closely together in the ship.

The terms upon which I was to command the *Mercury* having at length been arranged upon as satisfactory a basis as I could reasonably expect, I now found time to give consideration to my plans for the future. As my hope that the wild scheme of the conspirators might be frustrated,

and the ship and her cargo restored to their lawful owners, rested almost entirely upon the possibility that we might fall in with a British man-o'-war, the first question to which I devoted my attention was that of the route which I should choose by which to reach the Pacific. There were two alternative routes open to me; one—and that, perhaps, rather the safer of the two from the navigator's point of view—to the south and east of Australia, then northward between the Solomon and Admiralty groups to the waters wherein our search for a sort of earthly Paradise was to be prosecuted; and the rather shorter but more dangerous route up the western coast of Australia, then through the Ombay Passage into the Banda Sea, and thence, through the Boeroe Strait, into the Molucca or the Gillolo Passage, the successful negotiation of either of which would bring us to the spot where our search was to commence. If the question of ease and safety of navigation had alone been concerned, I should have unhesitatingly chosen the former; but when I came to weigh the comparative chances of falling in with a British man-o'-war, it did not take me long to make up my mind that the closer I could hug the Philippines, and the longer I could remain in their neighbourhood, the more likely should I be to encounter something belonging to the China station, and I accordingly settled upon the second alternative. This choice had the further advantage that, being the shorter of the two routes, it gratified all hands, none of whom was intelligent enough to understand and appreciate the question of the comparative dangers of the two routes, or to consider that, by adopting the one which met with their approval, the risk of encountering a man-o'-war—and thus having all their plans knocked on the head—was very greatly increased. Naturally, I did not enlighten them.

It was the season of the north-east monsoon in the Indian Ocean, and a careful study of the chart and directory made it clear to me that the proper course to pursue was to run down our easting until 100 degrees east longitude should be reached, and then, still availing ourselves to the utmost of such westerly wind as might be met with, haul gradually up to the northward in the West Australian current, which has a northerly set. Accordingly, I kept the ship's bowsprit pointing steadily to the eastward, despite the violent remonstrances which Wilde addressed to the boatswain and the carpenter—he had never spoken to me since I had ordered him off the poop and turned him out of the cabin. For the first few days I was rather afraid that I was going to have a little trouble with these two men, for whenever Wilde complained to them that I was unnecessarily prolonging the voyage by steering east instead of north-east—which, according to his crude notions, I ought to have done—they came to me, reiterating the man's complaints, and evincing so much curiosity and suspicion that it was perfectly evident they did not trust me. But I quickly arrived at the conviction that, let my relations with Wilde be what they might, it was absolutely necessary that I should possess the full confidence of the boatswain and the carpenter—and, through them, of the whole crew. I therefore took considerable pains to make them clearly understand my reasons for acting as I did, after which I had no further trouble with them.

I very soon had reason to congratulate myself upon the adoption of this policy; for while my relations with the crew daily grew more satisfactory—so that had it not been for the ridiculous hopes of a life of perfect liberty, equality, and immunity from hard work with which Wilde had addled their brains, I might easily have won their consent to take the ship to her legitimate destination—Wilde was devoting his entire energies to the task of stirring up and fomenting a spirit of lawlessness and insubordination among his fellow emigrants, chiefly—as it seemed to me—with the object of causing me as much annoyance and trouble as possible.

At length, however, matters came to such a pass that I perceived it would be absolutely necessary for me to seize the first opportunity that offered to assert myself and put an end to a state of affairs that was fast becoming utterly unendurable; and that opportunity was not long in coming.

It arose in this wise. There was among the passengers a girl named Grace Hartley, about twenty-three years of age, of considerable personal attractions, well-educated, and of a very gentle and amiable disposition. She had been a governess in England, and had been engaged by an agent to proceed to Australia to take a similar position in a family out there; and it was, perhaps, the indifferent treatment which she had received at the hands of her former employers that had caused her tacitly to accept the alternative which Wilde's scheme offered her. Be that as it may, she had apparently raised no protest when the scheme was first mooted, nor subsequently. What sort of life she was really looking forward to upon the island for which we were about to search I do not believe that even she herself could have explained. Probably her philosophy might have been expressed in the phrase: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof". She soon discovered, however, that the future would not permit itself to be shelved in this offhand fashion; there were certain problems that persisted in thrusting themselves upon her notice with increasing frequency, and one of them was—marriage! The idea of creating a Utopia necessarily included that of establishing the home life and domestic happiness. There were two men in particular who forced her to give some thought to this detail, one of whom was Wilde, and the other an able seaman named Gurney—the latter quite as remarkable a man in his way as was Wilde in his, though the ways of the two men were totally dissimilar; for Gurney, while wonderfully popular with his mates in the forecastle, was so entirely different from them in every respect that they admiringly nicknamed him "The Swell", which will perhaps enable the reader to make a mental sketch of him. He and Wilde had both made formal proposals of marriage to Miss Hartley—the ceremony to be performed as speedily as might be after our arrival at Utopia; but she had thus far accepted neither, although, as might be expected, of the two men she was rather disposed to favour Gurney. Wilde, however, was not at all the sort of man to accept a rebuff tamely, indeed his vanity was so stupendous that he could not understand another being preferred before himself. He consequently plagued the poor girl so persistently that at length, in desperation, she came aft to me, laying all the circumstances before me, and begging my protection. I answered by directing her to remove herself, bag and baggage, to the after cabin, assigning to her one of the spare staterooms therein, and permitting her to take her meals at the cabin table. Whereby I greatly strengthened Wilde's enmity toward me, but at the same time secured two devoted adherents, namely, the girl and Gurney; and a time came—as I sometimes suspected it would—when I was more than glad to have them on my side, instead of against me.

Chapter Six.

The derelict Dutch barque.

Nothing further of any importance occurred until, having worked our way slowly up past the west and north-west coast of Australia, we found ourselves to the northward of the Ombay Passage, the entrance of which—or, rather, Savou Island, which may be said to lie in the

fairway of the southern entrance—I hit off to a hair, much to my own secret gratification and the admiration of the boatswain and carpenter. Then one night, toward the end of the middle watch, the wind having fallen very light, the carpenter, whose watch it happened to be, came down below in a great state of perturbation to inform me that, although nothing could be seen, all hands had been terribly alarmed by the sound of a bell tolling at no great distance.

My first thought upon hearing this news was of a bell buoy marking the position of some dangerous rock or shoal toward which we might be drifting; but I quickly dismissed that idea, for bell buoys were much less numerous in those days than they are now. Moreover there was no mention of any such thing on the chart or in the directory. I therefore came to the conclusion that there must be some other cause for the sounds, and, without waiting to don any of my day clothing, went on deck to investigate.

Upon stepping out on deck the reason why nothing could be seen at once became apparent, for the night was as dark as a wolf's mouth—so dark indeed, that, even after I had been up on the poop long enough for my eyes to become accustomed to the darkness, nothing was visible save the feeble light of the low-turned cabin lamps shining through the skylight, the faint glow of the binnacle lamps upon the helmsman's face and hands and the upper part of the wheel, and the ghostly image of some twelve feet of the mainmast, part of the fife rail round it, and such portions of the running gear as were belayed to the pins therein, all glimmering uncertainly in as much of the cabin light as made its way out on deck, through the door by which I had emerged. Beyond these patches of dim illumination, and the coming and going of a spark on the forecastle, where one of the watch sucked meditatively at his pipe, all was opaque darkness, unrelieved by even the occasional glimpse of so much as a solitary star.

The night was as quiet as it was dark, for the wind, light all through the preceding twenty hours, had at length fallen away to nothing, and the ship was motionless, save for the slight heave of the swell which, stealing along through the blackness, would occasionally take her under the counter and give her a gentle lift that would cause all her spars to creak and her canvas to rustle with a pattering of reef-points, a jerk and rattle of hemp and chain sheets, and a faint click of cabin doors upon their hooks, the whole accompanied, perhaps, with a discordant bang of the wheel chains to the kick of the rudder as the black water swirled and gurgled round it. In the midst of it all there would come the clear, metallic clang of a bell—a single stroke, as though someone away out there in the offing were tolling for a funeral. It was a ship's bell that was being struck, there could be no doubt about that; but why was it being tolled? That was the question that puzzled me, and, as I could clearly see, had excited the superstitious alarm of the carpenter and the hands forward. The sound was so clear and distinct that I felt convinced it must emanate from a craft at no very great distance, and Chips and I accordingly united our voices in a stentorian hail of "Ship ahoy!" repeating it at least half a dozen times. But no reply came to us out of the darkness, save the occasional "ting" of the bell; nor was any light shown to indicate the whereabouts of our mysterious neighbour. This being the case, and feeling satisfied that the stranger could do us no harm so long as she came no closer to us than she was, I instructed Chips to report the matter to the boatswain when the latter came on deck at eight bells, requesting him to keep a sharp lookout during the remaining hours of darkness, and to call me at daylight, and then went back to my cabin and turned in again.

I had scarcely closed my eyes, as it seemed to me, when I was awakened by Polson, who

was shaking me by the shoulder as he reported:

“It’s just gone four bells, Mr Troubridge, and there’s daylight enough abroad to show us that the ringin’ that have been worryin’ us comes from a barque ’bout half a mile to the east’ard of us. Her mizenmast is over the side, and she looks as if she might have been afire; but I don’t see nobody aboard of her except the chap what’s hangin’ over the poop rail, and it’s him that seems to be tollin’ the bell.”

“All right, boatswain,” I replied, “I’ll be on deck directly, and take my bath as usual under the head-pump, after which we will have a good look at our neighbour.”

Springing out of my bunk, I passed through the main cabin out on deck, and so forward into the eyes of the ship, where one of the watch, having rigged the head-pump in readiness for washing decks, sluiced me for a couple of minutes with clear, cool, sparkling salt water. The refreshment from this exhilarating shower bath, after a night spent in a close sleeping-cabin, was indescribable; and having given myself a good towelling I returned aft to my cabin to dress for the day, taking a cursory glance at the strange barque as I went. As the boatswain had said, she was about half a mile distant from us, and her mizenmast was over the side, still fast to the hull by the rigging, which had not been cut away.

Half an hour later, having given the scrubbers time to get off the poop, I once more hied me on deck, this time taking the ship’s telescope with me; and now, seating myself upon a convenient hencoop, I proceeded to acquire as much knowledge of the stranger as was to be obtained with the aid of a reasonably good set of lenses. I saw that the vessel was a craft of probably a trifle over three hundred tons, her hull painted green, from her rail down to her zinc sheathing. She was lying in such a position that the *Mercury* was broad on her port bow, and my first glimpse of her showed that she carried a name upon her head-boards, which name, after a while, I made out to be *Braave*. She was, therefore, doubtless Dutch. For a little while after that I was unable to make out anything further about her, for she lay right in the wake of the newly risen sun, the dazzle of which obliterated all detail; but after the lapse of about a quarter of an hour the sun crept a trifle away to the south of her, while some slight movement on the part of both vessels helped me. Then, although her port side was still in shadow, a dark stain on the green paint beneath one of her scuppers attracted my attention, and set me wondering what it could possibly be; for there was a sinister suggestiveness about its appearance that I did not want to accept.

I could still see nobody about her decks, although the time was now long past when her crew ought to have been stirring, nor was there the faintest film of smoke issuing from her galley chimney. Yet it seemed that she could scarcely be abandoned, for she carried two boats at her davits, one on each quarter, while there were two more, bottom-up, on the gallows abaft the mainmast, and, unless I was greatly mistaken, I could make out the longboat stowed on top of the main hatch, with the jollyboat in her. But I could not be certain of this, for the vessel’s decks seemed to be lumbered up most unaccountably just in that part of her. As I was looking at her, she canted a bit, bringing her poop into clearer view, and then I was able to see that, as the boatswain had said, there appeared to be a solitary figure up there hanging over the rail in a most extraordinary posture close alongside the ship’s bell, which still most persistently tolled a single stroke at irregular intervals. Once, when the craft rolled toward us, I thought I caught a

glimpse of what might possibly be a hole in her poop deck, just where the mizenmast had once been stepped. But these imperfect glimpses, which were all that I was just then able to get, were so full of suggestion that, as soon as the watch had finished washing the decks, the weather still being fine, with no sign of wind, I had the smallest of our quarter boats lowered, and, jumping into her with a couple of hands, pushed off for the stranger, determined to pay her a visit, and thus either confirm or banish certain suspicions that were beginning to arise within my mind.

Ten minutes sufficed us to cover the stretch of oil-smooth sea that lay between the *Mercury* and the *Braave*, when, passing beneath the stern of the latter in order to reach her starboard side, I again read her name, carved in four-inch letters upon her counter, with the word "Amsterdam", her port of registry. Then, as we cleared her stern and ranged up alongside her starboard main chains, with her green side staring at us in the full blaze of the tropical sunlight, my eye was again caught by a dark, rusty-looking stain beneath one of her scuppers, similar to what I had already observed through the *Mercury's* telescope. I recognised it for what it was, and what I had all along suspected, but had refused to acknowledge it to be—blood, dried blood, that had been shed so freely that it had poured out through the scupper-holes! The man who was pulling stroke, standing up in the boat and facing forward, fisherman-fashion, caught sight of the sinister stain almost as soon as I did, and exclaimed, as he laid in his oar with a clatter on the thwart:

"Jerusher! see that, sir? See that, Tom? Smother me if it ain't blood! Now, what's been happenin' aboard this here ghastly hooker?"

"I am afraid I can make a pretty shrewd guess," I answered; "but let us wait until we can get a glimpse of what is to be seen between her bulwarks. Make fast your painter round one of her deadeyes, and then follow me aboard."

So saying, I sprang into her main chains, and from thence made my way inboard. The moment that my head rose above her rail a horrible odour, of which my nostrils had already caught a faint hint, smote me almost as something solid, and, looking down upon the main deck, the waist of her seemed to be full of dead bodies, their clothing smeared and splashed with blood, while that part of the deck whereon they lay was deeply dyed and crusted with the same deep, rusty stain. As I gazed, petrified with horror, the bell upon the poop once more clanged loudly; and, glancing upward, I saw that the figure which I had already observed lolling in so odd an attitude over the poop rail was that of a dead man, grasping in his right hand the short length of rope attached to the clapper of the bell. His attitude was such that, as the ship swung upon the swell, his body moved just sufficiently to cause the clapper to strike a single stroke.

For the first few seconds after I had found myself standing upon the ensanguined deck planks of that floating charnel house I had no eyes for anything, save the spectacle of her slaughtered crew, lying there at my feet in every conceivable attitude indicative of the unspeakable agony and terror that had distracted their last conscious moments. Then, as the two seamen who had accompanied me from the *Mercury* swung themselves in over the rail and came to my side, muttering ejaculations of horror and dismay at the ghastly spectacle that met their gaze, I pulled myself together with a wrench, and, mounting to the poop, began to take in the general details of the scene.

Standing, as I now was, at the head of the starboard poop ladder, I commanded a complete view of the vessel's deck from stem to stern, and saw that my original estimate of her size was rather under than above the mark, her dimensions being those of a vessel of fully three hundred and fifty tons. From certain details of her build and equipment I set her down as being at least fifty years old; but she was still apparently quite sound as to hull, spars, and rigging, and had been evidently well taken care of. She mounted eight twelve-pounders upon her main deck, four in each battery, but they were all secured, and I could see nothing to suggest that she had recently fought an action with another ship. On the contrary, all the evidence was in favour of the assumption that her people had been taken completely by surprise—most probably during the night; that she had been boarded by pirates, Malays or Chinese, all hands ruthlessly massacred, and the ship then plundered and set on fire. These last assumptions were based upon the facts that her longboat—which from the deck of the *Mercury* had appeared to be stowed over the main hatch—had been shifted over to the port side of the deck, the hatches removed, and a quantity of her cargo broken out and hoisted up on deck, where it now lay, a confused jumble of merchandise and of torn bales and shattered packages, piled high on the starboard side of the hatchway. A yawning, fire-blackened cavity in the poop, where the mizenmast had stood, showed that she had been on fire in the cabin; but that the fire had somehow become extinguished before it had had time to get a firm hold upon the hull. The condition of the bodies of the murdered crew seemed to indicate that the tragedy must have occurred some time within the preceding forty-eight hours. Apparently she had been under all plain sail when the thing happened.

Descending again to the main deck, and calling upon the two seamen from the *Mercury* to follow me, I next entered the poop cabin, which I found to be arranged after the manner that was very usual at that time. Access to the main cabin was gained by a narrow passage some nine feet in length, on the port side of which, and next the ship's side, was a stateroom which was easily identifiable as that belonging to the chief mate, while on the starboard side of the passage was the steward's pantry. At the inner end of the passage was a doorway, the door being open and hooked back against the bulkhead; and passing through this doorway one found oneself in the main cabin, an apartment some thirty feet long, with three staterooms on each side of it. Abaft that again was the sail-room, well-stocked with bolts of canvas of varying degrees of coarseness and several sails, many of which seemed to be quite new, neatly rolled up into long bundles, stopped with spunyarn, and each labelled legibly with the description of the sail. Forward of the main cabin, on the starboard side, and separated by a stout bulkhead from the steward's pantry, was the captain's cabin, a fine, roomy, comfortable apartment, neatly and conveniently fitted up with a standing bed-place, having a capacious chest of drawers beneath it, a washstand at the foot of the berth, and a small flap table against the fore-and-aft bulkhead, at which the skipper could sit to write up his log or make his daily astronomical calculations. There were two entrances to this stateroom, one from the main cabin, and one directly from the main deck; and in the fore bulkhead there was a window through which, while still lying in his bunk, the skipper could see everything that was happening out on deck.

These observations occupied me nearly half an hour; but the moment that I entered the main cabin my nostrils were assailed by the smell of recently extinguished fire, and upon looking about me I finally came to the conclusion that the fire had not been intentional but the result of accident. The miscreants who had boarded the vessel had apparently been all over her in

search of anything that might be worth carrying away, and, among other places, they had explored the lazarette, which lay beneath the cabin, a small hatchway just abaft the mizenmast giving access to it. This hatchway we found open, and the general appearance of the cabin seemed to indicate that the depredators had roused up a number of barrels and cases, and broken them open for the purpose of ascertaining what they contained. I conjectured that among the articles broached must have been a cask of spirits, which had been accidentally set on fire. The fire had burnt away a portion of the cabin deck, partially destroyed the cabin table, severely scorched and charred the paintwork generally, and had evidently burnt the lower part of the mizenmast, and the deck in which it was stepped, so completely away that the mast had gone over the side to the roll of the ship. Why it had not spread farther and entirely destroyed the ship I could not imagine. The plunderers had practically cleared the lazarette of its contents; the chronometer, the ship's papers, and the captain's charts and sextant were missing; but upon investigating the state of affairs out on deck it did not appear that they had taken very much, if any, of the ship's cargo. But we could not find any weapons or ammunition of any kind; if, therefore, the ship had carried anything of the sort the pirates had cleared the whole of it out of her. After giving the craft a pretty thorough overhaul fore and aft, and making a number of notes of my most important discoveries, I eventually came to the conclusion that the vessel had been surprised and laid aboard during the night; that her crew had been mustered and secured, most likely with a guard over them; and that, after the pirates had taken all that they cared for out of the ship, they had brutally murdered all hands.

It now became a nice question with me what—if anything—I ought to do with this blood-stained derelict. Although she had lost her mizenmast, there was nothing to prevent her being navigated to a port; and had the circumstances been different, I should have called for volunteers and made an effort to induce a crew to undertake the navigation of her to, say, Batavia, with the idea of claiming salvage. But I had come to know by this time that no eloquence of mine, even though it were backed up by the prospect of a handsome sum of salvage money, would be powerful enough to wean the crew of the *Mercury* from their cherished idea of a life of ease and independence upon some fair tropic island, to say nothing of their fear of what would follow upon the discovery of their unlawful appropriation of the ship and cargo to their own use and service. I therefore very quickly, yet none the less unwillingly, abandoned that idea, and proceeded to consider the merits of the only alternatives left me, namely, those of destroying her, and of leaving her just as we had found her—excepting, of course, that in the latter case sentiment demanded the decent and reverential burial of her murdered crew. Considering the latter alternative first, if we left her drifting about the ocean, what was likely to happen? On the one hand she might be fallen in with by another ship and taken into a port; but on the other hand it was equally likely that she might become a death-trap to some other craft, athwart whose hawse she might drift on some black and stormy night, and whose bows would be stove in and destroyed by violent collision with her; or she might be swamped and founder in the next gale that she encountered. Taking all things into consideration, I at length came to the conclusion that the best thing to be done was to scuttle her, and so render it impossible for her to become a menace to other craft. Accordingly, summoning my two men, who were below exploring the forecastle and fore peak, I jumped into the gig and pulled back aboard the *Mercury*, where I arrived just as the steward was bringing the cabin breakfast aft.

As we sat at table, partaking of the meal, I related to Polson and Tudsbery all that I had seen and done aboard the Dutchman, and informed them of the decision at which I had arrived with

regard to her, directing the carpenter to take a boat's crew and his auger immediately after breakfast, go on board, and scuttle her by boring several holes through her bottom below the water line. Both men fully agreed with me that this was the right and proper thing to do; and at the conclusion of the meal Chips set about the making of his preparations. Somewhat to my surprise, however, when, a little later, he came aft with his tools, he was followed by four men, instead of the modest two with which I had contented myself, who preceded him down the side into the boat. When he reached the *Braave*, instead of being absent ten minutes, or a quarter of an hour at the utmost, which would have afforded him ample time to do all that was necessary, the whole five of them vanished from sight, and were not again seen until, after the lapse of a full hour or more, they once more showed themselves on the deck of the derelict, passing a quantity of things down her side into the boat. Finally, about half an hour later still, they returned to the *Mercury*, considerably the worse for drink, and with the boat loaded down to her gunwale with bolts of canvas, new sails, and other oddments that they had appropriated. Of course there was no actual harm in their bringing these things away from the Dutchman, because, had they left them on board, they must have gone to the bottom with her and thus have been wasted; but I felt that Chips might as well have paid me the compliment of first mentioning his intentions to me. I was even more annoyed that the carpenter, occupying as he did a position of authority—of however shadowy a character—had not only permitted the men to partake pretty freely of the drink which they had found, but had evidently not scrupled to partake of it with them. I came to the conclusion, however, that my remonstrance would be likely to be a good deal more effective if addressed to him later on, instead of at the moment when he was under the influence of the liquor. Therefore I said nothing to him beyond briefly enquiring how many holes he had bored in the ship, and where, and suggesting to him the advisability of retiring to his bunk to sleep for an hour or two, which advice he seemed more than half-inclined to resent, but ultimately followed, in a somewhat belligerent mood.

Chapter Seven.

Embayed.

It soon became perfectly evident that, muddled with drink though he undoubtedly was, Chips had very effectively executed his work of destruction aboard the *Braave*, for in half an hour she had sunk to the extent of very nearly three strakes of her planking, and within the hour she had brought her chain-plate bolts flush with the water, at which rate another three hours should suffice to see the last of her. Before that moment arrived, however, a little air of wind came along out from the westward, and, with our port braces slightly checked, we began to creep away on a nor'-nor'-east course for Boeroe Strait. But our progress was so slow that at noon the derelict was still hull-up to the southward, sunk to the level of her covering-board; and when, after dinner, I returned to the poop and took the glass to search for her, she was nowhere to be seen, although, had she still been afloat, her spars and canvas at least should have been visible above the horizon.

Although the *Braave* had vanished, she had left behind her a small legacy of annoyance for me; for while I was still searching the horizon for some sign of her continued existence I became aware of certain raucous sounds issuing from the forecastle, which I was quickly able to identify as the maudlin singing which seamen are so prone to indulge in when they are the worse for liquor. Presently Polson, who had gone forward to turn-to the watch after dinner, came aft with an expression of vexation upon his weather-beaten countenance, and explained that the carpenter's boat's crew, having smuggled aboard several bottles of Schiedam from the scuttled vessel, all hands forward had become just sufficiently fuddled to render them indifferent to such authority as, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, we were still able to exercise over them, and had flatly refused to come on deck, declaring, with much abuse of the boatswain, that they did not intend to do any more work until they had finished the drink which still remained.

"How much have they, Polson?" I asked.

"I dunno, sir," he answered. "I tried to find out, but the scowbanks wouldn't tell me. I fancies, however, that they haven't got so very much, for I don't see how four men—or even five, if you chooses to reckon Chips in with 'em—could ha' brought more'n about a dozen bottles aboard among 'em without our findin' out somethin' about it; and a dozen bottles won't go so very far among all hands. I reckon that they'll finish the lot in the course of the next hour or so, and then they'll all turn in and have a good sleep, and be ready to come on deck in time for the first watch. Luckily there ain't no more wind than what we knows what to do with, and not much sign of it freshenin', so far as I can see; so p'rhaps there won't be such a very terrible lot o' harm done a'ter all."

"Possibly not," I agreed. "But," I went on, seizing the opportunity to point a moral, "that is merely a happy accident. Had it been blowing hard, and the weather threatening, it would probably not have made the slightest difference in the conduct of those men. You and Chips, by listening to and falling in with the fantastic proposals of that madman Wilde, have set the men a very bad example, the effect of which is bound to recoil on your own heads sooner or later. By

taking part in the seizure of this ship you have broken the law, which is the mainstay of all authority, order, and discipline, and in doing so you have encouraged those ignorant creatures for'ard to become lawless and disobedient. I have pointed all this out to you before, Polson, and now you have an example—a very mild example, it is true—of what inevitably happens under such circumstances."

"Yes; I sees what you mean, Mr Troubridge," answered the boatswain. "But, Lor' bless yer, sir, I don't think nothin' at all of a little spree like this here. Discipline's a first-rate thing, I admit; but a man can have too much of it, and it does him good to chuck it overboard now and again. Them chaps for'ard won't be none the worse for this here little outbreak of theirs, you'll see. We all enj'ys a bit o' liberty occasionally, you know."

"Ay," answered I rather bitterly. "The mischief of it is, Polson, that when men in the position of those noisy rascals in the forecastle take it upon themselves to determine when, and for how long a time, they shall indulge in a spell of liberty, they are as likely as not to insist upon having it at a moment when it spells disaster for other people. Liberty is a grand thing, in theory, and within certain well-defined limits; but when it becomes licence—as it is very apt to do—it is a bad thing for all concerned."

"Well, sir, you may be right, or you may be wrong, I don't know, never havin' had any eddication. But Mr Wilde, he's an eddicated man, and he's all for liberty and equality; and I don't mind sayin' as I prefers his notions to yours."

"Very well," I said; "go your own way, Polson, since go you will. But I wouldn't mind betting the sailorman's favourite wager—a farthing's worth of silver spoons—that before another year has passed over your head you will alter your tune. Take care that you do not defer the alteration until it is too late and the mischief has become irrevocable."

Now it happened that Wilde was, among a great many other things, a stanch teetotaller; he was also an excessively nervous person. When he, with the rest of the emigrants, came on deck after dinner upon this particular day, and heard the maudlin, drunken singing in the forecastle, and furthermore recognised that the ship was, for the time being at least, without a crew, he fell into a tremendous rage, and, rushing forward, precipitated himself into the forecastle, where, believing that the crew, drunk, would accord to him the same reverential attention that they were wont to do when sober, he proceeded to reproach and revile them in no measured terms for their lapse from virtue, actually going to the length, before anybody could stop him, of smashing half a dozen bottles of Schiedam that he caught sight of snugly stowed away in a bunk. So long as he confined himself to merely verbal remonstrance and abuse the men listened to him with the vacuous, good-humoured smile of intoxication, occasionally interrupting him with an invitation to join them in their bacchanalian orgy; but when he took what they deemed a base advantage of their good nature, by smashing the bottles and wasting the liquor that one of the revellers had incautiously revealed to him in support of the jovial invitation, their good humour suddenly evaporated, and, staggering to their feet in indignation, they would probably have done the man a serious injury had they been capable of following him up on deck, whither he precipitately fled. Then, having learned, during his brief visit to the forecastle, that the carpenter was the chief culprit, he rushed into the latter's cabin, mercilessly aroused poor Chips from the profound sleep that was gradually clearing his

muddled brain, and tongue-lashed the bewildered man until he must have scarcely known whether he was upon his head or his heels. Fortunately for the schoolmaster, Chips's indiscretion had been a mild one indeed compared with those of the forecastle hands, and he therefore accepted Wilde's rebukes with a tolerably good grace and in silence; but Wilde was one of those enthusiasts who carry even their virtues to excess, and his denunciations of Chips were of so virulent and extravagant a character that they did more harm than good, and—as I discovered later on—converted Tudsbery from a blindly faithful disciple into a sullen, more than half-doubting, and reluctant follower.

The incident ended, as Polson had anticipated that it would, in all hands coming on deck at the end of the first dogwatch, and clearing their brains by plunging their heads into buckets of sea water, after which the boatswain went forward and gave them all a mild and more than half good-humoured dressing-down, at the same time telling them one or two home truths in a tersely sarcastic strain that was far more effective than Wilde's rabidly intolerant language, which lost its point with those to whom it was addressed chiefly because of its violent exaggeration, through which he contrived, in a few minutes, to lose a measure of influence that it cost him months of strenuous endeavour to regain only partially. The fact is that this incident, comparatively trifling and harmless in its character as it was, led some of the men to question whether they had not thrown off the mild and easy restraints of lawful discipline, only to subject themselves to the grinding tyranny of a single individual of impulsive temper and overbearing disposition.

The sun went down that evening in a sky that glowed like molten copper and was streaked with long tatters of smoky-looking cloud, which seemed to presage both a windy and a dark night, to my great anxiety; for the ship was now navigating a comparatively restricted area of landlocked sea, the chart of which was dotted—much too thickly for my peace of mind—with dangers of various descriptions, the names of many of which, when they bore any names at all, were coupled with that sinister caution ("P.D.") warning the mariner that the position, as laid down upon the chart, was doubtful, and that therefore an especially good lookout must be maintained lest it should be blundered upon unawares.

These hints as to the necessity for exceptionally careful navigation were supplemented by a further warning given in the directory to the effect that not only were the positions of many of the dangers shown upon the chart exceedingly doubtful, but also that the existence of other dangers, not indicated at all upon the chart, was very strongly suspected! The exhaustive study which I had given to both the chart and the directory had so very effectually impressed upon me the vital necessity for the exercise of the most extreme caution henceforward that, being yet very young, and quite new to the heavy load of responsibility imposed upon me, I was perhaps more anxious than there was any actual need for. Under the pressure of this anxiety I went below, again produced the chart, and very carefully laid down upon it the course and distance, as indicated by the compass and log, which the ship had travelled since noon. I did this chiefly because I had already ascertained that there lay in the ship's path two known dangers, the positions of which were doubtful; and what I had just done resulted in the discovery that, should the wind freshen sufficiently during the night to increase the speed of the ship to more than six knots, we were likely enough to approach within perilous proximity of those dangers before daylight of the next morning.

Accordingly I mentioned this fact to both Polson and Tudsbery, cautioning them to shorten sail in good time, and to call me should the wind freshen, as it seemed likely to do, during the hours of darkness. As a matter of fact, not only did the wind freshen during the first watch, but it also hauled round over the port quarter, increasing our speed so greatly that at length, when the watch was called at midnight, I—having kept the deck in my anxiety—took the precaution of shortening sail to the three topsails and fore topmast staysail, thus ensuring, as I confidently believed, that we should keep well clear of those pestilent dangers while the darkness lasted. Then, to add further to my anxieties, a drizzling rain came driving down upon us, thickening the atmosphere to such an extent that it became impossible to see anything beyond a ship's length distant; and, after driving along through this at a speed of about five knots for the next four hours, my nervousness became so great that I gave orders to bring the ship to the wind and heave her to, determining to await the return of daylight before attempting any further progress.

At length a faint paling of the intense darkness astern proclaimed that the long night—wet, hot, steamy, and altogether unpleasant—was drawing to an end, and simultaneously the rain ceased, enabling us to discard the oilskins and sou'-westers in which we had been stewing all night. I took mine down on to the main deck, and hung them up to drain and dry on a hook commonly used to hook back the starboard door giving access to the poop cabins. Then, feeling exceedingly weary with my all-night vigil—for I had never been off the deck since sunset—I went to my own cabin for a few minutes and, filling the wash basin with cold fresh water, indulged in the luxury of a good wash, which had the effect of considerably refreshing me. This done, I returned to the poop, meeting Polson—whose watch it was—at the head of the poop ladder.

"Oh, here you are, sir!" he exclaimed in accents of evident relief. "I was just upon the p'int of goin' down to ask ye to come on deck again."

"Indeed," said I. "Have there been any fresh developments, then, during the two or three minutes that I have been below?"

"Well, I dunno know much about 'developments', Mr Troubridge," replied the boatswain; "but turn your ear to wind'ard, sir, and tell me if you hears anything at all out of the common."

"Why?" I demanded. "Do you hear anything in particular?" And, as requested, I turned my head in a listening attitude.

Even during my brief absence from the deck the sky away to the eastward had paled perceptibly, and there was already light enough abroad to enable one not only to distinguish all the principal details of the ship's hull and rigging, but also to render visible the heaving surface of the sea for the distance of perhaps a couple of cable's lengths, which was as far as the eye could penetrate the still somewhat misty atmosphere. As I glanced outboard my attention was instantly arrested by the short, choppy tumble of the water, and its colour, which was a pale, chalky blue.

"Why, Polson," I exclaimed, "what has happened to the sea during the night? Look at the colour of it! And—hark!—surely that cannot be the sound of broken water?"

"So you've catched it, Mr Troubridge, have ye, sir?" the man replied. "Well, you hadn't scarcely

got down off the poop just now afore I thought I heard some'at o' the sort, but I couldn't be sure. And what you told us last night about them there shoals that's supposed to be somewheres ahead of us have been stickin' in my mind all night and makin' me— Ah! did ye hear that, sir?" he broke off suddenly.

Again the peculiar "shaling" sound, as of water breaking over some deeply submerged obstruction, came floating down to me from to windward!

"Yes, Polson, I certainly thought I did," answered I in a state of considerable alarm; "and, to tell you the honest truth, I don't half like it any more than I do the movement and colour of the water. Let them get the hand lead and take a cast of it."

"Ay, ay, Mr Troubridge, I will. That's the proper thing to do," responded the boatswain, as he bustled away down on to the main deck and wended his way forward to bring up the lead-line.

The ship was already hove-to; there should therefore be no difficulty in obtaining absolutely accurate soundings. In another couple of minutes a man was stationed in the weather fore chains with the line coiled in his hand and the lead weight, its foot duly "armed" with tallow, sweeping in long swings close over the surface of the water, preparatory to being cast. Presently the weight shot forward and plunged into the sea a fathom or two ahead of the ship, the coils of thin line leapt from the leadsman's hand, and, as the ship surged slowly ahead, the line slackened, showing that the lead had reached bottom, and the leadsman, bringing the sounding line up and down, proclaimed the depth—eighteen fathoms!

"Eighteen fathoms!" ejaculated I in horrified accents to Polson, who had rejoined me. "That means, Polson, that we are already on top of one of those dangers that I was speaking about last night. Jump for'ard, man, at once; clear away the starboard anchor ready for letting go, and bend the cable to it. And hurry about it, my good fellow, as you value your life. We may need to anchor at any moment in order to save the ship!"

The daylight was by this time coming fast, and it was possible to see with tolerable distinctness all round the ship, to as great a distance as the haziness of the atmosphere would permit. Still at intervals there seemed to float down upon the pinions of the warm, steamy wind that curious suggestion—for it was scarcely more—of the sound of breaking water. But if it were indeed an actual sound, and not an illusion of the senses, what did it mean? Had we already become embayed or entangled among an intricacy of reefs and shoals during the night, or had we in some marvellous fashion blundered past or through them in the darkness, and were already leaving them behind us? As I stood on the poop, asking myself these questions, and sending my glances into the mist that enshrouded the ocean on all sides of me, I fancied that I again caught the mysterious sound which resembled that of breaking water; but this time it seemed to come from ahead. And looking in that direction, I presently became aware of a line of spectral whiteness, stretching right athwart our hawse, that seemed to come and go even as I watched it.

"Stand by to wear ship!" I shouted. As the watch sprang to the braces I signed to the man who was tending the wheel to put it hard up. The ship, with her fore topsail aback, slowly fell off, until she was running dead before the wind; then, just as she was coming to on the other tack, the mist lifted for a moment and I caught a glimpse of a vast expanse of white water foaming

and spouting and boiling dead ahead of and, as it seemed to me, close aboard of us!

“Lay aft here, some of you, and haul out the spanker!” I shouted. “Flow your fore topmast staysail sheet, to help her to come to, and call all hands to make sail. Round in upon your after lee braces. Board your fore and main tacks, Polson. We are on a lee shore, here, and must claw off, if we can!”

The furious battering of the boatswain’s handspike upon the fore scuttle brought up the watch below with a rush; and the sight of the white water close to leeward—caught by them the moment that they came on deck—was a hint to them, stronger than any words, of the necessity for haste, causing them to spring about the decks with a display of activity very unusual on the part of the merchant seaman. In a few minutes, the ship having come to on the starboard tack and brought the breakers square off her lee beam, the fore and main tacks were boarded, the sheets hauled aft, and half a dozen of the hands were in the weather rigging on their way aloft to loose the topgallantsails and royals, while two more were laying out upon the jibbooms to loose the jibs. Meanwhile I had sprung into the lee mizen rigging, and from that situation was anxiously scanning the sea ahead and upon the lee bow. To my great relief I presently saw that the ship was looking up high enough to justify the hope that she would claw off from the danger that menaced her to leeward; the sea being merely a short, irregular popple, with no weight in it to set us down toward the white water. Meanwhile the hand in the chains was continuing to take casts of the lead as fast as he could haul in the line, with the result that we seemed to be maintaining our depth of about eighteen fathoms, over a rocky bottom—composed of coral, as I had no doubt, from the peculiar whitish-blue tint of the water.

By the time that the topgallantsails, royals, jibs, and staysails had been set it had become broad daylight, and a few minutes later the sun rose above a heavy bank of thunderous-looking cloud that lay stretched along the eastern horizon, dispersing the mist that had hitherto obscured the atmosphere, and affording us an extended prospect of our surroundings.

The scene thus disclosed was alarming enough; for when, in order to obtain as wide a view as possible, I ascended to the fore topmast crosstrees I discovered, to my consternation, that we were in a sort of lake, of very irregular shape, measuring about eight miles east and west, by perhaps twelve miles north and south, surrounded on all sides by extensive patches of broken water, with narrow, and more or less intricately winding channels of clear water between them. How on earth we had contrived to blunder blindfold into such a trap of a place, in the darkness and thickness of the past night, without touching one or another of the countless reefs by which we were surrounded, passed my comprehension, although I believed I could make out the channel by which we had entered, far away to windward. If I were right in my conjecture we must have hove-to when we were about three or four miles to windward of everything, and then have driven, while still hove-to, along the channel, and finally into the lake-like expanse of comparatively deep water, missing destruction a dozen times or more during the passage by a sheer miracle.

Now, being in the trap, the problem to be solved was, how to get out of it again. Glancing round me, I could see nothing but broken water extending right out to the horizon, look which way I would. With the object of extending my view, I ascended to the royal yard, but even at this elevation the prospect was no more encouraging. Yet, stay, surely that dark streak away there

on the northern horizon was blue water! Yes; the longer I looked at it—that thin thread of dark colour, barely visible, and broken here and there by intervening white patches, must be open water. Furthermore, it was to leeward, and therefore to be reached much more quickly and easily than the open water which we had left behind us sometime during the night, and to return to which it would be necessary for us to beat to windward through a more or less intricate and difficult channel. It was undoubtedly true that somewhere out there to windward there existed a channel carrying a sufficient depth of water to float the ship, for she had already passed through it; but our difficulty would be to pick that particular channel out from among the many intersecting streaks of unbroken water that showed so elusively among the breakers. And if it were possible to hit off that channel, or indeed any channel leading without a break into clear water, was the wind sufficiently free to enable us to lay our course along it without breaking tacks? I doubted it very much; and if not, or if at a critical moment the wind should shift a point or two, the ship must inevitably go ashore and become a wreck; for I could nowhere see a channel wide enough to allow the ship to work in. Arguing thus, I soon came to the conclusion that I must look to leeward for the channel that must conduct us to open water and safety.

I accordingly directed my gaze northward; and for some time my eyes searched that vast expanse of seething whiteness for an unbroken channel leading out into blue water from the lagoon-like sheet of water across which the *Mercury* was then ratching. But all in vain; for while there were plenty of channels leading from the lagoon through the broken water to leeward, not one of them seemed to be continuous all the way across the reef and right out to blue water. They intersected, merged into, and branched off from each other in the most bewildering fashion, and there were at least half a dozen that seemed to lead into open water; but I quite failed to trace a connection between them and those that led out of the lagoon. At length, however, when the ship had reached the easternmost extremity of the lagoon, and the moment had arrived when it became necessary for us to go about and retrace our steps, we suddenly opened out a small patch of unbroken water away to the north-eastward, with a clear, well-defined channel leading from it to the open sea. While I was still regarding this part of the reef I caught a momentary glimpse of another channel leading into the small patch of unbroken water, and intently following its course I presently became convinced that it was continuous, with a channel that opened out close ahead of us, and broad on our lee bow.

This channel was exceedingly narrow and tortuous, but a rapid survey of it satisfied me that the wind was free enough to allow the ship to traverse it, and I at once determined to make the attempt. There was no time for hesitation; whatever was to be done must be done at once. I therefore hailed Polson to keep the ship away a couple of points; and a minute later the *Mercury* had slid into the channel, and was sweeping rapidly along it to the north-east. For good or for evil the die was cast; for the direction of the wind and the exceeding narrowness of the channel precluded any possibility of return, and a couple of hours would now decide the momentous question, whether or not we were to bring the whole adventure to a premature conclusion by leaving our bones, and those of the ship, on that deadly coral reef.

Chapter Eight.

The pirate junks.

To con a ship into and along a narrow winding channel, with no possibility of return, and with the certain knowledge that the slightest mistake, the smallest error of judgment, meant the destruction of the vessel, and the drowning of every individual on board her, was nervous work for a lad of my years. As I stood there on the royal yard, with my arm round the masthead to steady myself upon my somewhat precarious perch, and my gaze concentrated upon the thin line of unbroken water that twisted hither and thither through the seething turmoil of yeasty froth, swirling and boiling on either hand, I burst into a drenching perspiration. For it must be remembered that I had assumed the enormous responsibility of plunging the ship into the inextricable situation which I have indicated upon the impulse of a moment, generated by a conviction that in no other manner could we hope to escape from the labyrinth of shoals in which we had become involved. Furthermore, I had been spurred to the act by the hope, rather than the certainty, that the channel along which we were now sweeping with what, to my apprehensiveness, seemed headlong speed, offered us an unobstructed passage to open water. Yet now, when retreat was impossible, I began to fear that I had been fatally mistaken; for at a certain spot in the channel along which I proposed to take the ship I saw that the water, which happened to have been unbroken at the instant when I arrived at my momentous decision, was now all aboil with foam for a space of three or four ship's-lengths, as though an impassable obstruction existed there. If this were the case, but one slender hope remained for us, the hope that before that obstruction should be reached we might find a part of the channel wide enough to permit the ship to round-to and anchor, thus giving us time to make a more deliberate search for a way of escape.

This hope, however, was an exceedingly slender one, for the channel which we were traversing was appallingly narrow, averaging very little more than a couple of lengths of the ship, which was considerably less than half the minimum space that I required for the contemplated manoeuvre. But while I was anxiously searching the channel ahead, on the lookout for such a spot, I suddenly caught sight of another channel, branching out of the one which we were then traversing, which unquestionably ran without a break into the small patch of open water of which I have already spoken, and from which a good channel led into the open sea. The only question was whether there was room enough to allow the ship to take the sweep out of the one channel into the other without going ashore upon the reef; for the new channel branched off at a very acute angle, and there appeared to be even less width than usual at the junction of the two channels.

Here was another momentous question for me to decide, unaided, in the space of a few seconds—for there was not time enough to permit of my summoning the boatswain aloft and consulting him upon the matter. I had to make up my mind whether to continue along the channel which the ship was then in, trusting that the appearance indicative of an obstruction was illusory, or whether I would take the risk of wrecking the ship on the reef in an endeavour to pass round a very acute angle into the newly-discovered channel, which I was by this time able to see would certainly enable us to reach open water. It was difficult to determine which of the two alternatives was the more desperate; but as the ship went driving along toward the point, once past which a choice would no longer be possible, I fancied that the prospect of being able to turn into the new channel looked a trifle less hopeless than it did a few minutes earlier, while the appearance of an obstruction in the original channel was still as menacing as ever, I therefore determined to put all to the hazard of the die and make the attempt to get into the new channel. This decision arrived at, I hailed Polson to send all hands to their stations in

readiness to brace round the yards smartly at the word of command, and for the helmsman to respond instantly to my signals for the manipulation of the wheel. Then, as we rushed down toward the turning-point, I caused the ship to be edged gradually up to windward, until her weather side was all but scraping the coral of the reef, in order to secure every possible inch of turning-space, at the same time narrowly watching the channel ahead that I might be able to determine accurately the precise moment when to shift the helm. Twice or thrice in as many seconds did my courage fail me and all but determine me to take the risk of keeping straight head, but when the critical moment arrived I was once more master of myself and was able to give the order: “Hard up with your helm! Brail in the spanker, and shiver the mizen topsail!”

Polson, recognising the necessity for prompt action at the helm, had sent a second hand to the wheel, and at the first sound of my voice these two men sent the wheel spinning hard over with all their united strength, while at the same moment the men tending the after braces had relieved the ship of the pressure of the whole of the canvas upon her mizenmast, the craft accordingly swerved away from the wind with almost the alacrity of a living thing, and the next moment she was swirling round, as though upon a pivot, shaving the obstructive angle of the reef by a hairbreadth, and coming to with the wind over the starboard quarter, when the rounding of her port bow was actually dashing aside the white water, while I clung to my masthead in fear and trembling, waiting for the shock which should tell me that she had struck. As a matter of fact, she actually did, very slightly, graze the coral for a few feet of her length, just beneath the port main chains, for I afterwards saw the marks upon her sheathing; but it was the merest touch, the shock of which was scarcely perceptible, and the next moment she had luffed fair into the centre of the new channel, and was speeding away to the northward and eastward. This new channel was so exceedingly narrow and tortuous that the vessel still needed the most careful watching; but, compared with that sharp turn, the remaining portion of the navigation was simple, and a trifle over two hours later I had the extreme satisfaction of seeing the *Mercury* sweep clear of the edge of the reef into blue water, and to feel her once more rising and falling upon the swell of the open ocean. Then I made my way down on deck and, having given the officer of the watch the course, retired to the cabin to enjoy a good breakfast, before lying down to recover some of my arrears of rest.

At noon on the fifth day after this exceedingly awkward adventure, our latitude, as computed from the meridian altitude of the sun, showed that we had fairly cleared the Molucca Passage and had reached the waters, wherein our search for the ideal island pictured by Wilde’s vivid imagination was to begin. I therefore gave orders for the ship to be brought to the wind on the starboard tack, and we plunged into the vast North Pacific Ocean, shortly afterward sighting the Tulur Islands on our lee beam.

In the course of the next day we sighted and passed two groups of islands within twenty miles of each other, standing in close enough to each to enable us to form a pretty accurate idea of their character; but they were altogether too small and insignificant to meet with Wilde’s approval, so we left them without even taking the trouble to land and give them an overhaul.

On the following day, the ship still heading to the northward, we sighted a couple of junks, about a mile apart, steering south. They were made out from the forecastle-head, about three points on the lee bow, at four bells of the forenoon watch; and the emigrants, who were all on deck, manifested much interest in the quaint appearance of the craft, as they approached us

close-hauled. There was only a very moderate breeze blowing—we were carrying all three of our royals—and there was no sea to speak of, yet, despite these favourable conditions, I must confess that I was not a little astonished to see how nimbly those two unwieldy-looking craft moved over the water, and how close to the wind they contrived to lie—this last, of course, being due to the almost absolutely flat set of their mat sails. The weathermost of the two looked as though she might cross our stern, at a distance of not much more than a quarter of a mile. I got up the glass and had a look at them when they were about two miles distant, but found nothing very interesting about them, after I had noted their strangeness of model and rig, and the quaint, decorative painting of their hulls, the bows of each especially being painted to represent a human face with great, staring goggle eyes, and of most diabolically ferocious aspect. Grace Hartley was standing near me; and when, having completed my inspection of the junks, I was about to return the telescope to its beckets, she asked me if she might be permitted to use it. Of course I at once handed the instrument to her, and then walked away to attend to some business of the ship, returning to the poop when the leading junk was within half a mile of us, with her two masts in line.

“What singular-looking vessels, are they not, Mr Troubridge?” exclaimed the girl, withdrawing the instrument from her eye for a moment to speak to me. “Of course,” she continued, “I have seen pictures of Chinese junks; but one really needs to see the vessels themselves, sailing as those are, to get the complete idea of their quaintness of appearance. And what an extraordinary number of men they carry! Is it because of the peculiarity of their rig and the large size of their sails that they require so many men?”

“N–o,” said I doubtfully, “I think not. I am not aware that a junk needs an exceptionally strong crew. Do you consider that those vessels are very heavily manned?”

“Well, are they not?” she asked. “Of course I have no idea how many men a junk requires to manage it, but I have been looking at those two—and especially the nearest one—through the glass, and it struck me that they must each have at least a hundred men on board!”

“A hundred men!” I repeated incredulously. “Oh, surely not! You must be mistaken. Twenty, or perhaps twenty-five at the utmost, would be much nearer the mark.”

“Oh, but I am certain there are far more than that on board each of those vessels! It was one of the peculiarities that particularly impressed me in connection with them,” answered the girl.

“Are you quite sure? Kindly let me have the glass a moment,” said I, taking the instrument from her and levelling it at the nearest junk. The junk, however, was by this time settling away broad on our lee beam, as we drew ahead, and was showing her weather side to us. It was therefore difficult for me to get a view of her decks, the more so as her bulwarks seemed to be unusually high. One thing, however, I noticed, namely, that she carried eight brass guns—apparently about twelve-pounders—of a side; and as I got a glimpse through the wide ports out of which these weapons grinned, it seemed to me that there were men stationed at them!

In a flash my thoughts reverted to the *Braave*, the Dutch barque that we had fallen in with a week ago, with her cargo plundered and her murdered crew cumbering her decks; and I sang out for Tudsbery to come aft, that individual being at the moment busy upon some job on the forecastle, as was frequently the case during his watch, if I happened to be on the poop.

“Tudsbery,” said I, as he joined me on the poop, “I think I remember having heard you say that you have seen service in the China trade. I want you to take a good look at those two junks—if you have not yet done so—and give me your opinion of them.”

“I’ve had a squint at ’em, of course, Mr Troubridge,” he answered, as I handed him the glass; “but I haven’t noticed anything extra partic’lar about ’em, so far.” And he applied the instrument to his eye.

“You don’t imagine, for instance, that they are cruising in company; or that they are other than honest trading junks?” I asked.

“Well, I dunno,” he replied, working away at them with the glass. “Perhaps it is a bit strange, seein’ two of ’em out here so close together, and both of ’em steerin’ exactly the same course. Yes, and, by George, now I comes to look at ’em through the glass, I sees that they are both of ’em armed—this here nearest one mounts eight barkers of a side, and I’ll be hanged if I don’t believe her people are a-trainin’ of ’em upon us! Yes; dash me if they ain’t! You’d better look out, sir; they mean to slap a broadside into us in another minute, or I’m a Dutchman!”

I turned and faced forward. “Go below, all of you!” I shouted. “Down with you at once! That junk is going to fire upon us, and some of you may be hurt. Miss Hartley,” turning to the girl, who was standing close beside us, “go down off the poop and get under cover at once, if you please—”

Bang! crash! Eight jets of flame and smoke leapt from the port battery of the nearest junk, which had by this time drawn down broad on our lee quarter, some three cable-lengths distant, and the next instant the air all round us seemed thick with humming missiles, many of which struck the hull and bulwarks of the ship, making the splinters fly, while others passed through our lower canvas, perforating it in two or three dozen places, and providing a nice little repairing job for the hands in some of their future spare moments. A hurried glance along the decks, however, assured me that nobody had been hurt, although there was a good deal of screaming among the women, while several of the children, in the process of being hustled below by their parents, started crying vigorously. Meanwhile Miss Hartley, after pausing a moment to stare in astonishment at the splintered bulwarks and the riddled sails, calmly descended the poop ladder and made her way into the cabin.

“Well,” exclaimed Chips, “swamp me if that ain’t the rummiest go as ever I seen! That junk’s a pirate junk, Mr Troubridge, neither more nor less; and in my opinion t’other one’s no better. Look at that, sir; there she goes in stays! Tell ye what, sir, they means to get us in between ’em if they can!”

“Upon my word, Chips, I believe you are right!” said I, as the more distant of the two junks swept up into the wind, preparatory to going round on the other tack. “And if they should succeed it will be a pretty poor lookout for all hands aboard this ship! Have we any arms of any description, do you know, with which to defend ourselves?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, Mr Troubridge,” answered the carpenter in tones of great concern. “I haven’t seen none. But there may be a few muskets, or some’at of that sort, stowed away somewheres down below, for all that I knows. If there is, I dare say the bosun’ll know where to

lay his hands upon 'em."

"Then the best thing that you can do will be to go down and call the boatswain, and put the question to— ah, here he is!" as Polson's head showed above the poop ladder. "Come up here, Polson!" I exclaimed; "you are just the man we want. That junk astern of us has just treated us to a broadside of langrage, and Chips's opinion of the pair of them is that they are a couple of piratical craft. Have we any firearms of any kind aboard with which to defend the ship, or must we run for it?"

"I believe that there's a case of two dozen muskets and some ammunition down in a little bit of a magazine abaft the lazarette," answered Polson; "and I fancies that there's a few round shot for them two six-pounders of ours. Shall I go down and have a look, Mr Troubridge?"

"Yes, certainly," said I; "and be quick about it too, Polson. To be perfectly frank with you, I don't half like the look of things. That junk that has just tacked is looking up a good point higher than we are, and unless we happen to have the heels of her, I fancy that we are in for a warm time."

The boatswain waited to hear no more, but scuttled away off the poop again with more alacrity than I had seen him exhibit since I had joined the *Mercury*. Meanwhile the watch below, awakened by the racket, had come on deck, and were having the situation explained to them with much gesticulation and lurid language by their comrades, the watch on deck, all of whom had knocked off the work upon which they happened to have been engaged, and were now talking excitedly, casting occasional glances from us on the poop to the junk away down on the lee bow. Presently the junk which had fired into us, having drawn up fair into our wake, distant about half a mile, tacked and stood after us.

After an absence of some ten minutes, the boatswain reappeared with the news that he had found and opened the case of muskets, which were of the new-fashioned percussion pattern, and also a generous supply of ammunition for the same, together with some fifty round shot and cartridges for the six-pounders.

"Good!" I exclaimed. "Take some hands below, Polson, and bring up that case of muskets, together with some ammunition; also a few rounds for the six-pounders. If appearances go for anything, we shall need them all before long!"

A few minutes later the muskets, each of which had been carefully wrapped in well-oiled cloths, were brought on deck, taken out of their wrappings, well wiped, the nipples carefully tested with a pin, and loaded, the powder being measured out from a powder horn, a wad rammed down on top of it, with a bullet on top of that, and then another wad on top of all to keep the bullet in its place. Then the brass six-pounders were loaded and primed, and two pieces of slow match were cut off, ready for lighting.

I must confess that I looked forward to the prospect of a fight with a considerable amount of trepidation, for, in the first place, the odds were exceedingly heavy against us—thirty of a crew, of whom only twenty-four could be armed, against, probably, two hundred. Moreover, our lads knew nothing about fighting, and, as I could see, had not much stomach for it, while the crews of the junks were undoubtedly fighters by trade. Still it was clear that we were in a fix, out of which there was no escape without a fight; and that fact, which was patent to all hands, might

perhaps influence them to do their best. But probably there were some among them who had never handled a musket in their lives; it would obviously be useless to put weapons into the hands of such men, and my first business must be to ascertain how many men were capable of using firearms. I therefore directed the boatswain to call all hands aft to the quarter-deck, where I addressed them.

“My lads,” said I, “your leader’s plans, and your own folly in abetting them, have brought us into perilous waters, as you may see, for the two junks which are endeavouring to close with us are undoubtedly pirate craft. Unfortunately, none of us suspected their character until it was too late; and now we are in a trap from which we can only escape by fighting. And we must not only fight—we must also beat them off; for, as I suppose you all know, if we permit ourselves to fall into their hands, our fate will be similar to that of the unfortunate crew of the Dutch barque with which we fell in the other day. Now we have here two dozen muskets, with plenty of ammunition, and also a few rounds for the six-pounders; so we are not badly off for weapons if we only have men enough who know how to use them. Let as many of you as know how to use a musket step to the front. And if any of you know anything about working guns, step forward too.”

Exactly twenty men stepped to the front, sixteen of whom declared that they could use a musket, while the remaining four announced that they were capable of loading and firing cannon.

“Very well,” said I, “we must all do our utmost; for fight we must. Those of you who are unable to fight must act as sail-trimmers. Polson and Tudsbery, you must take charge of the guns. Steward, go below and tell the emigrants that I want eight volunteers capable of handling muskets; and they must preferably be single men. Polson, you may serve out ammunition to the musketry men; and, hark ye, lads, when the time to shoot arrives, do not blaze away at random, but select a mark, and do your best to hit it! Now range yourselves along the lee rail, and do not fire until I give the word.”

Chapter Nine.

We beat off the pirates.

A few minutes later the steward returned from the ’tween-decks, followed by seven very decent-looking young fellows, who appeared as if they might have been farm hands, and announced that they knew how to handle a fowling-piece, and they supposed that a musket was not very greatly different. To these men muskets and ammunition were accordingly distributed, and they were put among the seamen stationed along the lee rail. This left one musket unemployed, at which I was by no means sorry; for I rather fancied myself as a shot, and was glad of a good excuse to appropriate one of the weapons.

Our arrangements being now complete, I had leisure to consider the relative positions of the two junks as regarded ourselves, and it needed but a single glance to assure me that the enemy’s vessels, unwieldy and awkward as their model seemed to be, had the advantage of us in the matter of weatherliness; for they looked up a good point and a half higher than the

Mercury, and although they made more leeway than ourselves, that point and a half fully compensated for it, the consequence being that the junk astern was gradually working out upon our weather quarter, while the junk on our lee bow was also hawsing up to windward. We were slightly faster than they, however, and were consequently drawing away from the junk astern, from which I hoped we had not much more to fear. But the junk on our lee bow was certain to give us trouble, for we were gaining upon her while she was edging up nearer to our track every minute, with the result that, by the time that we overhauled her, we should be within biscuit-toss of each other. And I could not hope to escape her by tacking ship, for she would probably be quite as quick in stays as ourselves, possibly a trifle quicker. Such an evolution would place her broad on our weather quarter, and far enough to windward to permit of her edging down on us with slack bowlines, while we should be jammed close on a wind, an advantage which, I believed, would give her the heels of us and enable her to lay us aboard. This, I felt, must be avoided at all costs; for if once her crew should gain a footing upon our decks their numbers were sufficient to overpower us instantly. I therefore determined to slip past her to windward and run the gauntlet of her fire; that risk, terrible as it was, being, to my mind, less than the other.

Having thus decided, I called to Polson to ask him how we were off in the matter of bullets, to which he replied that there were half a dozen kegs altogether. This being the case, I thought we might venture to be a trifle extravagant, so I gave orders for a keg to be brought on deck, and for the two six-pounders to be loaded with bullets practically to the muzzle, on top of a round shot. This was done, four double—handfuls—amounting to about one hundred bullets—being dropped into the gun on top of the round shot, and a wad rammed home on the top of all. This done, the two guns were run forward and pointed out through the two foremost ports on the lee side of the deck.

We were now all ready for the fight, and nothing remained but to await the critical moment with such composure as we could summon to our aid. In one respect we were more fortunate than many other ships would have been in the same situation, for our helmsman was sheltered in a sort of little hurricane house built of stout planking over the wheel, and he was therefore in some degree protected from jingal fire. Indeed I hoped that the planking of the structure would turn out to be absolutely proof against the missiles usually fired from such weapons, which I expected would be the firearm used by the pirates. Thus we might hope we should avoid being thrown into confusion at the critical moment by our helmsman being killed or disabled.

At length we drew up within point-blank musketry range of the junk that was endeavouring to close upon our lee bow, and I gave the word for those armed with that weapon, while keeping carefully under cover themselves, to open fire upon any of the pirates who might expose themselves. Almost immediately a dozen shots rang out from our decks, and a few splinters flew aboard the junk, but I could neither see nor hear that any further mischief had been done.

“Watch her ports, lads, and fire through them,” I ordered. “If you can shoot down the men at her weather battery during the few minutes that we are passing her you will have nothing more to fear.”

At this moment a perfect giant of a man ascended the short poop of the junk and stood calmly watching us, occasionally saying a word or two to those on the deck beneath him. He had

scarcely taken up his position, however, before our men began to blaze away at him, and presently a bullet knocked his hat off, while, as he was calmly stooping to pick it up again, another bullet must have struck him on the right shoulder; for I saw him suddenly clap his hand to that part and hastily retreat from his exposed situation, without stopping to pick up the hat.

“Hurrah, lads!” I shouted. “There is first blood to us. Keep the pot boiling; but don’t shoot until you can see somebody to shoot at!”

At this moment the weather bulwark of the junk became suddenly lined with men all armed with jingals, with which they proceeded to blaze away at us, and some half a dozen or more missiles went whizzing past most unpleasantly close to my head. Nobody was hurt, however, and our men returned the fire with commendable steadiness, scoring a few hits, if one might judge by the cries that arose on board the junk, and the suddenness with which some five or six of her people sank out of sight behind her bulwarks. Then fresh hands appeared, showing suddenly above the rail, taking rapid aim, pulling trigger, and vanishing out of sight, not always quickly enough, however, to dodge the bullets that our people sent whizzing about their ears.

Thus far not one of the *Mercury’s* people had been touched; but the critical moment was yet to come. It was now close at hand, however, for our figurehead had drawn up level with the stern of the junk, and there was not more than fifty fathoms of water between the two craft. We might expect their broadside at any moment, and I felt that it was scarcely possible for us to receive it at such very short range without receiving very severe punishment. I therefore exhorted our people to maintain a hot fire upon the ports of the junk, feeling-convinced that every bullet which passed through would be almost certain to find its billet in the body of a Chinaman, thus tending to flurry their gunners and possibly cause them to shoot wide.

We were now so close that I was able to see that the junk needed a trifle of lee helm to keep her close to the wind; and I had no sooner noted this fact than I saw a man show his head for an instant above the break of the junk’s poop and sign to the helmsman to put his helm hard down. I guessed in an instant what this meant. They were about to throw the junk into the wind, in the hope that she would fall aboard of us, when they would pour their starboard broadside into us and board amidst the smoke. They could not possibly have hit upon a plan more likely to succeed, or to be fatal to us; and, recognising the deadly nature of our peril, I yelled to our people at once to fling themselves flat on the deck, which they did with almost laughable promptitude. At the same time I seized my musket, which thus far I had not fired, and, kneeling down, with one of the poop hencoops as a rest, aimed straight at the body of the junk’s helmsman, just as he was thrusting the tiller hard down. I pulled the trigger the instant that I had the man covered, and down he dropped, motionless, the ponderous tiller escaping from his grasp and swinging heavily back amidships, with the result that the junk, which was already coming to, at once fell off again at the precise instant when her whole starboard broadside burst into flame and smoke, the missiles luckily passing just ahead of us and very considerably damaging our figurehead, but doing no worse injury. By a most fortunate chance I had made my lucky shot at the exact moment which alone could save us from disaster. To give the pirates their due, at least a dozen men instantly sprang up on the poop, and rushed aft to replace the injured helmsman; but our people had been watching through a number of peep-holes what was happening, and no sooner did they see the Chinese on the poop than they leaped to their feet, and opened fire upon them with such murderous effect that half of them dropped, while the

other half turned and fled from the poop, seeking shelter under cover of their craft's bulwarks.

Left thus to herself, the junk gradually fell broad off, presenting her quarter to us. The opportunity thus afforded to pour into her a partially raking fire was much too good to let slip, and I shouted to the boatswain and Chips to send the contents of their pieces into her starboard bulwark, hoping that some at least of the bullets would enter her open ports and do a certain amount of execution. The two men had evidently been expecting such an order and had got their pieces ready levelled. A couple of seconds later the two six-pounders barked out together, and the two hundred bullets peppered the junk's bulwarks most handsomely, many of them penetrating the planking, as I could both see and hear; for the next instant a dreadful, ear-splitting yell arose from the deck of the craft, telling a tale of very severe punishment. But that was not all; the two round shot likewise crashed through the bulwarks very effectively, one of them dismounting a gun, while the other brought the craft's mainmast down, thus effectually placing her *hors de combat*. Those two shots must have wrought terrible havoc among the junk's crew, for not only did they not attempt to return our fire, but they allowed their vessel to run broad off before the wind, squaring away their foresail the better to do so; and presently the junk in our wake abandoned the chase and bore up to join her consort. We thus emerged marvellously well from a predicament that at one moment threatened to be exceedingly serious, and that, too, without the slightest injury to so much as a single one of our company.

It was remarked that Wilde had most scrupulously refrained from obtruding his presence on deck during our little brush with the junks, which exhibition of pusillanimity on the part of a man who aspired to the position of head and leader of the little community provoked a great deal of adverse criticism, and considerably reduced his influence and popularity.

On the fourth day following the above incident, with the appearance of dawn, we sighted land ahead, which, as we drew nearer, resolved itself into three islands lying close together, the largest of which measured about eight miles long by three miles wide, while the remaining two were roughly circular in shape, measuring about a mile in diameter. The two smaller islands presented the appearance of low pyramids with rounded tops, their highest points rising some eight hundred feet above the sea level, while the biggest of the three rose somewhat abruptly from the water to a height of about fifteen hundred feet at each extremity, and preserved that height pretty uniformly from end to end, but with an elevation rising perhaps three hundred feet higher almost in the middle of its length.

All three of the islands were well wooded; but the largest had been cleared to some extent of its timber, the cleared ground bearing evidences of being under cultivation. This, of course, indicated that at least the largest of the islands was already inhabited, and was therefore unsuited to the requirements of Wilde and his followers, who wanted to find a spot where they would be reasonably free from all risk of molestation by hostile natives. Nevertheless, it was decided to approach the islands a little nearer, if only for the chance of being able to procure some fruit and a few fresh vegetables, for which all hands were by this time pining. However, since we knew nothing of the character of the inhabitants, but were under a sort of general impression that the natives of all the islands of the Eastern seas were of a more or less treacherous character, while some at least of them were very strongly suspected of cannibalistic tendencies, we determined to adopt every possible precaution. The muskets were accordingly brought on deck and loaded, while every man who had not a musket served out to

him took care to provide himself with a weapon of some sort, even though it were no more formidable than a belaying pin. I also insisted that the ship should be kept under way, in order that, upon the first suggestion of treacherous designs upon the part of the natives, we might be able to make sail and stand out to sea again.

Approaching the lee side of the biggest of the three islands, one hand was sent aloft into the fore topmast crosstrees to keep a sharp lookout for submerged rocks, while another was sent into the fore chains with the hand lead. Then we clewed up our courses, royals, and topgallantsails, and hauled down our flying jib and some of the lighter staysails, but furled nothing, leaving all in a state to be set again from the deck at a moment's notice.

The water in the immediate neighbourhood of these islands was deep, no bottom being reached with the hand lead until we were within half a mile of the shore, at which distance we brought the ship to the wind and laid the main topsail to the mast, as it was seen that many natives had gathered on the beach, and were making preparations to launch their canoes, several of which were hauled up on the dazzlingly white sand. I kept the ship's telescope steadily bearing upon these craft and the numerous natives who swarmed about them, and was greatly relieved to see that the latter all appeared to be busily engaged in loading the former with baskets of fruit, fish, and quantities of fowls, while nowhere could I discover anything resembling a weapon.

That these people were quite accustomed to the bartering of their produce with passing ships, and had been taught to understand that they would not be allowed on board, was evident; for, although within the next half-hour we were surrounded by quite a hundred canoes of various sizes, ranging from the sixteen-foot craft with two occupants up to the vessel measuring fifty feet over all, manned by from twenty to thirty natives, not one attempted to come alongside until specially invited to do so. They simply lay off a few fathoms and held up to our view the wares that they had for disposal, and then waited to be beckoned to approach.

These natives were for the most part fine, lithe, active-looking men, of a deep, rich, bronze colour. Most of them were almost naked, and adorned with necklaces of shells or sharks' teeth, their hair so arranged that it stuck out all round their heads like the thrums of a twirled mop. A few of them wore necklaces or armlets of vari-coloured beads, of which they appeared to be inordinately proud, and these adornments furnished many of our people with a hint as to the kind of article most desired in exchange, a whole basket of assorted fruit, as heavy as one man could conveniently lift, being freely parted with for a hank containing five strings of ordinary glass beads which, at home, would cost about a penny. Next to beads, copper wire appeared to be the most prized commodity, nails coming next, such a basket of fruit as I have just described, or half a dozen fowls, costing twenty two-inch nails; while a dozen baskets of fruit were eagerly offered for a single six-inch spike. Fish-hooks, too, commanded good prices, that is to say, two baskets of fruit, or one dozen fowls, sold for a single hook. Fish, of which several basketfuls were brought off, were to be had almost for the asking, a basket containing about fifty pounds weight of delicious fresh fish being gladly given in exchange for a single ordinary pin! At such prices as these the crew and emigrants would willingly have taken as much as the natives had for sale, if I would have allowed it; but I was afraid to let them have too much fresh fruit all at once, lest they should make themselves ill; but we took every fowl that we could get hold of, killing enough to serve all hands for dinner that day, and putting the rest into the coops,

which had by this time become almost empty.

It took us nearly two hours to complete our purchases, for I would not allow more than four canoes alongside at the same moment; and when we had acquired as much produce as I thought it prudent to lay in at one time, the mainyard was swung, the fore and main tacks boarded, and we resumed our voyage, parting from the natives with mutual smiles and upon the best of terms. I was very much gratified at this first experience of intercourse with the Pacific islanders, for it seemed to me that it would be impossible to find a more quiet, amiable, peace-loving race of people on the face of the earth. I made the mistake of judging the whole by a very few, and set down the stories I had heard of treachery, cruelty, and blood-curdling tragedy as malicious fables. I was speedily disillusioned, however; for a week later we reached the Caroline Islands; and while we found some of these islanders as friendly disposed as those above-mentioned, there were others who did their utmost to entice us to land and place ourselves within their power, and on one occasion, when they failed in this, produced hidden weapons and resolutely attacked the ship, giving us all that we could do to beat them off, and more or less seriously injuring three seamen and two of the male emigrants. This little experience taught us all a much-needed lesson in prudence; for it was more by luck than good management that we avoided capture and the general massacre that would most assuredly have followed.

For the next five weeks we cruised among these islands, vainly seeking the earthly paradise that Wilde had taught all hands to expect, and with less than which none of them would be satisfied. For such islands as seemed to approach Wilde's standard in the matter of size and fertility were already inhabited, and that, too, for the most part, by natives whose pressing invitations to land, and lavishly proffered hospitality, we had learned to regard with something more than suspicion; while the uninhabited islands were invariably found to be wholly lacking in some essential feature.

Then, leaving the Carolines behind us, we passed on to the Marshall group, where the atoll—which we had already encountered in a somewhat modified form here and there among the Carolines—was to be found in its typically perfect development. Here the islands, such as they were, were entirely of coral formation, of diminutive area, generally not more than six or eight feet above the surface of the ocean, their vegetation consisting of a few coconut trees, with, maybe, a patch or two of coarse grass here and there, and possibly a few stunted bushes, the whole constituting a more or less irregularly shaped belt enclosing a saltwater lagoon, usually with an entrance from the open sea, and with water enough inside to float a ship; but sometimes with no entrance at all. A fortnight among these atolls sufficed to convince the most optimistic among us that what we were looking for was not to be found in that neighbourhood. Accordingly we bade farewell to the group, to my intense relief, for, between the shoals and the currents, I was worried very nearly into a fever, and scarcely dared to leave the deck day or night.

Once clear of the Marshall Islands, we stood away to the northward, gradually hauling round, as the wind favoured us, to about west-nor'-west, occasionally sighting a small island, but more frequently broken water, until at length, when we had been out from the Marshall group close upon three weeks, land was made at daybreak, bearing two points on the lee bow. It was at a considerable distance, for it showed soft and delicate of tint as a cloud in the brilliant light of the

newly risen sun, but that it was good, solid earth was clear enough from the fact that it did not in the slightest degree alter its truncated conical shape as the minutes sped. True, there was no land shown on the chart at that precise spot; but that did not alter the fact of it being there; and since it showed above the horizon from the deck at a distance which we estimated at fully *fifty* miles, it was concluded that it must be of fairly respectable size, and quite worth looking at more closely; the helm was therefore shifted, and we kept dead away for it.

The ship was slipping along at about seven knots, before a nice little easterly breeze, under all plain sail—that being as much canvas as I cared to show, bearing in mind the fact that not infrequently, of late, we had been obliged to haul our wind rather suddenly in consequence of white water revealing itself unexpectedly at no great distance ahead. But although we were travelling at this quite respectable pace—for the *Mercury*—we did not appear to be decreasing our distance from the land ahead nearly so rapidly as we had anticipated, which circumstance led me to the conclusion that I had considerably underestimated that distance in the first instance. And this conclusion proved to be correct, for at six bells in the afternoon watch we were still fully seven miles from the island. But we had arrived within four miles of what, from the fore topmast crosstrees, I had been able to identify as a barrier reef that appeared to extend from the northern to the southern extremity of the island—and, indeed, might completely surround it, for aught that I could tell—enclosing a magnificently spacious harbour, some three miles wide between itself and the island, which I estimated to measure about ten miles long, from north to south, with a peak, apparently the crater of an extinct, or at all events a quiescent, volcano, approximating to three thousand feet high, rising almost in the centre of it. It was wooded from the inner margin of the somewhat narrow, sandy beach that lined it to within about three hundred feet of the summit of the peak; and—most promising of all, from the point of view of Wilde and his followers—there were no canoes on the beach, or any other signs of inhabitants.

Chapter Ten.

We arrive at the island.

The surf was breaking heavily over the whole length of the barrier reef; but my experience among the Caroline and Marshall Islands led me to believe that somewhere in that reef a break might be found wide enough to allow the passage of the ship through it. Examining the long line of the leaping surf very carefully through the ship's telescope, I at length thought I detected such a passage, some two or three miles to the southward of the point at which the ship's bowsprit was pointing; I accordingly hailed the deck, directing the helmsman how to steer for it, and at the same time requested Polson to join me.

"There, Polson," I exclaimed, "what think you of that for an island upon which to settle? It ought to be big enough to accommodate all hands of you, with room to spare. Its soil is fertile, if one may judge by its luxuriantly wooded appearance; and, thus far, I have been unable to detect any signs of inhabitants upon it. Do you think it good enough to justify us in attempting to find a way through that reef in order to get a closer view of it?"

"Do I?" repeated the boatswain, feasting his eyes upon the lovely prospect the island presented in the rays of the afternoon sun, which happened at that moment to fall at just the proper angle to reveal clearly the gently undulating character of the island, scored here and there with ravines which seemed to promise not only a series of charming prospects, but also an abundance of fresh water from the streams that had their origin in the central peak—"Yes, Mr Troubridge, I most certainly do, if a way can be found of gettin' at the place. Why, it's the very kind of island as I've been picturin' in my mind ever since that chap Wilde began to talk about his plans, except that yonder island is a good bit bigger and altogether more promisin' than I'd ever hoped to stumble upon. But how is that there line of surf goin' to be passed through, Mr Troubridge?"

"Take this glass, Polson," I said, "and very carefully examine the spot immediately over our jibboom-end. To my mind there seems to be a very narrow patch of unbroken water there, which may yet prove wide enough to take the ship through with a leading wind."

"Ay, sir," answered Polson, "I sees what you mean; there certainly do look to be a bit of a passage there; and, narrer as it looks, it may, as you say, be wide enough for the *Mercury* to slip through. And what's them two p'ints on the mainland, just over the break, with the blue shadder showin' beyond it? Don't it look to you somethin' like a bit of a cove, or a harbour of some sort?"

I looked at the spot indicated, and thought I could detect something of the kind suggested by the boatswain; but my unaided vision was not strong enough to enable me to be sure; I therefore borrowed the glass from Polson, and then saw that there was indeed an indentation of some sort which had the appearance of being spacious enough to give harbourage to the ship. That, however, was a point that did not call for immediate settlement, although it was certainly to be kept in mind.

Meanwhile, the ship, running off with the wind now a couple of points over the port quarter, had been sliding rapidly down toward the reef, and had by this time drawn so near it that I felt morally certain not only of the fact that there actually was a passage through it, but also that it was wide enough for the ship to go through. Yet I did not altogether like the idea of pushing the ship through it without further ado, for a rather unpleasant thought had flashed through my mind, which I at once proceeded to communicate to the boatswain.

"Now, look here, Polson," I said. "That is undoubtedly a passage through the reef; and as we draw nearer to it I grow the more disposed to believe that it may be possible to take the old *Mercury* through it. Yet I am strongly opposed to the idea of doing anything hastily. What I mean is this," I continued in answer to the quick glance of half-suspicious enquiry that he flashed upon me. "There is no sign that we can detect of natives upon that island; yet there may be hundreds, ay, thousands, of them there for all that. If so, what is to prevent their having us in sight all day to-day, and hiding their canoes and otherwise obliterating all indication of their presence, in the hope that, by so doing, we may be tempted to pass through the reef and come to an anchor under its lee and in pretty close proximity to the island. Once through that passage, Polson, and, with the wind as it is now, we should be in a trap from which it might be difficult, if not absolutely impossible, to escape in the event of our being attacked by a strong body of hostile natives. Now, my idea is this. If we were to enter that lagoon this evening, by the time that we had come to an anchor and rolled up our canvas it would be altogether too late to go ashore and explore satisfactorily that island; and, as I said just now, if there happen to be hostile natives there we might find ourselves in an exceedingly awkward fix. I propose, therefore, that instead of attempting to go inside to-night, we should shorten sail to our three topsails, go round under the lee of the island, and either heave-to or stand off and on until daylight. If we do this at once we may hug the lee side of it as closely as we please, and subject that side of the island to a pretty searching scrutiny while it is still daylight; and if the lee side is as bare of any sign of inhabitants as the weather side seems to be, I think we may venture with tolerable safety to go through the passage to-morrow morning as soon as there is light enough, when we shall have the whole day in which to explore the island. What say you?"

"Yes, Mr Troubridge, you're quite right, sir," answered the boatswain. "That there island looks most terrible temptin', shinin' there in the a'ternoon sunlight, and I should dearly like to stretch my legs by takin' a run ashore there afore I turn in to-night—as I make no doubt is the case with all hands; but what you say is right, sir; and what you propose is the proper thing to do. Shall I go down on deck and start shortenin' sail at once, sir?"

"Yes, if you please, Polson," answered I. "Meanwhile, I will remain up here and see as much as I can."

Whereupon Polson descended the rigging, and, taking charge, proceeded to clew up and haul down until the canvas was reduced to the three topsails and the fore topmast staysail, afterward sending the hands aloft to make a harbour furl of everything.

By the time that all this was done we had run down to within a mile of the opening which I had detected in the reef, and I now perceived it to be wide enough to allow of the passage of not only a single ship, but of half a dozen vessels abreast, of the tonnage of the *Mercury*. At this distance from the reef, and at my elevation above the level of the water, it was possible not

only to see this, but also to make out that a fringing reef stretched along almost the entire eastern face of the island, to the northern and southern extremities of which the barrier reef was united with but one opening in it, namely the one that I had already discovered. The fringing reef—the whereabout of which was indicated by the pale-blue tint of the water, varied in width from two miles, at the north-eastern extremity of the island, where the barrier reef joined it, to an average of about half a mile along the rest of the shore—except for a break of some two miles in length at the point where Polson had detected indications of a cove or an inner harbour.

This much determined, I hailed the deck, instructing the boatswain to haul up to the southward; and when we had brought the passage through the reef in line with the summit of the peak I again hailed him to take the bearings of the latter, to serve as a guide when running for the passage on the morrow. This bearing I found to be north-west by west-a-quarter-west, of which I made a note in my pocket book.

The sun was within half an hour of setting when at length, having closely skirted the southern shore of the island, we opened out its western side, which, all aglow as it was in the golden light of evening, presented a picture of absolutely fairy-like beauty, its wooded slopes revealing in the nearer distances a thousand varied tints of verdure, from brilliant yellow to deepest olive, relieved here and there by great patches of white, scarlet, purple, and other lovely tints that could only proceed from immense masses of blossom of some kind. As this blaze of rich and varied colour receded from the eye into the middle and more remote distances, it gradually merged into an all-pervading tint of delicate, exquisite, ethereal grey.

With the gradual unfolding of the charming picture presented by the western side of the island—which seemed to throw all hands down on deck into ecstasies of delight, judging from the continuous exclamations of rapture that reached me from below as fresh beauties swung into view with the progress of the ship—it became apparent that the barrier reef existed only on the eastern side of the island; but the fringing reef seemed to run all round it, with a narrow margin of dazzlingly white coral sand above high-water mark. The land seemed to rise everywhere from the beach at a very gentle slope; and the vegetation came down right to the inner margin of the sand. In fact there was a thick fringe of what I took to be coconut trees growing all along the edge of the beach, and encroaching upon it so far in places, that the roots of the trees must be actually washed by the salt water at the top of the spring tides. But, search the shore as carefully as I might—and now that we were to leeward of the island I did not hesitate to approach the ship to within a quarter of a mile of the edge of the reef, in order that I might obtain the best possible view—I could discover no sign or trace of human beings. There were open patches of delicious greensward here and there visible among the clumps of trees, but no suggestion of cultivation; there were no canoes on the beach—indeed I greatly doubted whether it would have been possible for canoes to pass through the line of surf that boiled and swirled all along the edge of the reef, even on the lee side of the island—nor could I detect any feather of smoke rising among the trees, or other sign of human occupancy, although we were now so close to the land, and the evening light smote upon it so strongly, that had there been any natives moving about on the beach or in the nearer open spaces, I could scarcely have failed to see them.

The ship, now under the lee of the island, and moreover under short canvas, did little more than barely drift to the northward, along the western edge of the reef, and long before we arrived off

the north-western extremity of the island the sun had set, and it had become too dark for me to complete my survey of this lonely but lovely spot; yet I had seen enough to assure me that there was only one place along that lee side at which it would be possible for the ship to anchor. Even there, although the place in question took the form of a bay, I did not altogether like the look of it; for nearly half its area consisted of fringing reef, upon which, if a ship were to drive ashore during a sudden shift of wind, she would infallibly go to pieces in a few minutes. It might possibly be made to do, failing a better place, by riding with both anchors down; but I determined to have a look at Polson's cove round on the weather side of the island, under the shelter of the natural breakwater formed by the barrier reef, before risking the ship by taking her into such an unsatisfactory anchorage.

The second dogwatch had passed before we drew out clear of the island, and once more felt the full strength of the breeze, whereupon I gave instructions for the ship to be kept "full and by" on the starboard tack until four bells in the middle watch, when the officer of the watch was to wear ship and come to the wind on the port tack, heading to the southward for the island again, the weather side of which I considered we ought to fetch by daylight, in good time to allow of our passing through the reef and coming to an anchor about breakfast-time.

The first rays of the morning sun were flashing off the placidly heaving waters, and into my cabin, when Chips awakened me with the news that the peak of the island was broad on our lee bow, and that there was now light enough to enable us to see our way in through the reef. I accordingly turned out and went forward to get my usual douche bath under the head-pump prior to dressing, taking note on the way of the fact that we were still some ten miles to the northward and eastward of the opening in the reef. Moreover, the wind was blowing a very gentle breeze, pushing the ship along at scarcely more than three knots; I therefore so far modified my arrangements of the previous night as to give orders for breakfast to be prepared half an hour earlier, in order that the meal might be disposed of before the real business of the day began. But long before the cook's husky notes summoned the emigrants' messmen to the galley, to receive their morning allowance of cocoa and their tins of "lobscouse", all hands were on deck, the emigrants gathered in the waist of the ship, leaning over the lee rail, and devouring with their eyes the beauties of the lovely island, fresh, green, and sparkling with the dews of the past night. It was rather amusing to note that many of these people, especially the women and children, had donned their best clothes in which to go ashore, as though it were a festive occasion.

By the time that breakfast was over the ship had drawn well down toward the southern extremity of the island; and at length the peak was brought to bear by compass north-west by west-a-quarter-west, by which I knew that it and the passage through the reef were now in line. Accordingly we bore up and wore round, heading straight for the peak. Slinging the ship's telescope over my shoulder, I once more wended my way aloft to the fore topmast crosstrees, in order that from that commanding elevation I might perform the delicate task of conning the ship through the passage in the reef, and at the same time maintain a sharp lookout for what now seemed to be the only peril to be guarded against, namely, the possible existence upon the island of hostile natives.

Although we were some four miles from the reef when we bore up, I had not the slightest difficulty in discovering the whereabouts of the passage through it immediately upon my arrival

in the crosstrees; and I now at once brought the telescope to bear upon it, in search of possible dangers in the form of sunken rocks; for although that apparently narrow stretch of unbroken water was the sure indication of a break in the continuity of the reef, it was just possible that there might be a detached rock or two in the fairway, lying deep enough to allow the swell to roll over it unbroken, yet not quite deep enough to permit a ship of the size of the *Mercury* to pass over it.

But a prolonged inspection with the aid of the glass failed to reveal any such danger, and in the course of the next half-hour we had drawn so close in, that I could see as much in that direction with the unaided eye as with the telescope. I therefore diverted my attention for a few minutes to the more distant beach, and the still more distant open grassy spaces of the island, in search of possible indications of life and movement. But here, too, my quest was vain, for nowhere could I detect the slightest signs of life, except that of birds, a few gulls and pelicans being visible, busily engaged in seeking a breakfast on the waters of the lagoon, while it was also possible to detect the occasional flash of wings among the trees that so thickly clustered on the slopes of the island.

At length the moment arrived when it became necessary for me to give my undivided attention to the passage through the reef, which the ship had now approached, to within a distance of a couple of cable-lengths, while the air was vibrant with the deep, hoarse, thunderous roar of the surf that eternally flung itself in foam and fury upon those ten miles of submerged coral wall which I have spoken of as the reef. This wall, or reef, I could now see, was of a tolerably uniform width of about one-third of a mile throughout its length, and its top was so nearly level with the surface of the ocean that it constituted a very perfect breakwater, excluding from the lagoon which it enclosed all surface disturbance except the trifling amount caused by the incessant beat of the surf upon it, and revealed itself in the form of some eight or ten lines of miniature swell, sweeping inward from the reef and losing itself in the smooth, sparkling surface of the lagoon within a distance of half a mile.

Thus far I had failed to discover any submerged dangers in the passage through the reef, and we were now so close in that I must have seen them through the clear, transparent water, had such existed. I therefore directed the helmsman how to steer, so as to take the ship through the middle of the channel, which now revealed itself as an opening fully sixteen hundred feet wide, and a minute later we surged into it on the back of a swell which crashed down upon the reef to right and left of us with a roar that made one's very ears tingle, while the spray, snow-white, and sparkling in the dazzling sunshine like countless millions of diamonds, leapt into the air as high as our maintop, to fall, a cable's length to leeward, in a glittering shower upon the seething turmoil of lace-like foam that swirled hither and thither above the reef.

Five minutes sufficed us to accomplish the passage through the reef, when we found ourselves gliding gently forward upon the placid surface of the lagoon, which formed a magnificent crescent-shaped, natural harbour, some ten miles long by about two and a half miles wide at its widest part, tapering away to nothing at its northern and southern extremities, where the barrier and fringing reefs united. The floor of this lagoon, as I could distinctly see from my elevated post of observation, was composed of fine white coral sand, with no sign of rock or any other obstruction upon it so far as my sight could reach. We of course had a leadsman in the chains taking continual casts of the lead as we proceeded, and from these it appeared that the depth

of water in the lagoon, close up against the inner face of the reef, amounted to seven and a half fathoms, shoaling very gradually and regularly as we neared the island, the exceeding beauty of which evoked a continuous chorus of admiration from the delighted emigrants as its many attractions unfolded themselves at our approach.

Upon clearing the passage through the reef I had shouted instructions down to the man at the wheel to haul up a couple of points to the northward, which had brought our jibboom-end pointing fair between the two headlands opening into the indentation which I have termed Polson's harbour, and I now judged, from what I could see, to be of quite respectable extent. I had no intention, however, of attempting to take the ship into it without first subjecting it to something in the nature of a preliminary examination. I therefore now called to them on deck to stand by to let go the anchor, to which Polson responded that they were all ready for letting go.

"Stand by to let run your topsail halyards!" was the next order, which was obeyed with a rush as of a parcel of schoolboys eagerly anticipating a holiday. I allowed the ship to drive ahead a little farther, until we had arrived within half a mile of the two headlands, which, I now saw, were about a quarter of a mile apart, and then gave the order: "Hard down with your helm, and let her come head to wind!" closely followed by: "Let run your topsail halyards!" and the next moment, with a screaming of sheaves and a rattle of parrals, the three topsail yards slid down the topmasts and brought up with a thud upon the caps, to the accompaniment of a jubilant cheer from the crowd on deck. Then, a minute later, when the ship had lost her way, followed the order: "Let go your anchor!" succeeded by a yell from the carpenter of "Stand clear of the cable!" a few clinking strokes of a hammer, the sudden plunging splash of the anchor into the placid waters of the lagoon, and the rattling roar of the cable through the hawse-pipe. Chips snubbed her with the twenty-five fathom shackle just inside the hawse-pipe, the depth of water alongside being a deep five fathoms, and then the men sprang into the rigging and laid out on the bowsprit to furl the topsails and fore topmast staysail.

Then, turning myself about with my face toward the stern of the ship, I seated myself comfortably in the crosstrees and, once more bringing the telescope into action, proceeded again to subject the island to a searching scrutiny. We were now so close to it that, had there been human beings upon it, I could scarcely have failed to detect some indication of their presence; but, search as I would, no sign of life, save that of birds, could I discover. I therefore finally came to the conclusion that, strange as it might be, this lovely island was actually uninhabited, and, therefore, in that respect, perfectly suited to the experiment which Wilde and his disciples were about to attempt upon it. Nor did it appear less suited in other respects. Its size was ample; its fertility indisputable, and apparently exuberant. Glimpses of tiny rivulets of water could be caught, here and there, flashing and sparkling through its glades; there appeared to be no noxious animals upon it to endanger life; and, so far as beauty was concerned, the place seemed to be a perfect Eden, the woods being gay with flowering shrubs and trees, that everywhere diversified the innumerable shades of green with great splashes of vivid and gorgeous colour. Nor could much fault be found with the climate, for, although the island lay well within the tropics, the constant sea breeze must certainly temper the heat and render it perfectly endurable.

The people on deck, seeing how I was engaged, waited with exemplary patience until I should make a move; but the moment I rose to my feet and prepared to descend the rigging there was

a rush to that part of the deck which I must first touch, upon my return from aloft, every individual in the crowd evidently charged with questions which he fully intended to fire off at me without further delay. While descending the ratlines, therefore, I hastily prepared a little speech which I hoped would not prove disappointing to them.

Chapter Eleven.

An end to my responsibilities.

As I stepped out of the rigging on to the rail, and stood there grasping a backstay, there was a sudden rushing together of the crowd, every eye sought mine, and a few of the more eager ones stretched out their hands, as though to grasp me and thus establish a sort of claim to my immediate attention. But I had no inclination to subject myself to the sort of cross-questioning that might be expected from folk of the class of which the emigrants were largely composed. I therefore raised my hand for silence and to command attention, and when I saw that they were ready to listen to me I began.

“I can see,” I said, “that you are all very naturally anxious to learn what I have been able to discover concerning yonder beautiful island during my long stay aloft. I will therefore embrace the opportunity which you have given me, by assembling yourselves together, to tell you collectively the result of my observations.

“To begin with the size of the island, of which you are probably as well able to judge as I am. Roughly speaking, it is of circular shape, as you have already had the opportunity to see for yourselves, and I estimate its diameter to be, as nearly as may be, ten miles. This should give you an area of somewhere about seventy-eight and a half square miles, or upwards of fifty thousand acres, of which probably three-quarters will be found useful for any purpose to which you may wish to put it. I therefore think you will agree with me that the island is amply large enough to accommodate you all, and find you plenty of employment for the remainder of your lives. I have seen several streams of water, evidently fresh, flowing down its slopes; you are therefore not likely to perish of thirst; on the contrary, there must be an abundant supply, judging from the evidences of abounding fertility that we see everywhere. I have observed no signs of animals, noxious or otherwise, nor do I very well understand how they could get here, taking into consideration the fact that there is no other land near at hand from which they could have come; you are not likely, therefore, to experience any trouble from that source. And, lastly, I have seen no signs of inhabitants; it would therefore appear that your title to the island is as good as that of anyone else;” (loud cheers). “But,” I continued, “I do not think it would be altogether wise to assume that the island is uninhabited simply because I have been unable to discover from aloft any trace of human presence. For aught that we know to the contrary, the place may be swarming with natives, eager to obtain possession of this ship and her cargo; and since we first entered these waters we have had more than one opportunity of judging what would be likely to happen, should we be so unfortunate as to fall into the power of such people. I therefore propose that instead of all hands swarming ashore, and leaving the ship to take care of herself—as I see you all seem inclined to do—the muskets, with a good supply of ammunition, shall be served out to those most capable of making a good use of them, and half of that number shall go ashore as an exploring party to examine the island thoroughly, while the

other half shall remain aboard to take care of the ship. Then, when you have satisfied yourselves that there are no hostile natives to molest you, we will take the ship into yonder cove, and all hands can then land without fear." This last proposition of mine was evidently extremely unpopular, with no one more so than Wilde, who, thrusting himself through the crowd, hotly demanded to know who I thought I was that I should presume to dictate to them as to who should and who should not land. But there were a few level-headed ones among the party who, while freely acknowledging how tantalising it would be to those left on board to gaze upon the island without being permitted to land upon it, were quite able to recognise the prudence of my suggestion, among them being Polson and the carpenter. At length, after much animated discussion, not altogether free from the flavour of acrimony, the proposal was adopted, and the difficult task of choosing those who were to form the exploring party was proceeded with. Wilde demanded that he should be included among the party upon the ground that he was the originator of the scheme which had brought us all to the island; and as I saw no particular reason for resisting this demand, I allowed it to pass unchallenged, merely insisting that Polson should be the leader of the expedition; while four others would necessarily have to be seamen, in order to handle the boat and bring her quickly back to the ship in the event of anything in the nature of a hasty retreat becoming advisable. Thus five of the twelve explorers were seamen, and the whole of these I personally nominated, being careful to choose the most steady and reliable for so important a service, while the remaining six were chosen by lot from among the unmarried male emigrants. This point being at length settled, a packet of refreshments, consisting of cold meat and ship's bread, was served out to each member of the expedition; the largest of the quarter boats was lowered and brought to the gangway, and the whole party bundled down the side into her and pushed off amid the half-envious cheers of the rest. Just before they started I drew Polson aside and gave him my views upon the manner in which I considered that the exploration ought to be conducted, and impressed upon him the fact that he was the leader of the expedition and must exact the strictest obedience from every member of it; and this he promised to do.

I allowed the exploring party to get fairly away from the ship, and then, causing the second quarter boat to be lowered, sent four hands down into her with the lead-line, followed them myself, and then headed after the first boat toward the harbour which I suspected to exist inside the two headlands first discovered by Polson, my object being to make a rough survey of this harbour before attempting to take the ship into it. The fact that I would allow only four seamen to accompany me occasioned some further discontent among the number who were obliged to remain aboard the ship; but I cared nothing for this. I was quite determined that no unnecessary risks of any kind should be run; and since these people appeared unable to think for themselves, and Wilde seemed to have as little idea as the rest of them of what precautions ought to be observed, I just resolved to think for them, at least until they were all safely ashore and I could feel that I was no longer responsible for their safety. After that they might take as many risks as they pleased.

As we in the second boat neared the two headlands which formed the approach to the inner harbour they assumed a much more imposing appearance than they had presented from the deck of the ship, rising sheer out of the water to a height of nearly or quite two hundred feet, in the form of precipitous cliffs of dark rock which sloped away on either hand until, at a distance of about a mile to right and left, they dwindled away to nothing and were lost in the verdant slope that rose gently from the outside beach.

I started sounding as soon as the boat pushed off from the ship's side, and, instead of heading directly for the inner harbour, pursued a zigzag course athwart and toward the mouth of it, each arm of the zigzag measuring about half a mile. I did this in the hope of discovering any hidden dangers that might perchance lurk in the track of the ship on her way into the inner harbour; but we found none, and the floor of the lagoon seemed to be as smooth and almost as level as that of a ballroom, sloping very gradually up from a deep five fathoms where the ship lay to four and a half fathoms between the two headlands.

But when at length we got fairly in between those two headlands, what a surprise was sprung upon us! I had expected—and indeed the utmost extent of my hopes had been—that inside those two heads we might find a snug little cove just large enough to allow the ship room to swing in; but, to the astonishment of us all, when we got inside we found ourselves in a splendid landlocked basin, measuring about two and a half miles long by about one and three-quarter miles wide, by far the largest part of the area lying to the south-westward of the entrance.

On the inner side the two heads presented very much the same appearance as they did outside; that is to say, they sprang sheer out of the water as practically vertical cliffs, gradually decreasing in height until, at about a distance of a mile from the harbour entrance, they disappeared altogether, merging into the general, gentle, upward slope of the land from the water's edge. Where the cliffs ended a beautiful sandy beach began, having a sweep of fully three miles round the back of the basin. It was on this beach that the exploring party had landed; and when we entered the basin there was the other boat, her stem hauled up on the beach, and her painter made fast to an oar, the loom of which had been driven deep into the sand, instead of lying off, afloat, with two hands in her as boatkeepers, ready for any emergency, as I had directed. It was a little annoying to find one's instructions disregarded so flagrantly; but I reminded myself that, with the berthing of the ship in the basin, I should have accomplished all that had been demanded of me, and henceforth must expect to be treated as a nonentity. That, of course, would leave me quite free to think out some plan whereby to effect my escape and return to civilisation; for Wilde's Socialistic doctrines did not in the least appeal to me, and not even the prospect of passing the remainder of my life upon that beautiful and fertile island could reconcile me to them.

However, there was plenty of time before me in which to work out a plan of escape; my present business was to ascertain whether the Basin—as I already named it in my own mind—afforded safe anchorage for the ship; I therefore resumed the task of sounding, working pretty regularly all over the area of it, with the result that the floor was found to slope upward very gradually until within about half a mile of low-water mark, when the slope became comparatively steep. So far as my somewhat cursory survey went there seemed to be no submerged rocks, shoals, or other dangers in that beautiful landlocked harbour to imperil the safety of the ship; but in order to make assurance doubly sure I landed on the inner beach and ascended the south-west head—from which the best view of the basin was to be obtained—when, the sun having by this time climbed nearly to the zenith and his rays striking down almost perpendicularly into the water, I was able to see a considerable portion of the sandy floor of the harbour through the crystalline depths of its waters; but neither in this way could I discover any sign of danger or obstruction. I therefore concluded that the ship might be brought inside the Heads, and anchored pretty closely to the beach, without much apprehension of harm happening to her, especially as there did not appear to be more than eighteen inches rise of

tide in this particular part of the ocean.

From the situation which I now occupied I was of course afforded the best view of the island that I had yet obtained; and truth compels me to say that the more I saw of it the better I liked it. There should be no lack of fresh water on the island, for even from my point of observation there were at least a dozen small streams in sight, and doubtless there were others beyond the range of my vision. Then the trees upon it seemed to number some hundreds of thousands, a very fair proportion of which appeared to be of large size, and the timber of which would probably be found useful for a multiplicity of purposes. It was a veritable garden of flowers of the most varied and beautiful shapes and hues; butterflies of enormous size and the most gorgeous colours flitted here and there; bees hovered over the multitudinous blossoms, busily engaged in collecting their store of honey; many birds were seen, some of then of marvellously beautiful plumage; while, as to fruit, wild strawberries and raspberries flourished in profusion even upon the headland on which I was standing, and which boasted no other vegetation than grass and low bushes. The shores of the basin offered an absolutely ideal site for a town, although the ground there might perhaps be considered rather low; and for my own part I practically made up my mind that, while I would stick to the ship as long as I might be permitted to do so, if I were compelled to remain on the island for any length of time I would endeavour to secure a plot of land on the weather side of the island, and about halfway up the side of the mountain.

One of the most remarkable facts connected with the island, that served to confirm me in the conviction that it was uninhabited, was the extraordinary and absolute fearlessness of man which the birds and other living things exhibited. They flitted about us, and settled within reach of our hands, and numbers of them might have been captured had I permitted it; but I pointed out to the men who accompanied me the absolute uselessness as well as cruelty of such a proceeding, and contrived to convince them that a great deal more pleasure was to be derived from the sight of these beautiful creatures, alive and flying about in perfect freedom and fearlessness, than from the possession of a few of their dead and stuffed skins.

Having at length learned as much as was possible in such a brief visit to this island paradise, and having also fully made up my mind as to the precise spot in the basin where the *Mercury* should be moored, I summoned my boat's crew to follow me, and, descending to the beach, got into our boat and pulled back to the ship, just in time for dinner.

Polson being ashore with the explorers, the cabin party at dinner consisted only of Miss Hartley, Tudsbery, and myself; and it was only natural that my two companions should be eager to learn what impression a nearer view of the island had produced upon me, although I could not help thinking that there was a something suggestive of apprehension or distaste in the questions which the girl put to me. I took but little notice of it at the moment, however; for I was thinking more about the task of moving the ship than of satisfying the curiosity of my companions, who, I considered, would doubtless have an opportunity on the morrow to learn for themselves all that they desired to know.

I had so completely made up my mind that there was no reason why the ship should not at once be taken into the basin, that as soon as dinner was over I gave the carpenter instructions to muster the hands and heave short, the news that the ship was about to enter the basin

producing a sufficient number of voluntary helpers from among the emigrants to render the task of walking the ship up to her anchor an easy one, despite the fact that the exploring party left us five seamen short. Then, the seamen who remained on board having loosed and set the three topsails, jib, and spanker, we broke out the anchor, cast the ship with her head to the southward for a short stretch in the lagoon, in order to get a fair run in between the Heads, then roused the anchor up to the bows, and catted it.

By the time that this was done we were far enough to the southward to enable us to point our jibboom straight for the fairway between the Heads—the northernmost of which slightly overlapped the other—when we tacked ship and bore away for the entrance, with the emigrants crowding the waist, on both sides of the ship, eager to see their new home at somewhat closer quarters. A quarter of an hour later we swept in between the two towering headlands, with sufficient way on the ship to carry us through the belt of calm under the lee of the northernmost Head, and the interior of the Basin, in all its beauty, lay spread out like a picture before us. Loud ejaculations of delight proclaimed the pleasure which the sight gave to the emigrants, several of whom turned their faces toward the poop, and in unmistakable language hinted the hope that they would now be allowed to go ashore without further delay. Once fairly inside the Head, the helm was starboarded and the ship was headed for a sort of bay in the southern extremity of the basin, the topsail halyards were let go, the jib hauled down, and the spanker brailed in, and with the way that she still had on her the *Mercury* slowly drifted to the spot which I had chosen as her final berth, and the anchor was let go, in three and a half fathoms of water.

I am afraid I earned a certain amount of unpopularity by steadfastly refusing to allow anyone to leave the ship until the explorers should have returned, but the refusal was part of my policy of extreme caution, of leaving nothing to chance, and of taking no risks of any kind, and I adhered to it, explaining my reasons, and, I think, convincing the majority that I was right.

With the mooring of the *Mercury* in the berth which I had chosen for her inside the Basin, I considered my task and my responsibility at an end; and, seating myself in a basket chair on the poop, beneath the awning, I disposed myself to begin thinking out some plan for the ordering of my own future conduct. But I had scarcely settled myself comfortably when I was joined by Grace Hartley, who strove to conceal a somewhat embarrassed manner, and the obvious fact that she had something on her mind, behind an attempt at light and frivolous conversation. I endured this as long as I could; but at length the girl's preoccupation became so marked that I interrupted her somewhat unceremoniously by saying:

"Pray excuse me for breaking in upon your entertaining remarks, Miss Hartley, but do you not think you had better come to the point, and have done with it? You want to say something to me, and do not quite know how to begin. Is not that the fact?"

"Yes, Mr Troubridge, it is," she acknowledged; "although how you managed to guess it, I am sure I don't know."

"Well," said I, "let it suffice that I have guessed it. Now, go ahead and just tell me what it is."

The girl hesitated for some time, and at length said, with a laugh of embarrassment:

“I know quite well what it is that I want to say; but my difficulty is that I do not know how you will take it, for I have only a very hazy idea what are your own ideas upon the subject.”

“Has it anything to do with Gurney, by any chance?” I asked.

“Well, yes, it has—in a way,” she answered. “The fact is, Mr Troubridge, that now, when that horrid man Wilde’s scheme seems to be nearing fruition, I am beginning to realise that I am in a very awkward and difficult position; and I am feeling very anxious. I have heard much talk, lately, that has greatly alarmed me; and I have been compelled to ask myself what is to be the outcome of this attempt to found a colony upon Socialistic lines. I admit that I have never very closely studied the doctrine of Socialism; but if Wilde’s views are to be accepted as its gospel, my common sense tells me that the experiment which we are about to make can result in nothing but a ghastly fiasco. The text of his preaching is Social Equality. Equality! There has never been, and never will be such a thing so long as this world endures and mankind is what it is; and all attempts to make and keep men equal are foredoomed to end in failure, even as they did in the days of the French Revolution. I foresee that one of the first results which will follow such an attempt here will be discontent; then will speedily follow dissension, and, finally, anarchy; and I look forward to that condition of things with the utmost dread. For anarchy means lawlessness, violence, the adoption of the doctrine that Might is Right; and in the midst of such a state of things what will happen to us unfortunate women?”

“Ah!” said I. “That is a question which I should think will affect you very closely, although, judging merely from what I have seen of the others, I doubt whether it will greatly trouble them. I imagine that, even if anarchy should come, they will know pretty well how to take care of themselves, even as the French Revolutionary women did. But what has all this got to do with Gurney?”

“Well, it concerns him in this way,” the girl answered. “He thinks upon this subject precisely as I do, and foresees—as I do—that grave troubles for us all loom in the not-far-distant future. Of course you know very little about George Gurney, Mr Troubridge; to you he is merely one of the crew of this ship; but,” with some little embarrassment which I very readily understood, “I have seen a great deal of him of late, and I assure you that he is a very remarkable man, intelligent, well-educated, refined; indeed, as a matter of fact, I believe—although he has never told me so—that he was born to a very different station in life from that which he now occupies. I may as well acknowledge that it is to conversations I have had with him that I have come to see things in the light that I have endeavoured to make clear to you; and it is partly at his suggestion that I finally decided to mention the subject to you, and endeavour to obtain your views upon it.”

“My views, Miss Hartley,” said I, “are in all essentials identical with your own—and Gurney’s—and, if you think fit, you may tell him so.”

“Oh, thank you, Mr Troubridge!” exclaimed my companion. “I will certainly do so, for I am sure that he will be glad to hear it. Of course you understand that this conversation of ours was intended to be private? You will not mention to others what—?”

“I will not,” I promised; “make your mind quite easy upon that point. As a matter of fact I am very much obliged to you for opening your mind to me; I will give what you have said my most

serious consideration; and it may be that, a little later on, I shall be very glad to have a little further conversation with you upon this most interesting subject."

Chapter Twelve.

A landing is effected.

The explorers, weary but jubilant, bubbling over with enthusiastic encomiums upon the beauty, fertility, and resources of the island, and loaded down with samples of the numerous fruits and vegetable products which they had discovered, arrived on board the ship just as the sun was sinking beyond the southern shoulder of the peak. Polson reported that, upon landing, they had gone to the westward, and thence north, east, and south, spreading themselves out in such a manner as to cover the widest possible extent of country while still retaining touch with each other, and had carefully examined the entire coast line of the island in search of indications of the presence of natives, but finding none; so they had come to the conclusion that they might safely assume the island to be uninhabited, and therefore in that respect, as in all others, eminently suited to their requirements. They had found two harbours, in addition to the Basin, one—that which we had observed on the preceding evening—toward the north-western extremity of the island, and the other—of nearly the same area as the Basin—on the northern shore; but they considered both these harbours to be inferior to the Basin, from the fact that the one on the north-west coast was practically an open roadstead, exposed to westerly winds, while the other, although pretty well sheltered from all except north-westerly winds—which seldom blew in that latitude—was shallow, the fringing reef entirely filling it. They described the island as abundantly watered, having encountered and crossed no less than twenty-seven streams and brooks during the day; and there did not appear to be a sterile spot anywhere upon it, except just the bald head of the peak. Wilde was of opinion that the island was rich in minerals, traces of both iron and coal having been met with, while outcrops of granite and a very beautiful marble, probably exceedingly rich in lime, had also been encountered. This was the first rough report of the explorers, given immediately upon their return to the ship, which Wilde undertook to supplement in an address which he proposed to deliver from the poop after supper.

Accordingly, at the conclusion of the meal, all hands, emigrants and seamen alike, mustered in the waist and on the quarter-deck, finding seats where they could, some of them on the rail with their feet resting on the plank-sheer, some on the after hatch, and the rest on the deck planks, while Polson, Tudsbery, Grace Hartley, and I disposed ourselves upon the poop, near enough to hear all that was said; Wilde placing himself in the centre of the fore end of the poop, where he could be seen and heard by everybody. I am bound to admit that, as a speaker, the ex-schoolmaster acquitted himself fairly well. His grammar was unexceptionable, as might be reasonably expected; his choice of words admirable, and his mode of expressing himself easy, yet precise; while he seemed to have the gift of arranging the points of his subject symmetrically, and in such a manner as instantly to catch and hold the attention of his hearers. He began by recounting in detail the history of the day's doings, describing the route taken, the nature of the country passed over, and the various products met with. Some of his descriptive passages dealing with the beauties of the scenery—the loveliness of the wooded glens, each

with its tiny streamlet flowing over a rocky bed, with here and there a romantic, tree-shaded waterfall, its jagged margin adorned with rich growths of rare and beautiful ferns; the wide, park-like expanses of greensward dotted with magnificent trees; the tangled brakes, gorgeous with strange and wonderful orchids and flowering shrubs and creepers; the countless fruit-bearing trees and shrubs loaded with luscious fruits and berries; the miles of coconut-palms bordering the shore; the gaily-plumaged birds with their quaint and sometimes discordant cries; the brilliant-winged butterflies—were both picturesque and poetical. There were neither savages, ferocious animals—or, indeed, animals of any kind—nor reptiles on the island, so far as the explorers had been able to discover, he said; and as for the extent of the island, it was sufficient to provide each individual of the party, including the children, with ample subsistence for the rest of his or her life.

Then he proceeded to sketch out—for about the thousandth time—the principle upon which the community was to be governed. It was to be subject to laws which were to be enacted from time to time by a council of seven—including himself—of which he was to be president for life in virtue of the fact that the whole scheme and idea was of his originating, the remaining six members of council to be elected once every three years. There were to be no distinctions of rank or class; all were to be absolutely equal; there was to be no such thing as private property, everything being held in common; everybody was to labour diligently for the benefit of the entire community; and the natural increase due to every person's labour was to be delivered into a sort of general store, or warehouse, and apportioned out in accordance with rules to be framed by the council. There was a great deal more said that night to the same effect, some of the statements being received with rapturous applause—chiefly by the lazy and ne'er-do-well members of the party; but I could see that although all hands had in the first instance jumped readily enough at the prospect of an easy and luxurious life, free—as they thought—from all restraint, in a land of eternal summer, there were those among them to whom the Socialistic doctrine of perfect equality and all things in common was already distinctly distasteful; and I believed that if I could but school myself sufficiently in the exercise of that patience which is said to be a virtue, I should hear more of that distaste, and also of other things that might be advantageous to me in my determination to effect my escape from a community with the aims of which I was entirely out of sympathy.

Wilde closed his discourse with the announcement that on the morrow all hands would be permitted to go on shore, immediately after breakfast, to view the island and sample its products for themselves, returning to the ship at sunset, in time for supper, after which another meeting would be held for the purpose of electing the six members of council, who would, upon election, immediately proceed to frame laws for the good government of the community, and also make arrangements for its settlement upon the island. Accordingly, soon after sunrise on the following morning, the emigrants once more made their appearance on deck in holiday attire, all impatient for the moment to arrive when the boats should be brought to the gangway to convey them to those green and bosky glades, which had spread themselves so alluringly before their gaze for the preceding forty-eight hours. So eager were they that it was only with the utmost difficulty we were able to persuade them to go below again, until the crew had had time to wash decks and perform the ship's toilet for the day. My determination not to forgo this daily duty drew from Wilde an acrimonious remonstrance; but his objections were promptly overruled by Polson and Tudsbery, who, I now discovered, to my great satisfaction, were, with most of the crew, disposed still to leave all matters strictly pertaining to the ship, and her rule

and governance, entirely in my hands.

“Wilde don’t know nothin’ about a ship, Mr Troubridge—how should he?” explained Polson to me; “and if he was let to have his way he might start pullin’ of her to pieces for the sake of her timber and metal.”

“As likely as not he would,” said I. “But you men must never permit that, Polson; at least, not for some time to come. There are a dozen ways in which she may yet be found eminently useful. For instance, beautiful and altogether suitable as this island appears for your purpose, who is to say that it does not possess some subtle peculiarity of climate rendering it unfit for the abode of Europeans; and what sort of condition would you be in if such should prove to be the case, and you had no ship to which to retreat, and in which to seek another island?”

“Very true, sir,” cut in the carpenter. “I hadn’t thought of that; but there’s the chance of it, all the same, now that you comes to mention it.”

As a matter of fact, however, it was not the above reason that influenced me in the least in my desire to ensure the preservation of the ship, for, although I had mentioned it, I did not for a moment believe that the contingency would ever arise; but, like Grace Hartley and Gurney, I had long since subjected Wilde’s theories to careful examination, and decided that there was nothing in them to satisfy a man possessed of a healthy ambition to make his mark in the world; I therefore wanted to keep open for myself a way of escape; and no better way could possibly be afforded than by the ship.

By one bell in the forenoon watch—half-past eight—breakfast was over and everybody was once more on deck and clustering about the gangways, waiting for the boats to be brought alongside. This was soon done, every boat belonging to the ship having been got into the water and veered astern the first thing that morning. But now another delay occurred, most vexatious to the impatient emigrants; for every one of the boats—excepting the quarter boats, which had been kept tight by filling them about a quarter full of water every morning—proved so leaky, their seams having opened through long exposure to the air, that they had quietly swamped in the interval between six o’clock and breakfast-time. The swamping process, however, had not occupied more than a quarter of an hour, since which time the submerged boats had been rapidly “taking up”; therefore when, soon afterward, they were baled out, it was found that they had already become tight enough to make the short passage to the shore; and by ten o’clock the ship was empty, save for Polson and two seamen who had been included in the exploring party of the previous day, and who were now willing to remain aboard and look after her.

I went ashore in the last boat to leave the ship; and, upon stepping ashore, at once set my face toward the peak, with the intention of ascending it. The nearer slopes ahead of me were thickly dotted with people in little groups, parents and children, or friends, who were bent upon seeing something of the island, certainly, but whose chief aim was an enjoyable picnic. The children were already, for the most part, busily engaged in plucking the many strange and beautiful flowers with which the greensward was thickly dotted; while the parents, eager to sample the various fruits which the island yielded, vainly strove to quicken the youngsters’ pace. There were a few solitary couples straying off by themselves; and among them I presently recognised Gurney and Grace Hartley. Wilde, acting as cicerone to a large party who were evidently anxious to see as much as possible of the island forthwith, was already a long way ahead.

The greensward, which came right down to the beach of coarse coral grit, rose undulatingly at a very gentle slope until within about three-quarters of a mile from the summit of the peak, when the slope became considerably steeper—probably a rise of one in five—to within a couple of hundred feet of the summit, when the slope took an angle of about forty-five degrees. But it must not be imagined that the very gentle slope of which I have spoken was uniform, for it was far from that; on the contrary, I had not advanced much more than half a mile on my way before I came to, first, a slight dip, then a rather stiff rise of a few hundred yards to a kind of ridge, upon surmounting which I found myself upon the edge of a wildly picturesque glen, or ravine, the steep sides of which consisted of finely broken ground interspersed with outcrops of lichen—stained rock and thickly overgrown with a tangle of bushes and flowering shrubs, with here and there a few graceful saplings or a clump of noble shade trees entwined with strange-looking and beautiful orchids. The cool, refreshing, musical sound of running water came up from the depths of the glen, although the stream itself was not visible from where I stood, while the subdued roar of a distant waterfall strongly tempted me to swerve from my path and follow the upward course of the glen. I surrendered myself to the temptation, rather erroneously arguing that every foot of rise must necessarily take me so much nearer the summit of the peak, whereas I eventually found that I had diverged almost at right angles to my proper course. But I was richly rewarded for my labour and loss of time, for at the end of a somewhat arduous climb of about twenty minutes I found myself gazing at as romantic and beautiful a bit of scenery as I had ever beheld.

I was in a deep hollow between two hills, the bottom of the hollow forming a rocky basin into which poured the water of a small stream, some ten feet in width, as it tumbled over a broad, rocky ledge some sixty feet above, and came foaming, lace-like, down the moss-grown face of the precipice. The pool, or basin, into which the water fell was some thirty feet in diameter, and apparently about four feet deep, the pebbly bottom showing with startling distinctness through the crystal-clear water. The steep sides of the hollow were grass-grown, with great, rough outcrops of granite rock showing here and there, out of the interstices of which sprang a great variety of beautiful ferns, and were overhung by a magnificent tangle of beautiful trees and bushes growing so thickly together as completely to exclude the sun’s rays, bathing the whole scene in a soft, cool, delicious green twilight.

The water looked so clear, so cool, so altogether tempting, that I decided there and then to treat myself to the luxury of a freshwater bath; I accordingly stripped and sprang in, fully expecting to touch bottom. But, to my astonishment, the pool proved to be fully ten feet deep; moreover the water was icy cold, or appeared to be so in comparison with the tropical heat of the air; I therefore scrambled out as quickly as possible, and, dressing, resumed my ramble, greatly refreshed by my dip.

The hot air was heavy with the smell of wet earth, the spray of the waterfall, the rank vegetation that flourished riotously along the margins of the brook, and the mingled perfumes of a thousand varieties of strange and gorgeously tinted flowers, as I laboriously climbed the steep side of the ravine, after crossing the brook, on my way to the more open country beyond. But this soon changed upon my emerging from the ravine, giving place to the more healthful and invigorating scent of the salt sea breeze that came sweeping over the island and roared among the lofty branches of the trees, among the trunks of which I now wound my upward way.

I had now reached a park-like stretch of country, the surface of which was clad with long, rich, luxuriant grass, thickly dotted with clumps of splendid trees, many of which were of immense height and girth, promising a rich yield of valuable timber, while others blazed with vivid scarlet flowers instead of leaves. These open park-like expanses of country, however, were of comparatively limited extent, the trees for the most part growing closely together, while the space between their trunks was choked with thick undergrowth, consisting of shrubs, bushes, and long, tough, flowering creepers, so densely and inextricably intermingled that it was sometimes impossible to force a way through it, and long détours became necessary in order to make any progress. But there were other spots, again, which conveyed the idea of natural gardens, for in them little else than fruit-bearing trees were to be found, among which I quickly recognised the banana, the plantain, the peach, the orange, the lime, the custard apple, the granadilla, to say nothing of many other kinds to which I was a stranger; while raspberries and strawberries were to be found almost everywhere. And a little later on in my walk I came here and there upon patches of melon plants in all stages, from that in which the blossom was just opening to that of the ripe and perfect fruit. A particularly rich and luscious-flavoured purple grape also appeared to be exceedingly abundant. Needless to say, I sampled these various fruits as freely as discretion permitted, while I filled my pockets with others to serve as dessert to my dinner. This meal I discussed, luxuriously reclining upon a thick bed of soft moss surrounding a spring of deliriously cold fresh water, that came bubbling up out of the earth in the shade of a thick grove of aromatic pines which constituted the last belt of timber before the bare soil surrounding the summit was reached.

Finally, after I had rested long enough to recover in a measure from the fatigue of my unwonted exertions, I left the scented shadow of the pine grove and, emerging into the blistering sunshine, manfully set myself to climb the last three hundred feet of steep, bare ascent that separated me from the highest point of the island.

The reason for the absolute bareness of the cone became apparent the instant that I stepped out of the shadow of the pines, for I immediately plunged ankle-deep in a loose deposit of ashes and pumice-stone that yielded to my tread and slid away under me to such an extent as to make progress almost impossible. But I was determined not to be beaten; and at length, after a full hour’s violent exertion, I found myself, breathless and with my clothing saturated with perspiration, standing, as I had expected, on the lip of the crater of an extinct volcano. The crater was almost mathematically circular in shape, of about a quarter of a mile in internal diameter, and fully five hundred feet deep; the sides of the cup were practically vertical, and everywhere so smooth that I could nowhere discover a spot where a descent into the crater would have been possible, even had I desired to go down into it. But I had no such inclination; for I could see all that I wished from the summit, the internal walls being absolutely bare, while the bottom was simply a lake of stagnant water, apparently not more than a few inches deep.

But if the interior of the crater offered little or nothing to attract the eye, it was far otherwise when I directed my gaze outward. The whole of the island, except the comparatively small strip that was hidden from me by the spreading rim of the crater, lay stretched out beneath me like a map, beautifully executed in relief and tinted by the hand of a master. Its groves, its brakes, its broad park-like expanses, its rocky glens, its picturesque ravines, its sparkling rivulets, its deeply indented coast line, its dazzlingly white beaches, the outline of its fringing reef, ay, and the long thin line of its barrier reef, with its spouting, leaping wall of snowy spray, reaching from

north to south, and spreading far into the deep blue of the ocean to the eastward, were visible through that clear air with startling distinctness. Why, I could even detect the evanescent whiteness of the breaking surges far out beyond the barrier reef, where their crests were whipped into foam by the scourging of the fiery breeze. I considered that I commanded a horizon of nearly a hundred and twenty miles in diameter, yet throughout that wide stretch of ocean there was nothing visible save the island, no ship save the *Mercury*, floating like a tiny toy upon the placid, landlocked surface of the Basin. I keenly searched the horizon in every direction for signs of other land, but nowhere could I detect even the loom of it. We were absolutely alone here in our lovely island Eden; and there was no land in any direction near enough to cause us the slightest uneasiness as to incursions of hostile savages.

Two full hours, by my watch, did I spend upon the summit of the crater, slowly sauntering round its rim, feasting my eyes upon the surpassing beauties of the scene beneath and around me, and also sketching a rough map of the island for future use. Then, sated with enjoyment, and more than half-reconciled to the possibility that I might be compelled to spend the remainder of my life amid such glorious surroundings, I set about to effect my descent and return to the ship, following a route which I had mentally mapped out, as it seemed to promise easier going than the one by which I had ascended. Taking my time, choosing my ground, and winding hither and thither to avoid obstacles, I arrived at the beach just in good time to go off aboard with the last boatload of holiday makers, all of whom, though hot and weary with their long day's ramble, were full of enthusiasm at the prospect of making their homes on so lovely and fertile a spot and in such a perfect climate.

At eight o'clock that night Wilde ascended the poop and, assuming the direction of affairs quite as a matter of course, gave orders for all hands to assemble in the waist in order that the business of electing the members of council—who, in conjunction with himself, were to frame the laws and order the affairs of the community—might be proceeded with. He opened the proceedings by explaining in detail precisely what the duties of the council were to be, incidentally mentioning the fact that, in consideration of the onerous and responsible character of those duties, the members would be absolved from the performance of any and every other kind of work. He dwelt at some length upon the qualifications which he considered indispensable for the efficient discharge of the duties of a member of council, enumerating, among others, wisdom, discretion, organising ability, and the faculty of anticipating and providing for the future needs of the community; and then himself proceeded to propose the six persons whom he considered best fitted to fill the office, all of them being chosen from among the emigrants!

At this stage of the proceedings Gurney promptly rose and intervened. He said that he fully agreed with the chairman both as to the necessity for extreme care in the choice of persons to fill positions of such heavy responsibility, and also as to the qualifications required in the holders of such positions. But, while he had nothing to say against the persons proposed by the chairman, he was of opinion that there was one person in the ship who, despite his extreme youth, was at least as fully qualified as any other individual among them to fill satisfactorily the position of a member of council, and who, moreover, had fully earned the distinction by piloting them to this beautiful island. He presumed that he need not add that he referred to young Mr Troubridge, to whose exceptional skill as a seaman and a navigator they all owed so much!

These remarks were greeted with so much enthusiasm that it was with the utmost difficulty I succeeded in making it understood—to Wilde's manifest relief—that for certain good and sufficient reasons I must decline to accept the proffered office. But, I continued, it seemed to me not only a mistake but distinctly invidious that the seamen should be entirely excluded from the governing body; and I considered that, in common fairness to them, two at least of their number—to be chosen by themselves—ought to be included.

This proposal also was loudly applauded; and, after a great deal of rather heated discussion, Polson and Gurney, as representative of the officers and crew of the ship, were duly elected members of council; the other four being William Fell, once a solicitor's clerk; Henry Burgess, lately a colliery agent; John Monroe, formerly a builder; and Samuel Hilary, late agricultural labourer. These four last, as may be readily understood, owed their election not so much to their superior qualifications as to the fact that they were red-hot Socialists, full of plans to enable everybody to enjoy a maximum amount of comfort at the cost of a minimum of labour; and they proved the sincerity of their doctrine by securing their own election to posts which freed them from the necessity to labour for themselves.

Chapter Thirteen.

An important talk with Gurney.

Immediately upon the completion of the election, Wilde, in the plenitude of his zeal and eagerness to taste the sweets of power and authority, insisted on calling a meeting of the council, to meet there and then in the poop cabin, for the purpose of arranging the proceedings of the morrow. When the sitting was over, Polson told me that the very first proposal submitted by the president was that the ship's sails should all be unbent and taken ashore to form tents for the people to live in; and that, next, the ship should be stripped to a gantline, and her spars and rigging—together with as much of her bulwarks as might be required—worked up into a raft for the conveyance of cargo to the shore. Of course Polson, with the memory of the conversation that had passed between him and myself on that very morning still fresh in his mind, stoutly opposed the proposal, adducing the arguments that I had used against such a proceeding, and adding to them his own, with such success that not only was the proposal negatived, but he actually succeeded in carrying another to the effect that half a dozen hands under me were to be told off for the express purpose of giving the hull, spars, standing and running rigging, and sails a thorough overhaul, and executing such repairs, etcetera, as might be found necessary to bring the ship to, and maintain her in, a condition of perfect fitness for service at a moment's notice!

This result achieved, the boatswain was quite content to let Wilde have his own way in all other respects, with the result that it was quickly arranged that the hatches should be lifted the first thing after breakfast on the following morning, the cargo overhauled as far as possible, and room made by transferring to the shore such portions of it as were not likely to be injured by exposure to the weather; also that the live stock, consisting of some three dozen fowls, together with a boar and two sows, were to be landed and allowed to run wild for a week or two, until proper quarters could be prepared for their reception, in order that they might improve their condition. The mention of live stock produced another weighty argument in favour of the proposal just carried by Polson, for it elicited an expression of opinion that horses and horned cattle, as well as sheep, were urgently required by the colonists, and ought to be procured at the earliest possible moment.

"What d'ye think of the arrangement, Mr Troubridge?" asked the boatswain, when he had brought his account of the proceedings to a close.

"I see nothing to find fault with in it," I replied, "except that I think you are acting unwisely in meddling with the cargo before providing a receptacle for it ashore. I believe it highly probable that when you begin to break out the cargo you will find many things that must necessarily be kept under cover, if they are not to be ruined by exposure to the weather; and what will you do with them? Strike them back into the hold? If so, you will be giving yourselves double trouble, and delaying instead of expediting matters."

"Well, but what else can we do? What would you have advised if you'd been in my place?" demanded Polson.

“I should have proposed building a storehouse big enough to receive the whole of the cargo before removing the hatches,” replied I. “The job could easily be done. A few poles cut up there among the hills and brought down to the shore, a sufficient quantity of wattles to form the roof and sides, and a covering of coconut-palm leaves, and there you are. We saw plenty of such structures among the islands that we visited before arriving here, and I remember that everybody remarked how easily they might be built.”

“Now, why the mischief didn’t I think of that?” exclaimed the boatswain, smiting his knee with vexation. “Of course that’s the proper thing to do. Oh, Mr Troubridge, why didn’t you let yourself be elected a member of council, sir? You’ve an old head, although it is on young shoulders; and you’d have been worth more to us than Fell, Burgess, Monroe, and Hilary all lumped together.”

“I refused, Polson,” said I, “because, as you must have been aware from the first, I absolutely and utterly disapproved of the whole affair from beginning to end. You started wrong, in the first place, by stealing the ship and cargo from those to whom they lawfully belonged. That is piracy; an act for which some of you may yet be made to smart. But apart from that, I am strongly of opinion that you are starting this community upon totally wrong lines. You have already heard me say, more than once, that I have no belief in, or sympathy with, the principles upon which Wilde proposes to rule this settlement. I do not believe they will be found to work satisfactorily; and therefore I will have nothing whatever to do with the scheme.”

“Yes, yes, I know, Mr Troubridge; I’ve heard you say all that afore,” answered Polson with some impatience. “But, all the same, I can’t for the life of me see what’s wrong with the plan. As for what you calls our act of piracy, well, there’s no gettin’ away from it that if ever we was found out, some of us would get ‘toko’ for that job, and I expect that I should be one. But I dunno as I feels partic’lar oneasy about that, for I don’t see how we’re goin’ to be found out. And the risk, such as it is, was worth runnin’, for ain’t we goin’ to settle down here and live in peace and plenty and happiness all our lives?”

“You think so, Polson, I don’t doubt,” said I. “But wait a while until the schoolmaster’s theories are put to the test of actual everyday practice, and then come and tell me what you think of them.”

“All right, Mr Troubridge, that’s fair enough; I will,” answered the boatswain. And therewith he rose and, with a somewhat troubled countenance, left me.

The effect of this conversation became apparent when on the following morning, before breakfast, Polson came aft and announced to me that, upon further consideration of the matter, the council had decided to build a storehouse ashore before touching the cargo. And he followed up this communication by asking me for my idea as to what the dimensions of the structure should be.

“Oh,” said I in a tone of indifference, “if you make it twice as long as the ship’s hold, twice as wide, and about twelve feet high to the eaves, you ought to have ample room for the storage of everything, in such a fashion that you can get at any particular portion of the cargo without difficulty, and at a moment’s notice. And let me give you another hint, Polson. If you are wise you will have a careful inventory taken of every item of the cargo as it goes ashore, with a

record of the particular part of the building in which it is stored."

"Thank 'e, Mr Troubridge; thank 'e, sir; that's good advice, and I'll see as it's follered," answered the boatswain, walking away.

Now, I was quite determined to hold myself absolutely aloof from everything in the most remote degree savouring of participation in this mad scheme, for many reasons; but I had no objection to the dropping of a hint to Polson now and then, for I considered that by so doing I should strengthen my influence with him. I wanted him to acquire the habit of depending upon me to help him when he found himself in a difficulty of any kind; and there was also the possibility that in this way I might occasionally be able to induce him to put forward or support proposals that might be of the utmost advantage to my plans of ultimate escape.

The revised arrangement of the council was put into effect immediately after breakfast, the boats being brought alongside and all hands—except the members of council, myself and my gang, and a few of the idlers—sent ashore. The carpenter, with a gang of assistants, going up to the higher lands to select, cut down, and transport to the near neighbourhood of the beach a sufficient number of suitable trees and saplings to form the framework of the store, while another gang sought wattles wherewith to form the walls, the women and children meanwhile being dispatched along the shore, to collect the fallen leaves of the coconut-palms and bind them in bundles, prior to their transportation to the site of the store for use as thatch for the roof and sides of the building. A fourth working party at the same time was engaged in digging holes in the soil for the reception of the poles which were to form the corner and intermediate posts of the structure.

While all hands ashore were thus engaged, the council was sitting in the poop cabin, drafting the laws by which the community was to be governed—and making a mighty poor business of it, if the frequent outburst of voices raised in angry altercation might be taken as a criterion. As for me, half a dozen seamen were placed at my disposal thoroughly to overhaul the hull, spars, rigging, and sails of the ship; and I began my task by unbending all the sails that needed any repair, sending them down on deck, and storing them away in the sail-room prior to starting upon the repairs. This did not take very long; and pretty early in the afternoon I had my party at work on the poop, under an awning, cutting out worn cloths and inserting new from the stock of canvas carried for that purpose, ripping off the old roping and replacing it with new, and generally putting each sail into perfectly good and reliable condition. There was not so much of this kind of work to be done as I had feared; so it and the building of the warehouse came to an end together.

Then followed the discharging of the cargo, which was conveyed to the shore in boats, carried up from the beach on men's shoulders, or, in the case of the heavier packages, on hand barrows; a few there were so heavy that they had to be removed from the beach on rollers, but they were not many; and when the ship's hold was empty, and the whole of its contents transferred to the warehouse, there ensued a general overhaul of everything, and a detailed inventory was taken, showing precisely what articles and materials, and in what quantity, were at the disposal of the community.

The ship being empty, I seized the opportunity to careen her, examine her sheathing, go over it with mallets where it had become wrinkled with the straining of the hull, stripping off the worst

of it and replacing it with new, so far as our resources would allow; removed all weed and barnacles, and re-caulked her seams where necessary. The next job was to smoke her for rats, with which she was overrun, and remove their carcasses; then we repainted her, inside and out, having plenty of paint for the purpose; after which we ballasted her with sand, putting a sufficient quantity into her to make her tolerably weatherly. Finally we gave her spars and rigging a thorough overhaul, fitting to her a new main topmast, the old one proving to be slightly sprung, and rove a considerable quantity of new running gear. The lower masts, bowsprit, mastheads, and yards were next repainted, the bright spars thoroughly scraped and revarnished, the standing rigging tarred down; and, last of all, the sails were rebent, and the old *Mercury* was once more ready to go to sea at practically a moment's notice.

All this work, with the small gang of men at my disposal, occupied the best part of six months in the doing. Meanwhile the remainder of the community had not been altogether idle, although it had already become apparent that there was a fairly liberal sprinkling of drones among them, and there was a steadily growing discontent among the more industriously disposed because of this, and because, also, Wilde's doctrines provided no means whereby the lazy ones could be compelled to do their fair share of work. But despite this, the aspect of the island had greatly changed—not altogether for the better, I thought—during the months of our sojourn upon it. In the first place, the warehouse had been so easily and quickly erected that a roomy, barrack-like structure had at once been built alongside it for the accommodation of all hands, pending the erection of separate dwellings of better appearance and a more permanent character for the several families. Then, many marriages had taken place, Wilde, in his capacity of chief magistrate, undertaking to tie the nuptial knot.

But the erection of two buildings by no means comprised the sum total of what had thus far been accomplished by the settlers. Small parties of prospectors had been sent out to ascertain the resources of the island; and, among many other valuable products, coal, iron, clay of exceptionally fine quality for the manufacture of bricks and tiles, marble, granite, basalt, limestone, pine, satinwood, teak, and sandalwood in exceedingly large quantities had been found. A brick and tile yard had been established over on the north-west side of the island, and large quantities of splendid bricks and tiles had already been made; a limekiln had been built, and was in full operation; and a large consignment of circular and other saws having been found among the cargo, a sawmill had been erected alongside one of the numerous streams, the flow of which had been utilised to drive the saws, and much timber had already been cut down and converted into planks and scantling. A considerable quantity of sandalwood had likewise been collected, with the intention of loading it into the ship and dispatching her with it to China, there to be converted into money, with which a cargo of tea and another ship were to be purchased and dispatched to find a profitable market, the proceeds of the cargo being expended to provide live stock and such other necessaries as the settlers might require. So much sandalwood indeed had already been collected that, to make room for it, it had been found necessary to discharge all but some eighty tons of the sand ballast that had been originally shipped, and the *Mercury* was now quite deep enough in the water to enable her to go to sea with safety at any moment.

The only thing that was worrying Wilde and the council, so far as this part of their plans was concerned, was the fact that I was the only navigator among them; and, well knowing how strongly I had disapproved of everything connected with the original scheme for the

appropriation of the ship and her cargo, they feared that, if I were sent away to navigate the ship, I should betray them at the first civilised port arrived at, while without me the ship could not be sent to sea at all. I gathered this partly from the strenuous efforts that were now being made to induce me to throw in my lot with the rest of the settlers, and partly from Grace Hartley, between whom and myself a firm friendship had steadily grown up, and who, in her turn, had gained a pretty fair knowledge of the situation from Gurney. But I did not often see her, for she had been installed as schoolmistress to instruct the young folk of the settlement; while I, in conjunction with a young fellow named Meadows, who had served his pupilage with an architect and surveyor in England, had been set the task of making a detailed survey and plan of the entire island.

The affairs of the settlement had reached this stage when, on a certain evening, after all hands had knocked off for the day, Miss Hartley came to my side as we were leaving the large shed in which all meals were served, and, after a few casual remarks that gave us time to get out of earshot of the rest, said:

“I suppose, Mr Troubridge, after tramping about all day in the hot sun, as you have been, you feel too tired to come for a walk with George and me?”

“No, indeed I do not!” I answered. “I have grown quite accustomed to be on my feet all day, and now think nothing of it; indeed, I had it in my mind to take a stroll in any case. The evening is far too fine and beautiful to be spent under cover. But, may I ask, have you any special reason for giving me this invitation?”

“Yes,” said Grace, “I have. The fact is, Mr Troubridge, that George is very anxious to have a chat with you.”

“All right,” I said. “I shall be very pleased. It is some time now since Gurney and I have spoken to each other. But do you know what he wishes to speak to me about? I hope there is nothing wrong.”

“No,” she said—“no; there is nothing actually wrong. But George will tell you all about it himself. Do you mind if we go up on to the Head? It will be delightful up there to-night, and we can talk without much fear of being overheard. I told George we would go there, and he will follow us.”

And so he did, overtaking us about halfway up the rise.

“I must apologise, Mr Troubridge,” he said, “for troubling you to come all this way after your long day’s work; but the fact is that for the last month I have had it in my mind to speak to you, and the inducement to do so has been growing ever since. To come to the point at once, Grace and I have had enough of Wilde and his fantastic notions, and would like to cut our connection with the whole concern if it were possible. I am speaking quite freely to you, Mr Troubridge, for I know that you have been dragged into this business quite against your will, and—apart from what Grace has told me from time to time—I have drawn my own conclusions from your steadfast refusal to sign the Charter. Also, from what I have seen of you, I feel tolerably certain that whatever I may say to you in confidence will not be betrayed to others.”

“Of course,” said I, “you may rest assured of that. But what is it that you wish to do, Gurney;

and in what way do you imagine that I can help you?"

"Well," said Gurney, "the idea has taken hold of me—and not me only, I may tell you, but a good many others, Wilde being one of them—that if a chance to quit this island and return to civilisation were to present itself to you, you would gladly seize it. And it is just this idea that has caused Wilde to hesitate about completing the loading of the ship and dispatching her under your command. Something, however, must be done soon; for the settlement is in urgent need of live stock, and many other things, which must be obtained by hook or by crook without much further delay. Now, I cannot speak with certainty, because I don't know, but by putting two and two together I have come to the conclusion that Wilde and certain other unscrupulous persons among his followers have it in their minds to fill up the ship with sandalwood, man her with a dozen or so of the forecastle hands in whom they can place absolute trust, and dispatch her to Canton under your command. But—and here comes in the villainy of the scheme—as soon as a landfall is made, you are to be quietly knocked on the head and hove over the side to prevent all further trouble. The ship is to be taken into port; she and her cargo are to be disposed of; another vessel and a cargo of tea are to be bought with the proceeds; a skipper secured; and the new ship is then to proceed to some good market where the tea will be disposed of, and the proceeds applied to the purchase of what is most urgently needed by the settlers."

"A very pretty scheme indeed!" I exclaimed. "But, Gurney, you must be mistaken as to their intention to do away with me. Why, the idea is monstrous; it means sheer, deliberate, cold-blooded murder!"

"Yes, it does," admitted Gurney; "and of course I may be mistaken, for I do not enjoy Wilde's full confidence by any means—we are far too antagonistic in every way for that. But let me urge you not to trust too much to the possibility that I may be mistaken, Mr Troubridge, for I do not believe that I am; and if it should happen to be you, and not I, who are mistaken, it would be bad for you, would it not?"

"It would," I agreed. "But forewarned is forearmed, Gurney; and I would take precious good care not to be caught napping. Was it to tell me this that you proposed this walk to-night?"

"Yes," answered Gurney; "to tell you that; and also to say that if what you have heard to-night should determine you to attempt an escape from the island, you may rely upon Grace and me to help you to the utmost extent of our power. Also, I want you to include us both in your plan. I think it will be quite worth your while to take us with you, Mr Troubridge; for you know something of my qualifications as a seaman, and I am sure I could be of service in carrying out your plans; while, as for Grace, well, if she can do nothing else, she can at least cook our grub for us. Now, what do you say?"

"I say that I will gladly include both of you in my plans, and there is my hand upon it," answered I, offering him my right hand in token of good faith. We discussed the matter for some time longer; and at length I said: "Now please leave me to think this matter out. What you have told me has taken me a good deal by surprise, and as yet I feel scarcely able to grasp the full significance of it. But I have no doubt that I shall get the bearings of it within the next hour or so. Meanwhile, I believe you are right in suggesting that it would be unwise to leave anything to chance; I will therefore endeavour to think out some practical scheme, and when I have done so we will have another chat. And now, good night! Good night, Miss Hartley!"

Chapter Fourteen.

The critical moment approaches.

I watched the tall, good-looking, well-spoken sailor, and the slim, willowy figure of his sweetheart gradually vanish amid the deep shadows of the bushes that bordered the path leading downward from the Head; and then, oblivious of the peril of rheumatism, seated myself upon the least dew-sodden boulder that I could find, and proceeded to think out the momentous communication that had just been made to me.

It was a glorious night. The full moon, some thirty degrees above the eastern horizon, flashed the whole sea beneath her, outside the reef, into a vast sheet of tumbling liquid silver, while her beams fell in a long line of tremulous radiance upon the placid waters of the lagoon, right up to the edge of the cliff upon which I sat. The sky was cloudless, and toward the zenith and away down in the west some of the larger stars beamed with that soft yet brilliant effulgence that is only to be seen within the tropics, but in her own neighbourhood the stronger light of the moon had eclipsed them all save the planet Venus that hung near her, glowing like a silver lamp. So brilliant were the moonbeams that even the ants, beetles, and other small creeping things that ran about my feet were distinctly visible, as were the tints of the flowers that bloomed everywhere, and some of which had the peculiarity of opening only at night. A soft and gentle breeze was blowing in from the sea, just strongly enough to stir and rustle the grasses and foliage about me, and to bring to my ears the deep and ceaseless thunder of the surf that beat everlastingly upon the distant reef.

The greater part of the Basin was still in shadow, including that where the *Mercury* lay, but the moon was high enough for her rays to reach the upper spars of the ship almost down to her topsail yards, and the dew-wetted spars and rigging gleamed as though inlaid with wires of silver. The settlement, temporarily built on the inner shore of the Basin, was almost as distinctly visible as though it were daylight, its scattered lights gleaming yellow through the gauze-like mistiness of the dew-laden atmosphere; and from it the slopes and undulations of the island delicately receded, until at the peak they assumed almost the ethereal softness of clouds. It was a glorious scene that the island presented, slumbering langorously under the brilliant rays of the tropical moon, more enchanting in some respects than when viewed in the garish light of the sun; and so strong was the enticement of its beauty upon me that, but for the dull cramping influence of the doctrines accepted by the settlers upon which to frame the guiding rules of their lives, I could without very much difficulty have reconciled myself to the idea of a sojourn there for the remainder of my days.

But I had already perceived unmistakable evidences of the blighting effect which was being steadily produced upon certain members of the community by the consciousness—which I think some of them were only now beginning to fully realise—that industry and individual effort were to count for nothing, and that the lazy, useless units were to live a life of inglorious ease at the expense of the hard workers. I foresaw that a time was coming when deadly strife would rage between the two sections; and the prospect was not enticing enough to induce me to throw in my lot with the rest. Yet, if I did not, my life would be in danger; for it scarcely needed Gurney's communication of an hour before to impress upon me the conviction that, sooner or later, Wilde

and his followers would insist upon my giving in my adhesion to them or—taking the consequences of refusal. And it did not need the gift of the seer to forecast the precise character of those consequences. I had scouted the idea of deliberate cold-blooded murder when Gurney had suggested it to me, yet I had not forgotten that I had already been threatened with death as the alternative to undertaking the navigation of the ship, during the quest for a suitable island upon which to settle; and I had very little doubt that they would have carried out their threat had I persisted in my refusal.

Now I was again threatened with it. There seemed to be but two alternatives—submission or flight; and it was but the work of a moment with me to decide that flight was the more acceptable of the two. But how to accomplish it? I thought of the longboat; but to fit her for a long voyage in the open ocean, with any hope of accomplishing it, would need an amount of preparation that could not possibly escape notice. And to be detected in the making of such preparations would be to arouse such suspicion as must inevitably result in the complete defeat of my plans, followed perhaps by other consequences of a still more serious character; while to neglect them and attempt flight in the boat, just as she was, would be madness—an expedient only to be resorted to under stress of the direst extremity. Hour after hour I sat there racking my brains in quest of some practicable plan offering a reasonable prospect of success; but could think of nothing; the scheme upon which I finally settled being only one degree less mad than that of venturing to sea in the unprepared longboat. Such as it was, however, I determined to submit it to Gurney's consideration, and hear what he thought of it.

Accordingly, watching my opportunity, I contrived to get hold of Grace Hartley, on the following evening, after supper, and whispered to her that I intended to walk up to the Head again, and would be glad if she and Gurney would follow me to the spot where we had had our previous talk together. To which she replied that they would certainly do so; and half an hour later the pair joined me.

"Well, Mr Troubridge," exclaimed Gurney, as we met, "I hope this summons means that you have succeeded in hitting upon some scheme which will enable us all three to get away from here without delay; for I may as well tell you that the council have to-day decided to complete the loading of the *Mercury* and dispatch her to Canton forthwith. And, although Wilde did not say so in so many words, I have every reason to believe that the pretty little programme which I sketched out to you last night is to be carried through."

"So much the greater reason why you and I, Gurney, should make up our minds at once what is to be done," said I.

"Yes; you are right," answered Gurney. "For I have not yet told you the whole of the story, nor how it affects Grace and me. I, as one of the council, am to go in the ship, ostensibly for the purpose of transacting the commercial part of the business—the disposal of the ship and cargo, the purchase of another vessel, and of a cargo of tea, and so on; but actually—as I have only too much reason to fear—in order that, during my absence, Wilde may have an opportunity to force Grace to marry him."

"I see," said I. "Well, Gurney, the only scheme that I have thus far been able to think of is of so mad and desperate a character that I gravely doubt whether you will feel justified in having anything to do with it."

“Let us hear what it is, Mr Troubridge,” answered Gurney. “It will have to be something pretty desperate to choke Grace and me off it; for I can tell you we are growing more than a trifle desperate ourselves.”

“Well,” said I, “to put the scheme baldly, I simply propose that we three shall run off with the ship, sail her to Sydney, hand her over to the authorities, telling the whole truth, and take our chance of what may follow. I doubt whether they would deal hardly with either of us. Miss Hartley is of course quite blameless; they would never dream of holding her in the least degree responsible for the theft of the ship and cargo; nor do I believe they would be very hard upon me, seeing that Wilde and the rest compelled me to fall in with their plans. And as for yourself, the fact that you had assisted me to restore the ship to her proper owners would probably be accepted as a set-off against your share of the crime of stealing the ship, especially in view of the fact that we had brought in a cargo of sandalwood in place of the much less valuable cargo which the settlers have appropriated. Now, what do you think of it?”

“Well,” answered Gurney slowly, as he turned my plan over in his mind, “the proposal that two men and a girl shall attempt to navigate a ship of eight hundred tons from here to Sydney—a matter of four thousand miles or more, I suppose—has certainly, as you say, more than a suggestion of madness about it. Yet I believe that we could do it, Mr Troubridge—I was in Plymouth Sound, a trifle over two years ago, when a ship nearly as big as the *Mercury* came in. She was from Rio; and the second mate, an apprentice, and one ordinary seaman comprised the whole of her crew. She sailed from Rio with her full complement; and when she was only three days at sea an outbreak of yellow fever occurred aboard her. First one, and then another, and another of her crew was struck down; but the skipper would not put back. He had a fair wind, and he insisted that the men’s best chance of shaking off the fever lay in keeping the ship at sea. And they did so, although the men continued to die until, by the time that they reached the latitude of the Azores, only the three I have named remained alive. Meanwhile, as the crew dwindled and the ship became short-handed, they snugged her down until at last they had nothing set but the close-reefed fore and main topsails and the fore topmast staysail, and under that canvas she entered the Sound, hove-to, and signalled for assistance. Oh yes, I am sure we could do it, provided, of course, that we kept our health; and we should have to take our chance of that. It would be hard work, certainly, but there are two of us, both fairly strong, and—as the second mate of that ship I told you of answered, when he was asked how they managed—one can do a lot of work with a tackle or two. And as to how the authorities might be disposed to regard my share of the stealing of the ship, I would take my chance of that. Gracie here can bear witness that I was never in favour of the scheme, and only joined in it with a good grace because there seemed nothing else to be done. Now, as to the best time for making the attempt, what is your idea about that?”

“Well,” said I, “in view of the fact that it has actually been decided to send the ship to sea, I think it will be well to wait until the cargo is all in, and the hatches on. That will give us an opportunity to get all our traps aboard without exciting suspicion. Then, on the night of the day prior to the sailing of the ship, we three must go off to her, slip her cable, make sail—as much as we can manage—and trust that we may be able to reach open water before our flight is discovered. If the completion of the loading can by any means be delayed until the moon rises about an hour after midnight, so much the better.”

“Oh, as to that!” answered Gurney; “the deliberate way of working that the people have got into will make it quite a week before the loading is finished, which will bring moonrise to somewhere about the time you mention. The moon will have taken off to about her third quarter by then; but even so she will give us light enough to find our way out through the reef, which is all that we need trouble about.”

“Precisely,” I agreed. “Then am I to understand that you and Miss Hartley definitely agree to throw in your lot with me in this desperate attempt?”

“Yes, Mr Troubridge, you certainly may,” answered Gurney. “At least,” he corrected himself, “I can answer for myself. And as to Gracie here, what say you, little woman?”

“I say, of course, that I would infinitely prefer to go with you and Mr Troubridge,” answered the girl. “The only thing is,” she continued, “that I am afraid I shall be a frightful trouble to you both. And yet I don’t know; I can cook your meals for you; and I can steer the ship in fine weather, can’t I, George?”

“Ay, that you can, as well as any man in the ship,” answered Gurney. “I taught her myself, Mr Troubridge, long before you appeared upon the scene.”

“I foresee, Miss Hartley,” said I, “that, so far from being a trouble to us, you will be absolutely indispensable to our success. And now, Gurney, I think we had better part; for, under all the circumstances, I believe it will scarcely be wise for you and me to be seen very much together. Watch the progress of events in the council, and let me know if anything should transpire of a character likely to interfere with our plans.”

On the evening of the following day, upon my return to the settlement from the scene of the surveying operations, I found awaiting me a formal intimation from the council of its determination forthwith to complete the loading of the *Mercury* and dispatch her to sea at the earliest possible moment; and I was instructed to deliver over all documents and papers of every kind relating to the survey of the island to my coadjutor, Meadows, who would henceforth have sole charge of the survey; also, I was to proceed on board the ship on the following morning, accompanied by the men—former members of the crew—named in the margin, for the purpose of submitting the hull, spars, sails, and rigging to a thorough overhaul, in order to ensure that the ship was fit and ready in all respects to undertake a voyage to China; and to prepare an inventory of such provisions and stores as might be required for the voyage. And, lastly, when these orders had been carried out, I was to report in person to the council and receive my final instructions relative to the voyage.

I found that my crew was to consist of twenty men, all told, namely, eighteen seamen, one cook, and a cabin steward; and of the eighteen seamen Gurney was to act in the capacity of chief mate, and Tudsbery, the carpenter, as second. Gurney, being a member of the council, was excused from participation in the overhauling operations, Polson—who was also a member of the council—being sent in his stead. I could not, at the time, quite understand the reason for this somewhat singular arrangement; for I did not for an instant accept the official explanation that Polson, from his former association with the ship as boatswain, was considered to possess a more intimate knowledge than Gurney of the minutiae of the ship’s equipment. However, it was all made clear to me afterwards.

With these twenty men, then, I proceeded on board the *Mercury* on a certain morning, and proceeded to give her and all her gear a thorough overhaul, although I knew it to be simply a waste of time and energy, the overhaul having already been made, all defective or doubtful gear replaced, and the sails loosed and aired once every week since. Still, I did not in the least object, for it was all to my personal advantage that if perchance any trifling defect had been thus far overlooked, it should now be made good. While the rest of the hands, under Polson and Tudsbery, were going systematically to work upon the overhauling process I set the cook and steward to work to take careful stock of the contents of the lazarette, with the object of ensuring that there should be a sufficiency of provisions to last us through the voyage. I also had the water tanks emptied, and filled up with pure spring water. And while all this was being done a strong gang was put to the task of bringing down the sandalwood, loading it into the ship's boats, and bringing it alongside, when it was carefully stowed in the hold, the object being to so stow it as to make the ship receive the utmost possible quantity for which she had capacity.

On the fourth day the overhaul of the ship was completed; and on the morning of the fifth day I presented myself before the council, to hand in my report and receive my full instructions. The report was a very simple document, merely informing the council that the final overhaul had been most carefully executed; that no defects of any description had been discovered; that the supply of provisions in the lazarette had been found to be sufficient for the proposed voyage; and that I was ready to proceed to sea at a moment's notice. The report was received with a formal expression of the council's satisfaction; and I was then informed that as it was anticipated that the loading of the ship would be completed on the morrow, I was to make every preparation for the sailing of the ship on the day afterward, when the crew would be sent on board immediately after breakfast, and when I was to present myself before the council for my final instructions.

I left the apartment that had been dignified with the name of council chamber exceedingly well satisfied with what had transpired, and especially so at the information that the crew were not to join the ship until the day of sailing. For this was precisely the point upon which I had been experiencing a good deal of anxiety of late. For this reason. I was most anxious that the ship should go to sea with her hatches on, and the longboat at least properly stowed. But, on the other hand, I greatly feared that when matters had reached this point the crew would be ordered aboard, say on the evening of the day preceding the sailing of the ship. And, if this should happen, my plan of making off with the ship must almost inevitably fail, for it would be practically impossible for Gurney and myself to overpower the remaining nineteen of the crew, who, apart from other considerations, would certainly have their suspicions aroused as soon as Grace Hartley's presence on board should be discovered, as it soon must be.

I shrewdly suspected that this arrangement relative to the embarkation of the crew at the last moment prior to the sailing of the ship must be due to Gurney, who would, of course, perceive quite as clearly as myself how vital to our success such an arrangement must be, and I tried to get a word with him to ascertain whether this was actually the case. But I found it impossible to do so; and I accordingly devoted the remainder of the day to getting my chest aboard, taking possession of my cabin, and carefully studying the charts with the view of deciding upon the most desirable route to be followed on the voyage to Sydney. Late in the afternoon Gurney and Tudsbery also brought their chests aboard, but even then I was unable to get any private word

with the former, because of the constant presence of the latter. Moreover, it appeared to me that Gurney was rather markedly avoiding me, a circumstance that caused me a good deal of uneasiness. But at the last moment, just as all hands were going ashore at the close of the day's work, my co-adventurer came and stood beside me at the gangway for an instant and, without saying a word, or even looking at me, felt for my hand, and thrust into it what seemed to be a small, tightly folded piece of paper, immediately afterwards passing through the gangway and down the ship's side. I waited until everybody else had left the deck, and then, carefully thrusting the paper into my breeches pocket, followed.

Arrived at length at the quarters that I occupied while ashore, I drew forth from my pocket what proved to be, as I had suspected from the feel of it, a sheet of paper folded into a very small compass, and, opening it, read as follows:—

"I have just learned, through the merest chance, that it has been arranged that the crew shall go aboard to-morrow, instead of next day, which means that we must act to-night. Please meet me, therefore, among the big rocks on the Basin beach under the South Head as soon after supper as you conveniently can; and, if I should not be there when you arrive, kindly wait for me. I have chosen that spot for our rendezvous on account of its secluded character, and because nobody cares to go there after dark."

This was awkward news indeed; for, as Gurney had remarked in his communication, it meant that we must act—that is to say, must make our escape—that same night, although the hatches were off, and all the boats were ashore. Of course the fact that the hatches were off was the merest trifle, for Gurney and I could soon clap them on and batten them down; but I did not at all like the idea of going to sea without even so much as a single boat on board; while, of all the boats belonging to the ship, I should most have preferred the longboat, because she was a fine, wholesome boat, and in the event of anything untoward happening we should stand a far better chance in her than in any of the others. However, there was no help for it; it would be better for us to escape without boats than not at all. And yet, when I came to think of it, there was no reason why we should go to sea entirely without boats; we should require one in which to make the passage from the shore to the ship, and surely it ought not to be beyond the power of two men—and a girl—to hoist one of the quarter boats to the davits, for, as Gurney had said, a good deal of work can be done with the aid of a tackle or two. And if we could hoist one quarter boat, why not both? Ay, and it might even be possible to get in the longboat as well, if time and opportunity permitted—but perhaps that was almost too much good luck to expect. Still, I had the germ of a plan in my mind, and I determined to talk to Gurney about it.

Supper, the last meal of the day, was served at seven o'clock, and was over and done with before eight, by which time it was quite dark, save for such light as the stars afforded. While this light was quite sufficient to enable one to see one's way about the island, it was not powerful enough to reveal objects at any great distance. The conditions were, therefore, quite favourable for our purpose, and when I left the building in which supper had been served I sauntered off in an aimless sort of way, as though going for a stroll toward the peak before turning in for the night. But when I had gone about a quarter of a mile, and had satisfied myself that no one was about—for the settlers were, as a rule, early birds, and usually turned in almost immediately after supper—I made a détour which took me, by way of a slight hollow, down to the inner beach, along which I passed towards the rendezvous mentioned by Gurney.

This spot was situated beneath the cliffs on the Basin side of the South Head, where an outcrop of big basalt rocks occurred, and was always of so dark and gloomy and weird a character that it was generally shunned even during the hours of daylight, while at night time nobody ever went near the place if they could possibly avoid it. As I drew near it I once or twice fancied that someone was following me, and, thinking that it might possibly be Gurney, I waited to let him overtake me; but as nobody appeared I supposed I must have been mistaken, and went on again, presently arriving among the rocks. The next moment two figures emerged from among the shadows, and Gurney and his sweetheart stood before me.

Chapter Fifteen.

The great adventure.

“Ah! here you are, Gurney, and Miss Hartley, too,” I exclaimed. “That is good; better, indeed, than I dared hope, for I did not expect to see you, Miss Hartley, at least for another two or three hours.”

“No,” answered Grace; “nor did I expect to be here so soon. But a lucky chance enabled me to get my box out of the hut unobserved, and, George happening to come to my window soon afterward to make his final arrangements, we seized the opportunity and came straight away at once. Mrs Pierson, with whom I have been staying, believes me to be in bed with a bad headache. I made my escape through the window.”

“Excellent!” said I. “Then I suppose we may set to work almost at once, may we not, Gurney?”

“Yes, as soon as you please, Mr Troubridge,” answered Gurney. “But I think it would be wise to give everybody a chance to get home and into bed first. It would be rather awkward if anybody should happen to be out late, taking a walk on the Head, and should see us.”

“That is true; it would,” said I. “Which reminds me that as I came along the beach, on my way here just now, I once or twice had an impression of being followed. I thought that possibly it might be you, and waited for you to overtake me; but nothing came of it.”

“It is a case of ‘guilty conscience’, I expect, Mr Troubridge,” laughed Gurney. “Why should anyone follow you? Nobody can possibly suspect us, for neither Grace nor I—nor you either, I suppose—have ever breathed a word of this to a single soul, not even to each other when there has been the slightest chance of our being overheard.”

“No, of course not; it was my fancy, perhaps,” I answered. “I must plead guilty to having felt a trifle anxious and nervous during the last few days. But that is all gone and past now. The first thing that I want to talk to you about, Gurney, is the boats. I don’t much like the idea of going to sea without boats, and especially the longboat. Now, so far as the quarter boats are concerned, I believe we might manage to get them both hoisted up to the davits, by hooking the watch-tackle on to the falls; but what about the longboat? Do you think there is any possibility of our being able to hoist her in?”

“We might, certainly—if we only had the time,” answered Gurney. “But it would have to be done before we passed out through the reef. In smooth water—if, as I say, we had the time—I dare say it could be done. But not outside, with the ship rolling and tumbling about; the boat would be stove long before we could get her inboard.”

“Undoubtedly,” I agreed. “But I have a plan which I think will afford us the time to hoist in the longboat as well as the two quarter boats before we go outside. When once we are safely out of the Basin, what have we to fear? Nothing, except being overtaken and the ship recaptured by a strong body of men sent after us in boats. But if they have no boats they cannot follow us! Now, my plan is this. I propose that, as soon as it seems safe to do so, we proceed to the spot where all the boats are moored, man the jollyboat, and tow all the rest off to the ship, veering them astern by their painters when we get aboard. Then we will loose and set the fore and main topsail and fore topmast staysail, slip the cable, and work the ship out between the Heads into the lagoon. Once there, we are safe; we can heave-to, and hoist the two quarter boats to the davits, then put on the hatches, and hoist in the longboat, with no fear that anyone can possibly interfere with us. Then, when we have completed our work to our satisfaction, we can cast the remaining boats adrift—they will be certain to drive ashore undamaged, and be recovered—and we can go out through the reef in broad daylight.”

“By Jove, Mr Troubridge, you have hit it!” exclaimed Gurney with enthusiasm. “If we can manage to secure the whole of the boats, and get the ship out of the Basin, undetected, we may defy all hands of them. Yes; I see no possibility of a hitch in that plan. But we shall not be safe until we are outside the Basin. And now, what do you think, Mr Troubridge, will it be safe to make a beginning at once, or shall we give them a little longer to get indoors and to sleep?”

“Every minute is of the utmost value to us,” said I. “Still, it would be a pity to spoil all by being too precipitate. Let us wait another hour, at the expiration of which I think we may safely make a move.”

Accordingly, we all three sat down in the deepest shadow of the rocks, chatting in low tones and discussing the prospects of the voyage, the chances of success in the somewhat desperate attempt that we were about to make, and kindred matters, until my watch showed that we were within an hour of midnight, when I thought it would be unwise to delay any longer, and accordingly gave the word to make a move. Whereupon Gurney hoisted his sweetheart’s box on his shoulders, and we all three moved cautiously and in dead silence along the beach toward where the boats were moored, keeping close in among the shadows cast by the cliffs and the overhanging foliage.

The boats, with the exception of the jollyboat, were all moored in a string at a distance of about a hundred yards from the beach, the longboat riding to a small boat anchor, while the others were secured to her by their painters, the jollyboat being hauled up on the sand. This was the boat that we intended to use to go off to the ship in, towing the other boats astern; and when we got alongside her, Gurney swung Grace Hartley’s box off his shoulder, intending to deposit it in the stern-sheets of the boat prior to launching her. As he leaned over the gunwale to do so, however, he started back with a smothered ejaculation, for at the same instant a human figure rose up out of the bottom of the boat, where it had been crouching. To drop the box on the sand was, with Gurney, the work of a second; and the next instant he had the man by the

throat and was bearing him back into the bottom of the boat again, while Grace Hartley seized my arm and gripped it like a vice to prevent herself from screaming.

“Not a sound, for your life, Grace!” I hissed in her ear as I shook myself free from her grip. Then, springing to Gurney’s side, I exclaimed in a low, tense whisper:

“Steady, Gurney; steady, man! don’t kill the fellow, and don’t make a noise. Who is he? Let him get up and tell us who he is, and what he is doing here.”

“Do you hear what Mr Troubridge says?” growled Gurney in his prisoner’s ear. “Get up and give an account of yourself. But if you attempt to raise your voice I’ll choke the life out of you without more ado. Now then, let us have a look at you. Why, I’ll be shot if it isn’t Saunders!”

Saunders, it may be explained, was one of the original crew of the *Mercury*, and a very quiet, steady, well-conducted fellow. It was probably for that reason that he had not been chosen to go in the ship on her projected voyage to China.

I approached the man and stared in his face. Sure enough it was indeed Saunders; and a very scared as well as somewhat angry appearance he presented.

“Why, Saunders,” I exclaimed in low-pitched accents of surprise, “what are you doing here in the boat at this time of night? Come, explain yourself!”

“I will, Mr Troubridge, in half a jiffy, as soon as I’ve got the feel of Gurney’s grip out of my throat,” answered the man. “It’s like this, sir. I’ve been on this here island long enough to see that Wilde’s ideas won’t work. I can see that, accordin’ to his plan, I may stay here all my life and be no better off than I am to-day, ’cause why—the harder I and others like me works the better it is for a lot of lazy shirkin’ swabs, who’ve made up their minds that they’ll never do a hand’s turn if they can help it. And I don’t see no fun in workin’ for skowbanks like that. I’ve had about enough of it, and I wants to get away from this here place to somewheres where a man can get the full value of his labour. So I’ve kep’ my eye on you all day to-day, Mr Troubridge, on the lookout for a chance to ast you to let me stow myself away aboard the *Mercury* until she gets well out to sea, intendin’, you understand, sir, to cut and run at the first port that we touches at. But I couldn’t get the chance to speak to you without bein’ seen by them as I didn’t want to see me, so I follered you to-night when you started out for a walk—as I thought—intendin’ to range up alongside of you when we was well clear of the settlement. And afore I could arrange my thoughts shipshape, so’s to make clear what I wanted, you’d jined George here and the young lady, and I couldn’t help hearin’ pretty near all that was said. Now, sir, I understands that you and Gurney feels pretty much as I do about Wilde and his notions, and intends to give the lot of ’em the slip by makin’ off all alone by yourselves in the ship to-night. Ain’t that it, sir?”

“Well, supposing that we had any such plan, what have you to say about it?” I returned.

“Only this, sir,” answered Saunders, “that I begs you most earnestly to let me come in with you. It’s a stiff job, Mr Troubridge, for two people—for the young lady won’t count nothin’ to speak of—to work a ship the size of the *Mercury*, and you’d find me most uncommon useful, I assure ye, sir. I’m an A.B., and knows my business as well as e’er a man—”

“Yes,” I agreed, “that is perfectly true, Saunders, for I have noticed you more often than perhaps you think. But have you considered the tremendous amount of hard work that would fall to your share in such an adventure as you speak of? And hard work is not the only thing that has to be considered; a voyage of the kind that you are talking about is certain to involve a considerable element of danger. Are you—”

“I don’t care that for danger or hardship,” interrupted Saunders, snapping his fingers emphatically. “Only say that I may jine in the picnic, and you shan’t have no cause to regret it, sir.”

“What say you, Gurney?” I asked. “You have a right to a voice in this matter; and you probably know Saunders a good deal better than I do.”

“I say let him come by all means, Mr Troubridge,” answered Gurney. “He is a good man, and will be worth his weight in gold to us.”

“So I think,” agreed I. “But,” turning to Saunders, “are you prepared to start with us now, this instant? For I cannot consent to incur the risk and delay that would be involved in a return to the settlement.”

“There’s no call for me to go back, sir,” answered the man eagerly. “I’ve nobody to say goodbye to. And as to ‘dunnage’, why, I dare say I can make out pretty well durin’ the v’yage by helpin’ myself from the chests I shall find in the fo’c’s’le.”

“Very well, then,” said I, “you may come, Saunders, and welcome. Now, Miss Hartley, step in, please, and sit down while Gurney and I shove off. In with that box though, Gurney; we must not leave that behind. Go aft, Saunders, and help with an oar; but remember, everything must be done in absolute silence.”

The boat, which was already afloat for three parts of her length, was easily launched, and in another minute I was seated in the stern-sheets beside Grace Hartley, while Gurney and Saunders were gently and silently paddling toward the spot where the rest of the boats were moored. We ranged quietly up alongside the longboat, and I got hold of her painter and hauled up the anchor, which I placed in the bottom of the jollyboat. Whereupon the two men at the oars once more gave way gently, and we were soon slowly heading for the ship with the whole string of boats in tow. It took us a full half-hour to accomplish the distance between the ship and the spot where the boats had been moored, and during the whole of that time Gurney and Saunders kept their eyes intently fixed upon the settlement, while I steered; but the place remained wrapped in darkness, and nothing occurred to occasion us the least alarm.

During our stealthy passage across the basin we discussed in low tones the important question of the boats; and it was ultimately settled that we would take two of the four gigs, and at least make an effort to hoist in the longboat, the other two gigs and the jollyboat to be cast adrift and allowed to drive ashore as soon as we were ready to pass out through the reef. Accordingly, as soon as we had arrived alongside the ship, and Grace Hartley and her box had been safely passed up the side, all the boats were veered astern, the longboat and the best two of the gigs each by her own painter, while the other two gigs and the jollyboat were secured together in a string, one astern of the other, so that by casting off one painter all three of the boats would be

released at the same instant, while, being lashed together, they would all go ashore at the same spot.

By the time these arrangements were carried out the hour of midnight had arrived. The moon—or what there was left of her—was not due to rise until an hour and twenty minutes later; but by the time that we had got the two gigs hooked on, and the tackles hauled hand-taut—which was as much as we intended to do with them before getting clear of the basin—we had come to the conclusion that the stars afforded us light enough to see by, and we therefore determined to proceed at once with the task of setting the canvas. I was more anxious over this part of our job than any other, for it was no light task for four people—one of whom was a slender slip of a girl—to sheet home and hoist the fore and main topsails of an eight-hundred-ton ship. It would be rather a lengthy business, and somewhat noisy at that; for on a quiet night the rasping of the chain sheets through the sheeve-holes might be heard at a considerable distance, far enough, indeed, to attract the attention of any sleepless individual in the settlement. Moreover, the inside of the Basin was a particularly quiet spot, being under the lee of the Heads, and thus sheltered to a considerable extent from the sweep of the wind. True, the reef lay to windward, and the ceaseless roar of the surf upon it filled the air with such a volume of sound during the night that other sounds might well be drowned in it; but if perchance any suspicious sounds from the direction of the ship were to reach the settlement, and the alarm be given, it might still be very awkward for us, although we had all the boats. For the settlers had plenty of firearms and ammunition obtained from the cargo; and if they were to muster on the Heads in time to fire upon us as we passed out of the Basin, one or more of us might be hit and disabled, if not killed, which would greatly jeopardise the success of our attempted flight. Still, the risk had to be taken, and all that we could do was to minimise it as much as possible by taking every precaution.

Accordingly the buntlines, clewlines, and leech-lines were cast off and very carefully overhauled, and the watch-tackle hitched to the halyards before any of us went up on the yards; then the gaskets were cast off, and the main topsail sheeted home. To us, with our every sense wrought to its highest pitch by anxiety, the noise was absolutely appalling, and seemed as though it might easily be heard at the most distant extremity of the island; but the die was cast. We had taken our fate in our hands, and there was nothing for it now but to go on and get this part of the business over as quickly as possible; therefore as soon as the sheets seemed to be home we belayed them and sprang to the watch-tackle. With the assistance of this handy little piece of gear we got the heavy yard mastheaded without much difficulty, although the process was a somewhat lengthy one, in consequence of the necessity to frequently fleet the tackle, racking the halyards meanwhile to keep what we had gained. However, we completed the job at length, and then the same process had to be gone through with the fore topsail; and it was while we were dragging away at the halyard of this sail that Grace Hartley, upon whom we had not as yet found it necessary to call for help, came running forward to tell us that lights were beginning to flash out here and there in the settlement. It was true; for when we paused from our labours for a moment to verify the statement I counted four separate points of light, and while we still stood looking, another and another leapt out of the darkness.

“The alarm is given and the men are being roused!” I exclaimed. “Well, it cannot be helped; and, anyhow, they are too late; for before they can even discover that we have the boats we

shall be under way. Tail on again, my hearties, and let us get this yard mastheaded, then our heavy work will be done for the present. Grace, you will find a lantern in the steward's pantry; light it, please, and bring it for'ard, but take care that the gleam is not seen from the shore. Well, there, with the halyards, belay! I think we have all that we can get of it. Saunders, slip out and cast loose the fore topmast staysail. Gurney, lend me a hand to brace round the foreyard!"

Little or no attempt was now made at concealment; we hoisted the fore topmast staysail, and, light as was the breeze inside the Basin, the rustling of that important piece of canvas drummed in our ears with a sound like thunder; but I had sense enough to know that it was exceedingly doubtful whether or not it could be heard at the settlement. The most noisy part of our work was yet to come, however; and to it we now bent our energies. This was the slipping of the cable. We soon had the shackle out, and the released portion of the cable at once rushed through the hawse-pipe with a roar that must certainly be heard at the settlement. Then I dashed aft to the wheel and flung it hard over to help the ship to cant, which she did with, as it seemed to me, most exasperating sluggishness. But she paid off at last, when we hauled aft the staysail sheet, braced up the yards, and the *Mercury* began, very deliberately, to forge ahead, and our great adventure was at length fairly begun. Then, while the ship ratched across the Basin, prior to tacking to pass out between the two Heads, Gurney and Saunders, both of whom were exceptionally powerful men, went to work to hoist the two gigs up to the davits.

By the time that they had got the first boat up, and the second one out of the water, we were far enough to windward to render it necessary to tack in order to avoid putting the old barkie ashore on the northern beach. I was just a little doubtful whether the ship would work under such short canvas, but we had now drawn out from under the lee of the south Head, and were feeling something of the true breeze. The water was smooth, and the ship had very nearly four knots' way on her, I therefore determined to try it, and, giving the word "Ready about!" to the others, put the helm very gently down, my aim being to sail her round, if possible, with as little drag as might be from the rudder. She luffed into the wind quite as freely as could reasonably be expected; and the moment that I heard the head sails begin to flap I jammed the helm hard down and lashed it there, leaving the ship to herself while I sprang to help the others to swing the mainyard. By the time that we had got this and the main topsail yard round the ship was fairly paying off on the other tack, when I sang out to Grace to cast off the lashing and steady the helm. Then, letting go the fore braces, we dragged round the head yards and got them also braced up; whereupon I ran aft to the wheel again, leaving Gurney and Saunders to trim over the fore topmast staysail sheet.

Upon reaching the wheel I found Grace Hartley already perched alongside it, and the ship well to windward of the passage between the Heads. She had fallen off a good bit, owing to the sluggishness with which the head yards had been swung, but she was already coming to, and a few seconds later her jibboom was pointing straight for the middle of the passage, with the Heads looming up on either hand, black as ebony against the faint shimmer of starlight on the waters of the lagoon beyond. Gurney and Saunders now came aft and proceeded to complete the hoisting of the second quarter boat; and seeing that Grace seemed to know pretty well what she was about with the wheel I left her at it, directing her to steer the ship as nearly as might be midway between the two Heads, and went to lend the others a hand with the boat.

We had both davit-tackles "two blocks" by the time that the ship was fairly clear of the Heads

and in the lagoon, after which we put the hatches on and battened them down. Then came the formidable job of endeavouring to hoist in the longboat—and a formidable job it was, when we actually came to seriously consider it. Nevertheless we determined to make the attempt. Time was the only thing needed to assure us success; and it was just in regard to this that we had our doubts. For it must be remembered that although we had got the ship out of the Basin, she was not yet in open water; on the contrary, she was now moving athwart the placid waters of the lagoon, heading about sou'-sou'-east. This lagoon, I think I have somewhere said, was, roughly, crescent-shaped in plan, measuring about ten miles long by about two and a half miles wide at its broadest part, the northern end being a trifle the more weatherly of the two.

Now, our plan was this. A ship, when hove-to, drifts along on a course as nearly as possible at right angles to the direction of the wind, which, in this case, was blowing due east. We therefore proposed to work the *Mercury* up toward the northern end of the lagoon, until, when brought round and hove-to, she should have room to drive slowly to the southward without going ashore on the fringing reef which projected into the lagoon an average distance of a mile from the island. Then, while she was thus drawing to the southward—the available distance being about seven miles, or maybe a trifle more—we were to make the attempt to hoist in the longboat by means of yard tackles, and stow her on the main hatch. The hatches were already on and battened down. To get the chocks into place to receive the boat was but the work of a few minutes; and then came the business of rousing out the yard tackles and getting them aloft. I knew where to lay my hand upon them, and soon had them ready for sending aloft; but by the time that we had got thus far the ship had drawn well over toward the southern end of the barrier reef, and it was time to heave about. We therefore tacked ship again, the old hooker working in much more lively fashion this time, because we were now within the influence of the true breeze. Then, with Grace Hartley still at the wheel, Gurney and Saunders went aloft and got the tackles up on the fore and main yards, also the stay purchases; and we were then ready to begin the actual work itself. The boat was next hauled alongside the starboard gangway, in readiness to be hooked on; when, the ship being by this time as far to the northward as it was prudent to go, we tacked, and hove-to on the port tack.

Chapter Sixteen.

The cataclysm.

No sooner was the ship round and hove-to, with her fore topsail aback, than Gurney and Saunders slid down into the longboat and hooked on the tackles, which I stood by on deck to haul taut. Then by means of a snatch-block, the watch-tackle, and the winch, we proceeded to lift first the bows and then the stern out of the water, a foot or so at a time. It was slow, tedious work; but we were greatly assisted by the light of the moon, which was by this time well above the horizon; and by working as though for our lives we at length managed to get the boat well above the level of the bulwarks, to transfer her weight from the yards to the stay tackles, and to swing her inboard a few minutes before it became imperatively necessary for us to wear round in order to avoid going ashore upon the barrier reef. By this time, too, we were able to see a great crowd of people gathered upon the south Head watching us; and once or twice we even thought we caught the sound of hailing; but their attempts to communicate with us ended with that, a fear which I had entertained that a number of them might attempt to swim out and scramble aboard while we were all busy with the longboat proving groundless.

We contrived to get the ship round with her head to the northward again, just in time to avoid nicely hitting the reef; and then, upon the principle that it is useless to make two bites at a cherry, we determined to complete our task fully before going outside; we therefore got the yard and stay tackles down and stowed away, and the longboat properly secured in gripes before attempting to pass out through the reef. This kept us busy for nearly another hour, at the end of which we tacked for the last time in the lagoon, and bore away for the passage through the reef, which we successfully negotiated just as the sun's upper rim flashed above the horizon, the jollyboat and the two gigs that we intended to leave behind having been cast adrift a quarter of an hour earlier.

We were all by this time beginning to feel the need of both food and rest, we therefore decided to treat ourselves to a good, substantial breakfast to start with; after which, the weather being fine, and the glass high, three out of the four of us might safely venture to snatch a few hours' sleep. Accordingly I went aft to relieve Grace Hartley at the wheel, while she retired to the cabin which had been allotted to her and made a hasty toilet prior to an incursion into the steward's pantry with the view of arranging for breakfast. But Saunders was beforehand with her; for while she was refreshing herself he entered the pantry and gave it an overhaul, finding a smoked ham, a barrel of cabin bread, coffee, cocoa, sugar, and a number of other articles already stowed there by the steward who was to have accompanied the ship on her projected voyage to China. The ham he promptly cut, carrying several slices, together with the coffee, forward to the galley, where Gurney was already busy starting a fire; after which he returned to the cabin and produced a tablecloth, knives and forks, cups and saucers, plates and dishes, and set the table; thus, by the time that Grace was ready, she found all her intentions anticipated. When breakfast was ready, Saunders came and relieved me at the wheel, while I, in company with Gurney and his sweetheart, sat down to breakfast, at which meal it was arranged that I should take the first watch, steering the ship and keeping a lookout until seven bells in the forenoon, when Gurney was to be called to relieve me while I took the sun, Saunders's duty being to prepare a makeshift dinner. The next watch, until eight bells in the

afternoon, was to be Gurney's, when Saunders would come on duty for the first dogwatch, while Grace Hartley was to be allowed to prepare the tea—or supper, as it was then the fashion to call the last meal of the day; in fact, we made out a regular watch-bill, setting forth the sequence of the watches, the names of those who were to keep them, and the additional duties which each person was to perform, Grace Hartley being, of course, let off very lightly, her share of the work being principally confined to easy domestic duties.

As soon as I had finished breakfast I went on deck and relieved Saunders, who went forward to the galley to secure the food that was there being kept hot for him, taking it aft and consuming it in the cabin. I had already determined upon the route that I would take, and was glad to find that while I had been below, the wind had veered just sufficiently to allow the ship to lay her course, close-hauled. Half an hour's further experience revealed the fact that the ship was so nearly steering herself that a very slight adjustment of the helm would enable her to do so entirely, and this adjustment I was able to make with sufficient accuracy within the next twenty minutes to permit of my lashing the wheel and giving my attention to other matters. I therefore got out the chart and spread it open on the cabin table, went on deck again to take the bearings and distance of the island—the latitude and longitude of which I had long ago ascertained and marked upon the chart—and then laid down the ship's position.

Then, finding that the ship still continued to behave satisfactorily under her lashed helm, I got the telescope and went up into the main topmast crosstrees to take a last look at the island, by that time about ten miles distant. It still lay broad on the horizon astern, and so clear was the atmosphere that I was able to distinguish the boats which we had cast adrift, still about a mile from the shore. I next swept the entire horizon with the telescope, in search of other land, or a sail, but not a hint of the presence of either could I detect in any direction. I was especially anxious to fall in with a ship as soon as possible, it being my intention to borrow a few more men, if I could; for our experiences of the past night had already demonstrated to us that while it was certainly possible for us four to handle the ship in fine weather, it meant heavy work, while in bad weather it might easily prove impossible. The one thing of paramount importance to us, while we were so short-handed, was plenty of sea room; and this I was determined to keep, ay, although to do so should add another thousand miles to the length of the voyage.

Having taken a thoroughly exhaustive look round I descended to the deck and busied myself about a number of odd jobs that needed attention, such as hauling taut and coiling up as much of the running gear as had been cast off the pins during the night.

In this way I contrived to pass a fairly busy morning until seven bells, when I called Saunders to turn out and start work in the galley, afterward taking my sextant on deck to catch the meridian altitude of the sun. Then, immediately after dinner, I retired to my cabin and, throwing off the clothing that I had now worn for more than thirty hours, stretched myself upon my bunk, and slept like a log until Grace Hartley—who had left the cabin an hour or so before—knocked at my door to tell me that it was four bells and supper was ready.

By this time we had all had at least six hours' sleep, and felt able to face the coming night with equanimity, the more so for the reason that the weather promised to continue fine. The ship was still under her two topsails and fore topmast staysail, under which she was doing very well, her average rate of sailing throughout the day having been, as nearly as possible, four and a

half knots. There was a nice topgallant breeze blowing, and we all felt that we should like to have availed ourselves of it to the fullest possible extent; but making sail and taking it in were two very different things—we could make sail at our leisure, but we should probably be in a hurry when the shortening process became necessary; moreover, to swing the topsail and lower yards, with the strength at our command, was quite as much as we could well manage. After talking the matter over together, therefore, we ultimately decided to let everything stand just as it was until we could see a little more clearly what was before us.

In this manner, then, the first two days passed, the ship jogging along to the southward at the rate of about one hundred to a hundred and twenty miles in the twenty-four hours, the weather continuing fine and, on the whole, settled, enabling us all to get an ample sufficiency of rest while attending to the duties which each day brought with it.

On the third night, dating from the beginning of our adventure, it fell to me to take the middle watch; and when I went on deck at midnight I still found the weather everything that could be desired, except that the wind was perceptibly lighter than it had been when I turned in some four hours earlier. This change, Saunders informed me, had been in progress during almost the whole of his watch; but I did not think—nor did he—that it portended any very important alteration in the weather, for the sky was perfectly clear, and the stars shone brilliantly. The utmost that I anticipated was a possible shift of wind; which, however, would be no great matter, since it was just as likely to be in our favour as against us. We stood for a few minutes discussing probabilities, and then Saunders bade me good night and went below.

For nearly two hours I stood at the wheel, holding the ship to her course with ever-increasing difficulty; for the wind still continued to drop until we scarcely had steerage-way. Then, with a final sigh the breeze died away altogether, the topsails hung limp and dew-saturated from the yards, the fore topmast staysail sheet drooped amidships, and the *Mercury* swung broadside-on to the scarcely perceptible swell.

Abandoning the now useless wheel, I walked forward to the skylight—in which the cabin lamp, turned low, burned dimly—and had a look at the barometer. It was about a tenth lower than when I had last looked at it, two hours earlier, and that might possibly mean an impending change of weather; but if so, the heavens showed no sign of it thus far, for the sky was still clear as crystal, the stars beamed down with undiminished radiance out of the immeasurable depths of the blue-black vault overhead, and the swell was perceptibly flattening. Then I looked at the clock, which, as is usual at sea, was set every day by the sun. It wanted five minutes to two; I therefore had still two hours of my watch to stand; and, to stave off a certain feeling of drowsiness that was insidiously taking possession of me, I went down on to the main deck and proceeded to pace to and fro in the waist, satisfied that I might walk there as long as I pleased without disturbing the rest of my companions, each of whom occupied a cabin under the poop.

As I thoughtfully walked fore and aft between the main and fore rigging, instinctively treading lightly in sympathy with the profound silence of the night, my imagination carried me back to the island, and I was endeavouring to picture to myself Wilde's rage and disgust upon making the discovery that the ship had prematurely gone to sea, taking with her the girl that he had fully determined to marry, when a low sound, like the muttering of far-distant thunder, awoke me out of my reverie. I sprang up on the poop and flung a hasty glance around the horizon to see if I

could anywhere catch the glimmer of distant lightning, thinking that possibly a squall might be brewing. Far away to the northward I did indeed distinctly see what appeared to be the reflection in the sky of certain ruddy flashes, but they hardly looked to me like lightning, or, at all events, like the kind of lightning which I had been accustomed to see.

Meanwhile the low, muttering sound had not died away, as thunder does; on the contrary, it was not only continuous but was steadily growing; in volume with amazing rapidity, proceeding apparently from the direction of those curious ruddy flashes, which were also growing stronger, even as I stood staring and wondering what the phenomenon might mean. As the sound steadily increased so did its resemblance to thunder—or the rapid firing of heavy guns—become more pronounced, a distinct booming, like that of frequent heavy explosions, making itself heard in the midst of the continuous rumble—which seemed to me to be drawing nearer with frightful rapidity. Then, as I still gazed in perplexity toward the spot from which this mysterious and terrifying sound seemed to emanate, I caught the gleam of white water on the northern horizon; and no longer doubting that a heavy squall—of a character quite unknown to me, and perhaps peculiar to those waters—was about to burst upon us, I dashed down the poop ladder and into the cabin, uttered one yell of: “All hands on deck!” and then dashed out again on to the main deck, springing first to the main topsail halyards and letting them run, and then doing the same by the fore.

By the time that I had cast off the fore topsail halyards, Gurney and Saunders, alarmed by my cry, were out on deck, while in the doorway of the cabin stood Grace Hartley with a wrap of some sort thrown over her shoulders.

“What is it, Mr Troubridge—what, in the name of all that is terrible, is happening?” demanded Gurney, gazing about him in amazement.

“Man the reef tackles, for your lives!” I shouted. “Don’t you hear the squall thundering down upon us? If we are not lively it will whip the masts out of her—indeed I am not sure but it will in any case! Here we are; lay hold, and drag—Grace, go back to your cabin—this is no place for you!”

Gurney sprang to one of the reef tackles, while Saunders and I dragged at the other, yelling our “Yo ho’s!” as we did so. Meanwhile the awful booming and crashing sounds seemed to be sweeping down toward us on the wings of the squall, and so heavy had they by this time become that we could actually feel the ship trembling with the reverberation of them. The next second that frightful combination of rumbling and crashing sounds was all about us, mingled now with the hoarse roar of heavily breaking water; the ship suddenly began to pitch and roll with a violence which deprived us of all power to do anything more than just cling for our lives to the nearest object that we could lay hold of; the sea all about us suddenly broke into a mad turmoil of raging waters, white with the glare of phosphorescence, leaping, foaming, and swirling hither and thither with appalling violence; huge masses of water flung themselves high in the air and crashed in over our bulwarks, forward, aft, and amidships, all at the same moment, deluging our decks and threatening to sweep us overboard; and in the midst of it all we felt a succession of violent shocks, as though the ship were being swept over a reef by a violent tide race. But there was no wind; not a breath, save such slight baffling draughts as were probably created by the violent motion of the sea around us.

Those grating, hammering shocks lasted perhaps half a minute, then they suddenly ceased; the deep rumbling, crashing sound swept past us away down to the southward, and gradually died away; the roar of broken water changed its note and became the seething hiss of an innumerable multitude of streams rushing over a rocky bed and cascading from one level to the other; and the ship once more floated motionless, or nearly so. And throughout the whole of this soul-shaking experience the stars beamed calmly down upon us with undimmed splendour.

For a few seconds we three men stood staring at each other in awestruck silence; then Gurney spoke, with a curious little quaver in his voice.

“That was no squall, Mr Troubridge,” said he. “It was a submarine earthquake, and of extraordinary violence, too. I should not be in the least surprised if you find that its effects have been powerful and widespread enough to make your chart of these seas absolutely useless to you. For instance, we are supposed to be a long way off soundings here, are we not? Yet what are we to make of those shocks that we felt just now; were they merely the result of the earth tremor communicated to the water, and through it to the hull of the ship; or were we actually swept violently over the surface of a shoal? I should like, just for curiosity’s sake, to take a cast of the—”

He paused suddenly. While speaking, his eyes had been fixed intently upon something that he seemed to see over my shoulder, away out on the port side of the ship; and now, without attempting to finish his sentence, he abruptly walked to the rail and stood staring out over it.

“What is the matter, Gurney; what do you think you see?” I demanded, going to his side, and somehow thrilled by the queerness of his manner.

“Come up on the poop,” he said; “we shall see better from there.”

He led the way, and I followed; and as I drew to his side he slowly stretched forth his arm in a pointing attitude, and, sweeping his hand slowly right round the horizon, said, in a low, impressive voice that was almost a whisper, the single word:

“Look!”

Then, for the first time, I saw the explanation of his strangeness of manner. While he had been voicing his anticipations as to the possible effects of the earthquake, I had been looking at him, meanwhile merely catching a suggestion out of the corner of my eye, as it were, of the fact that the disturbance of the ocean’s surface around us was very rapidly subsiding, but without grasping the significance of it all; for I was listening to what he was saying, and turning it over in my mind. But now, as we stood together on the poop and gazed out in every direction round about us, I saw, to my unspeakable awe and consternation, that what, a quarter of an hour earlier, had been, to the best of my knowledge and belief, an unfathomable ocean was now, to a very large extent, dry land! That is to say, the ship appeared to be floating—or was she aground?—in a kind of pond, or small lake, of perhaps eight or ten acres in extent, surrounded on every side by land of some sort, off the rugged surface of which the salt water was still pouring in a multitude of little streams and cataracts. How far this land extended it was at that moment quite impossible to say; but, so far as could be seen in the dim uncertain light of the stars, it appeared to extend nearly or quite to the horizon. And the whole of it had been hove up

from the ocean depths in the space of a few seconds. True, this part of the great Pacific Ocean was thickly dotted with reefs and shoals, the positions of many of which had never been accurately determined, while it was known that there were many others with a sufficient depth of water upon them to allow a ship to pass safely over them in any weather. This might possibly be one of them; but, even so, the fact remained that a low island of quite respectable extent had suddenly been created.

“Well, Gurney,” I exclaimed, looking round in ever-growing amazement, “this is something quite new in the way of shipwrecks; something, indeed, that, if recorded in the newspapers, would be denounced by the clever ones who know everything as an outrageous falsehood, an audacious attempt to impose upon people’s credulity.”

“Very possibly,” agreed Gurney. “I have run up against a good many people in my time who seem to make a point of disbelieving everything that has not come within the scope of their own actual experience. Yet there is nothing so very wonderful in this business, after all. New land is frequently being discovered where deep water is known to have previously existed; and this is a case in point, that is all. And, as to calling our present plight a shipwreck—well, I think it is rather anticipating matters to do that. If we had chanced to be caught floating immediately over any of that portion that has been hove out of water, and the ship left high and dry, we might be justified in calling ourselves shipwrecked; but here we are, still afloat; and who is to say that a way may not be found out of this dock into the open ocean?”

“Yes,” I agreed, “there is certainly something in what you say. But are we really afloat? The ship seems too absolutely motionless for that. Let us get the lead-line, and take a cast.”

“Ay, ay, Mr Troubridge; that’s the proper thing to do!” exclaimed Saunders, who meanwhile had joined us. “I’ll get the lead and take a few casts all round her.” And he hurried off to put his resolve into execution.

As he descended to the main deck by way of the starboard poop ladder, Grace Hartley, fully clad, ascended to the poop by way of the other, and, approaching us, exclaimed:

“Oh, George—oh, Mr Troubridge, whatever dreadful thing has happened, and what does this unnatural stillness of the ship mean?”

“It means, Gracie dear,” answered Gurney, “that there has been a violent submarine earthquake, which has replaced most of the water that was round about us, half an hour ago, with dry land, as you may see by looking about you. And the ‘unnatural stillness’ of the ship, as you call it, is due to the fact that we are now afloat—at least I hope so—in a small lake, instead of upon the open ocean. That is the sum and substance of what has happened; and to that statement I may add that the earthquake has passed and there is now no further danger. There is therefore no reason why you should not be in bed, Miss Hartley, and there I very strongly advise you to go, forthwith.”

“Thank you, Mr George Gurney, both for your information and your advice,” answered Grace, with a little quavering laugh, that testified to the extent of the alarm from which the poor girl had been suffering. “As to the latter, however,” she continued, “I shall not follow it, for the simple reason that it would be quite impossible for me to sleep, notwithstanding your reassuring

statement that all danger has now passed. Therefore, as I imagine that you men will not attempt to turn in again to-night, I shall go to the galley, light the fire, and make you each a cup of good strong coffee, for which I believe you will all be the better."

So saying, she tripped away on to the main deck, and forward to the galley, from the dark recesses of which we presently saw a cheerful light gleaming; and within half an hour our ministering angel had placed within the hands of each of us a cup of steaming hot coffee and a buttered biscuit.

Meanwhile Saunders, having procured the lead-line and a lantern, proceeded to sound systematically all round the ship, with the result that in due time he rejoined us on the poop, reporting as follows:—

"There's a bed of soft mud under our bows, Mr Troubridge, on which we've grounded to about as far aft as the fore riggin'. Beyond that, I reckon the ship's afloat, for at that p'int there's eighteen foot of water, gradually deepenin' to twenty-two foot under the starn-post. I don't reckon that we're so very hard and fast on the mud, hows'ever; for there's a good seventeen foot o' water under the bows; and I noticed, when we'd finished loadin' her t'other day, that she only drawed seventeen foot six for'ard."

Chapter Seventeen.

The reef.

"That is good news," I remarked, when Saunders had completed his report; "for, short-handed though we are, I think it may be possible for us to get the ship afloat again. Then if, as you, Gurney, have suggested, there happens to be a channel carrying depth enough to float us, we may yet hope to find our way into open water once more. Let us pray, however, that the channel—if such exists—does not trend to windward, unless, of course, it happens to be wide enough to work the ship in. And now, I think our first job must be to clew up and furl our canvas, otherwise, when the breeze comes—as come it may at any moment—we shall drive ashore in grim earnest, and perhaps never get afloat again."

My two companions fully agreed with me; and accordingly, the halyards having already been let go, and the yards lowered to the caps, we let go the sheets and manned the clewlines and buntlines, first of the main and then of the fore topsail. Then we let go the fore topmast staysail halyards and hauled down the sail; finally laying out and securing it before going aloft to furl the topsails, which we tackled one at a time.

The next thing to be thought about was how to provide for the safety of the ship when the breeze should come again, as come it soon must. As the ship then lay she was heading almost exactly due east; and if the wind should happen to come away out from that quarter—which seemed to be its prevailing direction thereabout—I thought it not improbable that we might blow off the mudbank and go ashore again on the lee side of the lake, quite possibly in a very much worse position than that which we then occupied. Gurney and Saunders were quite of my opinion; and after talking the matter over for a while, we decided to get the stream anchor over

the bows, in place of the one left behind at the island, bend a hawser to it, and have it all ready to let go at any moment. This we did without any difficulty, the anchor in question being of a weight not too great for the three of us to handle.

By the time that this job was ended the first signs of the coming dawn began to show themselves away to the eastward, and with one consent Gurney, Saunders, and I sprang into the main rigging and made our way aloft to the crosstrees, with the purpose of taking a good look round at our surroundings. In those low latitudes the day comes quickly, and we had not occupied our lofty perch many minutes when up leapt the sun, flashing his golden beams over the dark expanse spread out around us, and we saw, to our dismay, that we occupied a small basin—one of many such—situated almost in the exact centre of a vast reef, stretching over a distance which we roughly estimated at thirty miles from north to south, and perhaps twenty miles from east to west. The salt water that had been hove up with the reef had by this time all run off, leaving the dark, weed-covered rock fully exposed to view. Here and there, of course, owing to the exceeding roughness and irregularity of the surface, were scattered numerous pools, some small, and others of considerable extent, which must obviously soon evaporate and disappear under the influence of the sun's beams; and the disagreeable possibility suggested itself to us all that the pool in which the *Mercury* floated might share the same fate. But we hoped not, for there were at least three channels, wide enough to permit the passage of the ship, leading out of our basin, stretching away across the reef, and joining other channels, until the labyrinth became too intricate for the eye to follow, and we trusted that one or more of these might lead to the open ocean.

While we still remained aloft, discussing our situation and the best means of extricating ourselves from it, a light air from the eastward arose, redolent of the mingled odours of mud and seaweed; and as a wind from this direction, if it would but come strong enough, might greatly assist our efforts to get the ship off the mudbank upon which she was partially grounded, we decided that we would at once try the effect of setting the main topsail and throwing it aback; so while Gurney and Saunders proceeded with this work, I looked about me for a suitable berth in which to moor the ship, in the event of our efforts to refloat her being crowned with success. At the height of the main topmast crosstrees it was easy for me to discern pretty clearly the character of the bottom of the basin in which we lay, and as the light increased I discovered that the mudbank which held the ship was only of very small extent, the remaining portion of the bottom being sandy, apparently of almost uniform depth below the surface of the water, and affording excellent holding ground. There was one place, however, some two hundred fathoms to the southward of the spot where the ship then lay, which seemed to be a trifle deeper than elsewhere, and I at once determined that, if we could by any means clear ourselves of the mud, I would anchor there.

By the time that I had thus decided, the other two had cast off the gaskets from the main topsail. I therefore slid down on deck by way of the topgallant backstay, and cast off the clewlines and buntlines that Saunders might overhaul them prior to coming down from aloft, and then manned the sheets, which, of course, came home easily enough, except for the last few inches, upon which I required the help of Gurney and Saunders. Then, having squared the main and topsail yard, we got the halyard to the winch, with the aid of a snatch-block, and hoisted the sail, flat aback. Gurney then went forward and loosed the fore topmast staysail ready for setting in case of need, while Saunders got the hand lead and dropped it over the side, in order

that we might be able at once to detect any movement on the part of the ship.

The wind meanwhile had freshened perceptibly, and was now blowing a ten-knot breeze, the effect of which soon became perceptible, for the lead-line had not been overboard five minutes when Saunders cried out that the ship was moving. At the same moment I distinctly felt a slight tremor in the hull, followed by a barely perceptible jerk, then another, another, and another, and she was once more afloat and driving astern. I at once sprang to the wheel, and put it hard a-starboard, at the same time shouting to Gurney and Saunders to hoist the fore topmost staysail. Then, leaving the wheel to take care of itself, I sprang to the main braces, throwing the port main and topsail braces off their pins, and rounding in on the starboard as well as I could unaided. The ship had now paid off on the port tack; and as soon as the starboard fore topmast staysail sheet was hauled aft, she began to forge ahead, whereupon I rushed back to the wheel, steadied it, and called to Gurney to stand by to let go the stream anchor, and to Saunders to take a cast of the lead. The first cast gave us a bare four fathoms; the next, a trifle over four fathoms; the next, four and a half fathoms; and the next, five fathoms; whereupon I gave the word to let go the anchor and haul down the staysail, at the same time abandoning the wheel and springing to the main topsail halyard, which I let run. By the time that we had once more furled our canvas, breakfast was ready, and we all sat down to it with excellent appetites.

Having breakfasted, Gurney and I again betook ourselves aloft to the main topmast crosstrees, carrying the ship's telescope with us, our object being to subject the reef to a thorough scrutiny, in the hope that, with the sun now high in the heavens, and the light as good as it was likely to be, we might be fortunate enough to discover a way of escape from our extraordinary prison.

As a matter of fact we did now get a much clearer and, on the whole, more satisfactory view of the reef than upon the previous occasion; but although we perceived a perfect network of channels—some so narrow as scarcely to permit the passage of a boat, while others were wide enough in places actually to allow a ship to work to windward in them—the inequalities in the surface of the reef were so great as to render it impossible for us to trace any of them for more than three or four miles at the utmost. There were four channels, wide enough to allow the passage of the ship, branching out from the basin in which we lay, one trending toward the north-east; another running off toward the north-west, and then, apparently, by a zigzag course ultimately leading to open water on the west side of the reef; a third running west out of the basin for a distance of about three miles, beyond which its farther course became untraceable; and a fourth, broad on our starboard bow, which looked the most promising of all. We counted seven pools, or lakelets, in addition and similar to our own—three to the northward, one to the eastward, two to the southward, and one to the south-westward of our own; but the one in which the *Mercury* floated seemed to be the largest of them all. The reef appeared to be composed wholly of rock, covered for the most part with weed, but with broad expanses of sand here and there, interspersed with mud banks; and its height above the ocean level seemed to vary from about a foot to ten or fifteen feet, with occasional isolated hummocks, rising perhaps as high in some cases as forty feet. With the aid of the telescope we were able to perceive that considerable quantities of fish had been stranded and left to perish by the sudden upheaval, and the appearance of them caused me a slight spasm of alarm on the score of our health, which was only partially dissipated by the fact, to which Gurney directed my attention, that already great flocks of sea birds had appeared and were busily devouring them.

We remained aloft for more than an hour, studying the reef and, so far as I was concerned, making copious notes and a rough sketch map of it in my notebook, and then descended to the deck, having come to the conclusion that the only thing to be done was to make a systematic exploration of the reef, and especially of the channels, by means of one of the boats.

For this purpose we selected the larger of the two quarter boats, a very handsomely modelled craft of twenty-six feet long by six feet beam, with a keel nearly eight inches deep in midships, and rigged as a fore-and-aft schooner. She had been the late captain's fancy boat, used by him for sailing ashore from open roadsteads, and was fitted with air-chambers forward and aft and under each of the thwarts, thus being converted into a sort of unsinkable lifeboat. She was therefore in every respect eminently suitable for the duty upon which we proposed to employ her.

I was rather afraid that, upon learning our purpose, Grace Hartley might express a desire to accompany us; and this would be somewhat awkward, in view of the rough work which might possibly lie before us; but to my relief she expressed herself as perfectly content to remain aboard alone, upon being assured that no harm could possibly happen to the ship. We therefore bent the ensign on to the main signal halyards, showed her how to hoist it, and directed her to run it up to the main truck in the event of anything occurring to render our immediate return to the ship necessary. Then, having hastily stowed away a few biscuits and a piece of cold salt beef in the boat's stern locker, and placed a small breaker of fresh water in her for ballast, we lowered her to the water, brought her to the gangway, rigged her, and got away about six bells in the forenoon watch, Grace waving her farewells to us from the poop.

We decided to begin our exploration by examining the channel which opened on the south side of the basin, as that was the widest and the most promising of the four. Accordingly, upon leaving the ship, we brought the boat close to the wind on the port tack—which just enabled her to point fair for the mouth of the channel—and at once proceeded to take soundings. But we had not been under way five minutes before we found that, under whole canvas, the boat travelled much too fast to enable us to sound with the frequency and accuracy that I considered necessary; we were consequently obliged to take in the foresail altogether, and sail the boat under the single-reefed mainsail and jib, at least during the outward journey.

Within ten minutes of leaving the ship we glided into the channel which it was our intention to explore, and found ourselves slipping along a waterway ranging from two hundred to a thousand feet in width, with an average depth of about five fathoms. The sides of the channel were very rough and irregular, its direction was also exceedingly erratic, varying from east-south-east to south by west. This irregularity of direction was the worst feature of the channel; for, with the prevailing direction of the wind at about due east, there were stretches of the channel looking so close into the wind's eye that the ship could never be sailed through them. True, some of these stretches were so short that Gurney believed the *Mercury* could be carried through them by making a half-board; but this would be a somewhat hazardous experiment, unless the wind chanced to veer a point or two in our favour, while, even then, there were other stretches that could only be traversed by kedging. But, apart from this disadvantage, there was nothing to find fault with, the channel being everywhere wide enough to permit the passage of the ship, and the depth in it never less than twenty feet, with a fine sandy bottom.

We traversed this channel for a distance of about nine miles, during which the general trend of it might be said to be south-east, and then we arrived at a point where it not only widened out, but also abruptly took a south-south-west direction, to our great delight. For if the ship could by any means be coaxed as far as this, she could then proceed with a free wind. But, alas for our hopes, we had not traversed more than another mile and a half before we found ourselves in a cul-de-sac, the channel coming to an abrupt end.

This was a very severe disappointment to us, for after travelling so far, and meeting with so few difficulties, we were already beginning to congratulate ourselves upon having found a way of escape at the first attempt. However, there was no use in worrying about it, the only thing to be done was to retrace our steps and try one of the other channels.

It must not be supposed that the channel which we had thus traversed to its extremity was unbroken; on the contrary, there were several other channels branching out of it to right and left at various points in its length, two of which at least—one about three miles back, and another five miles back—had struck us as not altogether unpromising, and our idea was now to return and examine these. But before starting upon our return journey Gurney made a suggestion that was destined to exercise an extraordinary influence upon our future. As we lay hove-to in the cul-de-sac, discussing the question of what should next be done, our attention had been more than once attracted toward a large hummock of rock rising some thirty or forty feet above the general level of the reef, at no great distance from the margin of the channel; and Gurney's proposal was that, before attempting anything else, we should land, make our way to the hummock, climb it, and ascertain whether any observations of value were to be made from its summit. The proposal had so much to commend it that it was agreed to forthwith. Laying the boat alongside the rock at a convenient spot, we all three landed, and set out to walk across the reef. The hummock in question was only some two hundred yards from the margin of the channel; we therefore soon reached it, despite the difficulty of the going, the surface of the reef proving to be exceedingly rough, and covered for the most part with weed so terribly slippery that it was positively dangerous to attempt to walk upon it. When at length we reached the summit of the rock we were not much better off; for although we could see from thence a great deal more of the reef than was to be observed from the boat, we made no discoveries that were likely to facilitate our escape.

But while we stood upon the summit of this rock, staring about us, our attention was arrested by the sight of a great brown patch, some three or four acres in extent, showing up strongly against the dull black of the otherwise weed-covered rock. Although it obviously had nothing to do with channels, or extricating the ship from her extraordinary situation, our curiosity was aroused, and we determined to pay it a visit and ascertain its character before returning to the boat. It lay some three hundred yards to the south of the hummock, and we saw that, upon returning from it to the boat, we should only need to pass close to the eastward of the hummock to hit off the correct trail.

Accordingly we descended to the surface of the reef, and headed for the mysterious brown patch, which we soon reached, some suspicion of its true character having dawned upon us, even before we arrived at the spot, from the circumstance that, as we approached, our nostrils became cognisant of a "most ancient and fish-like smell". The suspicion that we had formed was confirmed upon our arrival by the discovery that the object of our curiosity was a great bed

of oysters, hove up and exposed to the air by the convulsion of the previous night. But, fond as I am of oysters, I did not care to tackle any of these; for, apart from the fact that many of them were already dead, I did not altogether like the appearance of them. They were very much larger than the ordinary edible oyster; and to my mind they did not look quite wholesome. Saunders, however, was far less fastidious than either Gurney or me; he found one or two that, being immersed in a shallow pool of salt water, were still alive, and announced his intention of trying them. Accordingly, producing a strong clasp knife, he contrived, with some difficulty, to open one; and no sooner had he forced the shells apart than I guessed that we had all stumbled upon a fortune, in extent probably "beyond the dreams of avarice!" For as the shells parted, exposing the fish, three or four small bead-like objects became revealed, that I instantly recognised as pearls. The oysters were undoubtedly pearl oysters; and the millions of shells that lay at our feet doubtless contained gems enough to make us all rich for the remainder of our days!

Not to be behindhand with Saunders, I seized one of the bivalves, already dead and with the shells gaping apart, and tore it open; but although the shell was lined with beautiful lustrous mother-o'-pearl, it was barren of gems. Flinging this away, I tried another, and a third and fourth, with a like result; a fifth yielded nine small pearls about the size of duck shot; numbers six and seven proved barren; but the eighth surrendered to my eager grasp a magnificent pearl, perfectly globular, quite half an inch in diameter, and, when cleaned, of exquisite lustre and colour. Gurney and Saunders meanwhile had been as busily engaged as myself, and between them had secured three more gems not quite so large as mine, and about as much seed pearl as would half fill an ordinary wineglass. One of the three smaller pearls, however—secured by Gurney—amply made up in beauty what it lacked in size, for it was of a most exquisitely delicate yet rich rose colour.

"My friends," said I, as soon as I was able to collect my scattered senses and speak intelligibly, "it is said that the darkest cloud has a silver lining, and the extraordinary accident by which we have become imprisoned in the meshes of this reef—let us hope only temporarily—has at the same time presented us with a treasure of incalculable value. I think we should be almost criminally negligent if we failed to make the utmost of our marvellous good fortune, and I therefore propose that, before we proceed further with the exploration of the reef, we take steps to secure the wealth that lies spread so lavishly at our feet. Let us take these oysters and spread them—or at least a portion of them—in rows, so that the sun may get at them and speedily bring about that state of decomposition which I understand is necessary to enable the gems they contain to be secured uninjured. And I further propose that, whatever be the value of the wealth we may ultimately secure, it be equally divided between all four of us; for it would be manifestly unfair that Miss Hartley should not equally participate in our good as in our ill fortune. What say you?"

My companions cheerfully agreed with my proposal, and, this point settled, we forthwith proceeded to collect the oysters indiscriminately from the enormous heap and lay them out singly upon the seaweed in long rows, taking care to place each bivalve quite flat, in order that, as the process of decomposition proceeded, the precious contents should not roll out and be lost. So absorbed were we in our occupation that we did not desist until the sun hung upon the very verge of the western horizon, by which time we had placed in position very nearly three thousand oysters. And not until then did we find time to remember that we had eaten nothing

since leaving the ship!

Then, returning to the boat, we cleansed our hands in the water alongside, shook out our reef, set all our canvas, and headed the boat back to the ship, snatching a hasty meal as we went.

Chapter Eighteen.

The pearls.

The breeze freshened with the disappearance of the sun beneath the horizon, and the boat, under whole canvas and in the perfectly smooth water of the canal-like channel, fairly flew along, careening almost gunwale-to, with a merry buzzing of water at her sharp stem, as she sheared through it with a sound like the rending of silk. In about an hour and a half, favoured with a free wind, and a sufficiency of starlight to enable us to see our way, we found ourselves once more alongside the ship, tired with the fatigues of the day, but excited and happy at the amazing good fortune that had befallen us. For the moment we could neither think nor talk of anything but pearls; the precarious situation of the ship and the consideration of what might happen to her should a gale spring up were entirely lost sight of, and already Saunders, if not Gurney and myself, was anxiously considering what he should do with his wealth when he had conveyed it safely home. Grace Hartley, woman-like, fairly gloated over the sight of the lovely gems that we had brought back with us, and earnestly besought us that she might be allowed to accompany us on our next visit to the oyster-bed, in order that she might have the delight of securing a few with her own hands; and after some demur we promised that she might do so on the following day, by the end of which she would probably have had quite enough of it; for decomposition of animal matter is speedy under a tropical sun, and our experience even of a single day led us all to conclude that another twenty-four hours would reduce the stranded oysters to a condition sufficiently revolting to tax even male endurance pretty severely.

The following morning found us all early astir, and the moment that breakfast was over the boat was brought alongside and our provisions for the day passed down into her. Then Gurney descended and assisted his sweetheart down the side, Saunders following, and I bringing up the rear. The boat's sails were set, and under whole canvas we pushed off on our way to the oyster-bed; for the craving for wealth was upon us all, and we felt that every moment spent otherwise than in gathering it was so much wasted time.

The breeze was still blowing fresh, and, although for the greater part of the distance the boat was jammed close upon a wind, we made excellent time between the ship and our point of destination, arriving there after a pleasant sail of less than two hours. But long before we arrived I began to wish that I had thought of putting a gun into the boat; for while we were still a good two miles from the oyster-bed we saw the birds hovering over it in thousands, and I strongly suspected that upon arrival we should find that those same birds had played havoc with our previous day's work. And so we did; for when we reached the spot we found our neatly arranged rows of oysters turned topsy-turvy by the birds in their endeavours to get at the fish, while the odour that emanated from the millions of dead bivalves was already powerful enough to upset any but a strong stomach.

Although the birds had completely disarranged our labours of the preceding day, they did not appear to have otherwise done any very serious damage. It is true that every single oyster that we had laid out so carefully had been attacked, dragged out of place, and the fish extracted; but nearly a hundred pearls of value were found between the otherwise empty shells, while a careful examination of the ground revealed fully as many more, together with as much seed pearl as would rather more than fill a half-pint measure. Grace Hartley accompanied us from the boat to the oyster-bed, and remained long enough to actually find for herself two very fine pearls; but that sufficed. She confessed that the effluvium was altogether too powerful for her, and beat a hasty retreat to the boat, where she spent the remainder of the day in comparative comfort, only an occasional faint whiff of odour reaching her there. As for us males, we had taken the precaution to bring along with us a ship's bucket, which we filled with salt water upon leaving the boat, and every pearl found, whether large or small, was dropped into this as soon as found.

Our first task was to go very carefully over the ground upon which we had laid out our oysters on the previous day, retrieving the pearls that had been thrown out of the shells by the birds in their endeavours to extract the fish; and when we had satisfied ourselves that no more were to be found there, we turned our attention to the bed itself, where also the birds had been, and still remained, exceedingly busy. But we did not then attempt to look for spilled pearls, for the bulk of the oysters were by this time dead, and had been so long enough to render the opening of the shells quite an easy matter. We therefore wandered about the bed examining such of the shells as happened to be gaping open, extracting any pearls that might happen to be therein, and then flinging fish and shell as far away to leeward as we could. We had done with those, and now tossed them aside, in order that we might not inadvertently find ourselves handling them a second time. We toiled assiduously throughout the whole of that day, my two companions smoking steadily all the time in order to counteract, as far as might be, the sickening odour of the fast-decaying fish.

When we knocked off work shortly before sunset we found that altogether we had gathered during the day five hundred and nineteen pearls varying in size from a large pea to a marble, and nearly a quart measure full of seed pearl. Our prizes were, generally speaking, of the usual soft, sheeny, white colour; but there were exceptions to this, two more pink pearls being found, as well as one of a deep rich exquisite rose colour, one of a very delicate shade of sea-green, and seven of so very dark a smoke colour that they were almost black. We did not think very much of these last, believing that their extremely dark colour was against them; but we ultimately discovered that this was very far from being the case, that precise shade of colour being exceedingly rare.

None of us had much appetite for food that night when we got back to the ship; and when we turned out next morning we were even less desirous of food than we had been on the previous evening. We were all suffering from violent headaches, accompanied by great nausea, and were fain to confess that we had had quite enough of the oyster-bed for the present. We therefore soon agreed to let that part of the reef very severely alone for at least a week, and to devote the interval to the prosecution of our survey of the channel. Accordingly, after making an ineffectual attempt to do justice to the excellent meal which Grace Hartley had provided for us, we three males hauled the boat alongside, descended into her, and got under way.

Our course, for the first seven and a half miles, lay along the canal leading to the oyster-bed, our purpose being to examine two promising-looking channels that branched out of it, and that we had already noticed and commented upon. On reaching the more distant—and, as we thought, the more promising—of the two we bore up and, with the wind over our starboard quarter, ran away on a west-south-west course for about five miles, next hauling up to about south. But by the time that we had run some four miles in this new direction we saw clearly that this channel could be of no possible service to us, for it began to shoal, and ultimately became too shallow to float the ship; therefore as, simultaneously with this discovery, we caught a strong whiff of tainted wind from our oyster-bed, some four miles to windward, we put down our helm, tacked, and retraced our steps, going back a couple of miles along the oyster-bed channel to the other channel which we desired to examine.

It was by this time about noon, and the purer air of the reef generally—although even that was not wholly innocent of a suggestion of decaying fish—had so far restored our appetites that we decided to pipe to dinner; accordingly, upon entering the new channel we opened out the package that Grace had prepared for us, and fell to. The channel in which we now found ourselves trended generally about north-east by east for a distance of some four and a half miles, there were therefore short stretches in it here and there where the wind came too shy to allow the boat to lay her course, and we consequently had to beat to windward, a long leg and a short one, in those stretches.

At length we reached a point where the channel took a due northerly trend, when away we went with flowing sheets, but under short canvas, sounding industriously all the way. Then, after we had traversed some ten miles in all of this new channel, we quite suddenly and unexpectedly found ourselves in a basin, very similar to that in which the *Mercury* lay peacefully at anchor, but not quite so large. We coasted along the weather side of this basin for a distance of about two miles, and then found another channel, which we at once entered. This channel trended north-east, but we had not sailed above four miles before it narrowed so much that we saw it would be useless to us, and we therefore bore up and returned to the newly-discovered basin. Continuing our progress round this, we found another channel, branching out of its north-western extremity, and as it had a rather promising appearance we plunged into it. It trended away to the northward and westward for the first seven miles, then turned abruptly toward the southward for a distance of some five miles, when we found ourselves in another channel trending about north-north-west and south-south-east.

This channel was even more promising than the one which we had just emerged from, being almost double the width; but we were puzzled for the moment as to which direction to take, whether to head to the northward or the southward. The northerly-trending channel might lead anywhere; the southerly portion, on the other hand, looked as though it might possibly take us back to the ship, the spars of which were visible some nine miles away. We decided to try the latter, as the day was by this time well advanced, and, should we ultimately find ourselves obliged to retrace our steps, it would make us very late in getting back to the ship. Fortunately, however, we were not driven to this latter alternative, for after following the winding course of the southerly channel for a distance of some twelve miles we arrived at the north-eastern extremity of the basin in which the *Mercury* lay at anchor, and safely arrived alongside half an hour later, having spent the day in circumnavigating a portion of the reef which we thus discovered to be entirely surrounded by channels of a width and depth of water sufficient to

allow of the passage of the ship. This discovery, however, was of no practical service to us; for it still left us in our original state of uncertainty regarding the existence of a channel through which the ship might be taken into open water.

The narrative of our efforts to find such a channel has been given thus far with considerable detail, in order to bring home to the reader some idea of the extreme awkwardness of our situation, and the difficulties and perplexities with which we found ourselves confronted; but there is no need to continue the story further in quite so detailed a form, since the progress of our researches was unaccompanied by anything in the nature of adventure. Let it suffice, therefore, to say that we traversed the multitudinous canal-like channels of that labyrinthine reef continuously for ten days longer before we found a passage of sufficient width, and with a sufficient depth of water in it everywhere, to enable the *Mercury* to go through it to the open sea. This passage, when found, proved to be a continuation of the channel originating in the north-eastern angle of what we had now come to speak of as the Mercury Basin, from the fact that the ship lay anchored in it. Although it was an undoubted fact that we had actually found a channel leading from this basin to open water, the difficulties in the way of successfully carrying the ship through it were so great that we had very grave doubts of our ability to accomplish it. In the first place, the course of the channel was of so winding a character that, according to a very careful estimate, the ship would have to traverse no less than a hundred and ten miles of waterway before clearing the reef; consequently it would be impossible to accomplish the whole distance during the hours of daylight of a single day; while to attempt the navigation of any portion of it during the hours of darkness was altogether too hazardous an undertaking to be calmly thought of. But, as though this difficulty were not in itself sufficient, there was a stretch of twelve miles of channel running in a north-easterly direction which the ship could not possibly negotiate under sail unless a change of wind should occur—of which there seemed to be absolutely no prospect. The only alternative, therefore, would be to kedge those twelve miles; truly a most formidable undertaking for four persons—one of them being a girl—to attempt. Fortunately, however, for us all, the problem of how to overcome these tremendous difficulties was solved for us by accident, and quite unexpectedly. For, upon going over this long and intricate channel again, in order thoroughly to familiarise ourselves with it, and to become better acquainted with its many danger-points, it happened that on the return journey—which was being made by moonlight—we missed our way, continuing along what appeared to be the main channel, instead of diverging into a branch trending to the eastward; and by the time that we discovered our mistake we were so favourably impressed with the appearance of this new, strange channel—which seemed to be running almost straight toward Mercury Basin—that we determined to follow it up and see whither it led.

Not to dilate unnecessarily upon this portion of our adventures, we discovered, to our infinite satisfaction and delight, that it did indeed ultimately conduct us back to the ship; and that, too, by a route which reduced the distance to be travelled to about forty-five miles, or very considerably less than half that of the other channel. Moreover, while the original channel first ran north, then north-east, for the twelve miles that were only to be covered by kedging—before it ultimately changed its course to south—in which direction the point of ultimate egress lay, the new channel left Mercury Basin at its western, or leeward, extremity, running first west, then south-west, and ultimately south, straight out to sea. Thus the whole distance could be traversed under sail and with a free wind. The three following days and nights were devoted to a most careful re-examination of this new channel, with the result that we thoroughly satisfied

ourselves as to its absolute practicability.

With our minds thus relieved of a tremendous load of anxiety, we felt ourselves once more able to turn our thoughts in the direction of our pearl harvest. A full fortnight had been devoted to the exploration of the reef since our last visit to the oyster-bed, and we were of opinion that it ought by this time to be in such a condition as to afford us a very handsome return for our labours.

Accordingly, after allowing ourselves a day's rest to enable us to recover from the fatigues of our recent arduous boat duty, we once more repaired to the oyster-bed—Grace Hartley preferring on this occasion to remain "at home", as she put it, rather than again face the disgusting sights and odours that had met her on the occasion of her visit. But upon our arrival at the scene of operations we soon found that a fortnight had made a vast amount of difference in the condition of the oysters. For whereas when we had last visited the oyster-bed the process of putrefaction had only just begun, it had now advanced so far that the fish were not only completely decayed but had also in many cases so completely dried up under the influence of the sun's rays as to have, to a very great extent, lost their odour. Furthermore, the birds had been so busy that more than half the shells had been completely emptied; our task, therefore, although still excessively disagreeable, promised to be far less revoltingly offensive and disgusting than it had been before. Even such offensiveness as still remained we contrived to mitigate to a very considerable extent, by adopting the simple plan of starting work on the windward edge of the bed, whereby the accumulated odours were blown away from us, instead of directly in our faces, as on the previous occasion.

Now we went to work systematically, roughly dividing the bed into three nearly equal portions, one of which was to be gone over very carefully by each of us. Also we each had a bucket, into which to drop our spoils, so that there might be no time lost and no unnecessary fatigue incurred in passing to and fro. Our system of working was simplicity itself, and merely consisted in starting operations on the extreme weather side of the bed, examining the fish just as they came to hand, extracting such pearls as they contained, dropping the gems into the bucket of water with which each of us was provided, and then throwing the shells out on the reef apart from those still untouched. We toiled on thus all day, with a pause of half an hour about midday, when we retired to the boat, cleaned ourselves as well as we could, and snatched a hasty meal, concluding our labours about half an hour before sunset. When, during the run back to the ship at the end of the day, we proceeded to compare notes and take stock of the results of our labour, we came to the conclusion that either the bed was an enormously rich one, or that we had had an exceedingly lucky day, for our combined booty consisted of over fourteen hundred pearls—sixty-three of which were of quite exceptional value from their size or colour—and a full quart measure of seed pearl. I was of opinion, at the time—and am so still—that we might have obtained considerably more than we did of the last, but for the eagerness with which we prosecuted our search for the larger gems, which caused our search for the smaller seed pearls to degenerate into a very perfunctory operation.

The story of one day's work at the oyster-bed is the story of all; it is therefore unnecessary to say more upon the subject than that we spent a full fortnight upon the task of gathering pearls, by the end of which time we had acquired so much dexterity at the work that we did more in one day than we did in two at the beginning of our labours. Then, although at the expiration of the fortnight we seemed to have made scarcely any perceptible inroad upon that enormous

deposit, we grew tired of our self-imposed task and mutually agreed that we had accumulated as much wealth as we required. Moreover, as we watched the increase of that wealth day by day, our anxiety grew lest perchance anything should happen to prevent our escape from the reef and our return to that civilisation, where alone our wealth could be of any real value to us. The reader may reasonably ask what grounds of justification we had for the fear that anything could possibly happen to prevent our escape, seeing that we had been fortunate enough to discover a channel through which the ship might be easily taken out to sea; but I think we all still carried a vivid recollection of the terrific natural convulsion that had placed us in the extraordinary situation which we then occupied; and I believe the others shared with me the feeling that, such a thing having once happened, it might possibly happen again. The reef that had held us prisoners for so long might sink again to the ocean depths, perchance carrying the ship with it in the terrific turmoil that must ensue; or it might be hove up still higher, leaving the ship stranded and immovable; and then what would be our plight? Therefore, when on the evening of a certain day Gurney ventured to voice the suggestion that it would now be well to think seriously of making good our escape, while yet the opportunity to do so remained to us, neither of the others raised so much as a single word of protest, but on the contrary agreed to the proposal with an eagerness which clearly showed how welcome it was to us all.

“As for me,” said Gurney, when walking the poop with me that night and discussing the matter, “my way is now clear; Gracie and I will get married as soon as we arrive in Sydney; and then I think I may venture to return home and once more hope to find a welcome beneath the roof-tree which shelters those to whom I have given so much sorrow.”

“Indeed,” remarked I, scarcely knowing what to say, for my companion had spoken those last words in a tone of such intense feeling that I felt convinced a story must lie behind them.

“Yes,” he said, and was silent for a minute or two, apparently plunged in deep and painful thought. Then, suddenly throwing up his head, he continued: “I belong to the genus Prodigal Son. Would you care to hear my story? I think I should rather like to tell it you; for you are a good lad, high-spirited, full of generous impulses, eager to excel, and full of pluck. You are bound to make a success of your life if you will only steadfastly follow the path that your feet are now treading. But—forgive me for saying so—the qualities that you possess, excellent as they are, are precisely those that, unless you are very careful, are likely to betray you.

“When I was your age I was just such another lad as you are, and my father was as proud of, and as hopeful for, me as any parent can possibly be of an only son. He gave me a first-class education, and finally procured me an excellent post under Government. My duties took me abroad—there is no need to say where—and I at once found myself the associate and companion of a lot of young fellows who had somehow imbibed the idea that it was incumbent upon them, as Government officials, to adopt a smart, bold, dashing, reckless demeanour, a kind of modern edition of the swashbucklers of the Stuart regime; and they did their best to live up to that idea. This sort of thing was quite new to me; for you must remember that I was fresh from school at the time, and had never seen anything of the kind before, my father being an exceptionally quiet and sober-minded individual, associating only with men of similar temperament to himself. With my new companions, however, ‘respectability’ was voted old-fashioned and out of date, sobriety of conduct a bore. They were fine, dashing, high-spirited young fellows, fearing nothing and nobody, and they didn’t care who knew it. They drank freely,

constituted themselves authorities on all kinds of sport, gambled, and did many other things that at first distinctly frightened me, but which, a little later on, I rather admired, and—like the young fool that I was—soon began to humbly emulate. *Facilis descensus Averni*! The reverence for truth, and purity, and uprightness that had come to me in the atmosphere of home soon died. I recognised that those virtues belonged to a bygone period, but I was going to be up-to-date, in the forefront: nobody should surpass me! I dare say—ay, and I very fervently hope—that all this sounds the most incredible folly to you; but I give you my word that, so imperceptible were the steps by which I descended the down-grade that, looking back upon it all, I am even now not astonished at what I did. I believe that it was inevitable, under the circumstances, for, mark you this, I had never been warned against it! My parents had such implicit faith in me that the possibility of such a warning being necessary never occurred to them! Of course there could only be one end to this sort of thing, and in two years it came. Two years sufficed to convert me, from such a lad as you are now, into an utterly worthless, disreputable blackguard, a confirmed drunkard, a hardened liar, and—a contemptible thief! With my constitution completely shattered, I was obliged to resign my post, to avoid being kicked out, and I returned home a moral and physical wreck. But, even then, my poor father and mother had no suspicion of the truth, for I told them that my condition was due to fever contracted in the discharge of my duty. It was, however, impossible for me to conceal the truth from them very long after I had once more come under their roof; and the grief and shame that overwhelmed them when at length their eyes were opened might have melted the heart of a stone. But it did not melt mine, for I was by that time so completely the slave of my vices that I had lost every vestige of natural feeling. I continued my drunken habits as long as I had money to spend on liquor; and when finally I had exhausted my own resources I stole from my parents the means to still continue in the indulgence of my degrading vice. It broke my poor mother's heart, and she died; and on the day of her funeral I was unable to follow her body to its last resting-place, because I was too drunk to stand or speak! That was the crowning act of my disgraceful career; for on that very day my father gave me twenty pounds and turned me out of his house, forbidding me ever again to darken his door. I went to London, spent my twenty pounds in a wild life, got into a street fight, and was carried to a hospital with a knife-wound between my ribs; and there I lingered between life and death for nearly a month before I took a turn for the better and began to mend; and it was three months before I was up and out again. But during that three months the hospital chaplain contrived to gain my confidence. He induced me to tell him my story; and in return he told me some home truths that had the eventual effect of opening my eyes to the enormity of my guilt, the effect being helped, perhaps, by the fact that during my stay in the hospital I had been cured of my cursed craving for drink. When at length I was ready to leave the hospital my friend the chaplain offered to communicate with my father and endeavour to effect a reconciliation; but I refused. I had vowed that I would never return home until I could do so as a thoroughly reformed character; I therefore made my way down to the docks, took the first berth that offered, and, under the assumed name of George Gurney, became a common sailor. You will think, perhaps, that to go to sea, and in such a capacity, was not quite the best possible method whereby to effect my reformation, and may be it was not, but I was determined that nothing—nothing—should stand in my way; and I think I may now say, without undue confidence, that I have succeeded. Gracie, to whom I have told my story, assures me that I need no longer fear to face my father, and I believe her, for a woman can see more deeply than a man. So now I shall return home, to be a comfort, as I devoutly hope, to my dear father's declining years; and perhaps, with the aid of my wealth, I may be able to do enough good to obliterate the memory of all the grief and shame that I have caused him to suffer. That

is my story, Troubridge; and all that I will add to it is this: If ever you feel tempted to stray, though ever so slightly, from the path of rectitude, think of the man whom you once knew as George Gurney; and let his history serve as a warning to you. And now I will say good night; for we must be stirring early to-morrow."

Chapter Nineteen.

Once more in open water.

I slept anything but soundly that night, fearing that, if I abandoned myself too completely to the influence of the drowsy god, I might not awake early enough in the morning to ensure the accomplishment of all that was to be done next day—for we had to hoist the boat, make sail, and traverse some forty-five miles of winding channel through the reef in order to reach open water before darkness overtook us. But although I was astir with the first signs of the coming dawn, I found, upon going out on deck, that Gurney and Saunders were before me. They too, it appeared, had been too anxious to do more than doze restlessly and intermittently through the hot night, and finally, as though by mutual consent, had turned out about an hour before daylight and, after softly pacing the main deck together, chatting and smoking for about half an hour, had gone forward, lighted the galley fire, and proceeded to prepare an early breakfast, in order that we might all be ready to turn-to the moment that we had light enough to see what we were about. When I went forward and looked into the galley—the light from which had attracted my attention the instant that I emerged from the cabin—I was greeted with the mingled aromas of boiling cocoa and frying bacon, as well as with the cheery "good morning!" of the two men who were bending over the galley stove; but I had scarcely had time to exchange greetings with them when the fourth member of our party, awakened by my movements while dressing, made her appearance and promptly assumed charge of the culinary operations. This left the three males of the party free to tackle the more arduous duties of the day; and we forthwith proceeded to unrig the boat and make her ready for hoisting. By the time that this task had been advanced to the point of hooking on and hauling taut the davit-tackles, we were summoned to breakfast, and in high spirits sat down to partake of what we hoped would be our last meal but one before we should find ourselves once more at sea.

The meal over, we proceeded to get the quarter boat hoisted to the davits, which, heavy boat though she was for three men to handle, we soon accomplished with the assistance of a couple of watch-tackles, in the employment of which we had by this time, through much usage, become experts. Then came the loosing and setting of the canvas. We decided that, as before, we would rely upon the three topsails and the fore topmast staysail to carry us to our destination, that being as much canvas as we could conveniently handle; and an hour and a half sufficed us to get these sails set to our satisfaction and braced ready for casting the ship. Then, sending Grace Hartley aft to the wheel, which she was now able to manipulate as deftly as any of us, Gurney and I stood by the fore braces, while Saunders, armed with an axe, proceeded to the forecastle and stood by to sever the hawser by which the ship rode. At the proper moment the word was given, the axe fell once, twice, and we were once more adrift, the ship gathering stern-way and paying off with her helm hard a-starboard and the port fore braces flattened in. She made a stern board until she was heading about south-south-west, when the squared main and mizen topsails began to fill and checked her, whereupon the head yards were squared, the staysail sheet hauled over, the helm steadied, and the old *Mercury* began to forge ahead, not to stop again, as we hoped, until she should arrive in Sydney Harbour.

And now the most ticklish part of our task lay before us, for we had to navigate some forty-five

miles of narrow, winding channel, and negotiate several very awkward places, where the slightest mistake meant disaster, before we should find ourselves once more rising and falling in safety on the swells of the open Pacific. But we had talked the matter over a dozen times or more before reaching this stage of our adventure, and knew exactly what was best to be done. We therefore proceeded forthwith to do it, for there is no time for hesitation when a ship is under way in narrow waters; whatever has to be done must be done smartly and on the instant. The channel which we had to traverse, and toward the entrance of which the ship was now heading, started by heading due west for a short distance, then it swerved to about south-west, then looked up to about south-by-east, and thence, undulating slightly a point or so east or west, trended south for the remainder of its length. Now, there were two or three short reaches of channel, the longest of them not much more than a mile in length, where we should find the wind shy enough to necessitate the ship being braced sharp up on the port tack to enable her to negotiate them successfully. But it was necessary for one of us to be aloft to con the ship, and as it was obvious that the other two could not brace round the yards of a ship of the *Mercury's* size, we were no sooner free of our anchor than, although the ship was at the moment running off square before the wind, we sprang to the braces, and braced the yards sharp up on the port tack, in readiness for the negotiation of the reaches of which I have spoken. For, while the ship would run before the wind with her yards braced sharp up, she would not sail close-hauled with her yards square; and we had therefore settled it that the proper thing to do was to provide for the difficult points at once. By the time that this was done we were so close to the western extremity of the basin, and the entrance of the channel, that it became necessary for me to jump aloft at once, while Gurney relieved Grace Hartley at the wheel, and Saunders stood in the waist, with his eye on me in the fore topmast crosstrees, ready to pass the word from me to the helmsman, from whom I was hidden by the main and mizen topsails.

I am bound to admit that when I reached the crosstrees, and noted the speed with which the ship was sliding along in that perfectly smooth water, under the impulsion of a fine brisk easterly breeze, and observed the narrowness and tortuousness of the channel that we had to traverse, winding hither and thither through that vast expanse of reef, my heart almost quailed within me, and I felt inclined to doubt whether we three males possessed the ability, the skill, the quickness of eye, the readiness and strength of hand, to take the ship in safety through that apparently endless, twisting channel. But the feeling was merely momentary; an old adage flashed into my mind to the effect that one need never trouble about crossing a bridge until one comes to it; also that it is very unwise to meet troubles halfway. I told myself that I would not worry about the difficulties and dangers ahead, but would stand up there in the crosstrees and deal with them, one at a time, as we came to them. And so I did, with the gratifying result that when the sun's lower rim had reached to within a finger's breadth of the western horizon the *Mercury* slid out past the southern edge of the reef and made her first curtsy as she once more dipped to the swell of the open ocean, having triumphantly negotiated and overcome every one of the difficulties of that endless rock-bound channel. I sprang into the topgallant rigging and shinned up to the royal yard, from which elevation I was able to watch, over the head of the main topsail, the great black expanse of reef receding on either quarter, until the sun plunged beneath the horizon in a blaze of purple, crimson, and gold, and then I descended to the deck by way of the backstay, and walked aft to exchange congratulations with the little group of two men and a woman, who stood clustered about the wheel watching the evanishment of that strange rock prison in the fast-gathering gloom of the tropical night. Before descending from

aloft I had taken the precaution to fling one long, lingering, all-embracing glance round the horizon ahead, from one quarter to the other, and had pretty well satisfied myself that there were no dangers lurking in the road along which we were going, no white curl of surf to warn us of the existence of treacherous sunken reefs. Our next act, therefore, was to bring the ship as close to the wind as she would lie, on the port tack, lash the wheel, adjust the after braces in such a way that the craft would steer herself, and then all go below to partake of the very excellent meal that Grace Hartley had prepared specially to celebrate the occasion of our happy escape from the reef.

The ensuing fortnight was a period absolutely barren of events, the weather remaining fine and the wind steady during the whole time, so that we had nothing to do but just to permit the ship to drive steadily along to the southward, hour after hour, and day after day, at an average speed of about four knots. It is true that during the course of that fortnight we sighted and passed several islands, at varying distances; and in one case we hove-to for about half an hour to permit a canoe with half a dozen natives to come alongside and barter their load of fruit for a few feet of brass wire and a handful of glass beads. But we determined to anchor nowhere, if we could help it; for we were now all anxiety to reach our destination as quickly as possible. The care of so big a ship was a heavy responsibility to rest upon the shoulders of three men—and a girl, and we desired to free ourselves of it without a moment's unnecessary delay. And, quite apart from that, the monotony of the thing was beginning to get upon our nerves. For Gurney and Grace Hartley it was doubtless well enough; so long as they could be together it mattered little to them to what length the voyage might be spun out, but so far as I was concerned—and I think I might also answer for Saunders—I was beginning to crave for the sight of fresh faces, the sound of new voices, and the stir and bustle and excitement of life ashore.

At length, on our sixteenth day out from the reef, in latitude 1 degree 42 minutes north, the wind showed signs of failing us; and by sunset, that night, it had fallen stark calm, with a rapidly subsiding swell; yet the sky was clear, the barometer high, and, in short, there was every indication that we were booked for a long spell of calm weather before we should find ourselves to the southward of the Equator. So indeed it proved; for I believe I may say with absolute truth that never, for five consecutive minutes during the ten succeeding days, had we sufficient wind to extinguish the flame of a candle. True, there were occasional evanescent breathings that came stealing along from nowhere in particular, gently ruffling a few superficial yards of the ocean's glassy surface into faintest blue for a brief two or three minutes at a time, and then vanishing again; but during the whole of that period we never had enough wind to keep our canvas fully distended for a whole minute. Or course, being short-handed, we could not resort to the various devices usually adopted in a fully manned craft for profiting by those transient breathings. The yards were altogether too heavy for us to attempt to swing them to meet every fickle draught of air that we saw coming toward us; it was therefore only the most favourable that we made any effort to utilise; yet, despite this, we somehow contrived to drift daily a little farther south; it might be, perhaps, no more than a mile, or it might rise to as much as five or six miles. Everything depending upon whether the favourable zephyrs happened to hit the ship, or whether they passed her by—sometimes at a distance of only a few yards.

When we first ran into this belt of calm our horizon was bare, neither land nor ship being in sight—indeed we had not sighted so much as one solitary sail since leaving the island; but at dawn

on the sixth morning of the calm we sighted the mastheads of a small craft far away down in the southern board, which, upon being inspected from aloft, proved to be a schooner of, possibly, a hundred or one hundred and twenty tons measurement. During the day it became apparent that she was bound to the northward, for she assiduously utilised every chance breath of wind that touched her to work her way in that direction, while we did what we could to make way in the opposite direction, with the result that by sunset we had shortened the distance between us by three or four miles. The succeeding four days were simply repetitions in all respects of the same wearisome, monotonous state of things; yet the way in which the *Mercury* and the strange schooner insensibly drew ever nearer to each other during that time was singularly illustrative of what could be accomplished in the way of progress by sailing-ships, even in the embrace of what was to all intents and purposes a stark calm, by active and intelligent officers. It is true that we in the *Mercury* did but little toward the abbreviation of the distance between the two vessels, for the reason already mentioned, yet when the tenth day of the calm dawned the schooner was hull-up in the southern board, some six miles distant from us.

None but those who have endured a long spell of calm in the vicinity of the Equator can have the faintest idea of the deadly monotony of the experience. Day after day comes and goes, bringing a cloudless sky of dazzling blue, in the midst of which circles a merciless sun, from the scorching rays of which there is no escape, even under an awning; for the stoutest canvas seems incapable of completely intercepting the fiery darts that cause the pitch to bubble up out of the deck seams, and heat metal and dark-painted wood to a temperature high enough to blister the hand unwarily laid upon either. Even though an awning be spread, and shelter sought thereunder, those burning rays are not to be evaded; for they flash up from the mirror-like surface of the sea with a power which is scarcely to be distinguished from that exerted by those which fall direct from the great luminary himself. As to going below in order to escape the arrows of the fiery archer, the thing is not to be thought of; for the whole interior of the ship is, at such times, simply an oven, the air of which is too hot to breathe! Under such circumstances with what eagerness does the long-enduring seaman scan the polished surface of the sleeping ocean in search of the little smudge of faint, evanescent blue, the cat's-paw that betrays the presence of some wandering eddy in the stagnant air which, even though it be too feeble and insignificant to move the ship by so much as a single inch, may at least afford his fevered body the momentary relief of a suggestion of comparative coolness. And how often does the panting and perspiring officer of the deck drag his weary, enervated frame to the skylight in the almost despairing hope that he may detect a depression of the mercury in the barometric tube, giving the promise of a coming change, only to turn away again with a weary, disappointed sigh.

It was under such circumstances as these that, during the forenoon of the tenth day of the calm, Gurney, upon examining the barometer, reported a concavity in the surface of the mercury, which, as we all knew, was the first indication of a tendency to fall; and a falling barometer of course meant a change of weather, which, in its turn, meant wind, from what quarter we scarcely cared, so long as it came with strength enough to fill our canvas and give us steerage-way. Yet the change was long in coming, for the fall of the mercury was so slow as to be all but undistinguishable, while up till noon the only difference that could be detected in the aspect of the sky was a certain subtle thickening of the atmosphere, that robbed the blue of its exquisite clarity, and reduced the sun to a shapeless blazing; mass that could be gazed at without bringing tears to the eyes, although there was thus far no appreciable alleviation of the

scorching heat of the rays that he showered down upon us. But there was an added quality of closeness in the air that caused one literally to gasp for breath occasionally, while the slightest exertion—even that of moving from one part of the deck to another—induced instant profuse perspiration. So hot, indeed, was it that with one accord we decided against cooking any food that day, the idea of hot viands of any kind being absolutely repulsive to us all, and we accordingly dined all together upon the poop, under the shelter of the awning, upon such cold food as the steward's pantry afforded.

It was about four bells in the afternoon watch when the upper edge of a great bank of livid purple cloud began to heave itself up above the north-western horizon; but when once it had risen into sight its progress was rapid—so rapid, indeed, that within an hour of its first appearance it had soared high enough to blot out the sun, to our intense relief, for with the disappearance of the luminary we were at once freed from the scorching of his beams, although the closeness of the atmosphere became intensified, rather than otherwise. Of course there was no mystery as to what we were to expect; we were undoubtedly in for a first-class tropical thunderstorm, with its usual accompaniments of torrential rain and, very probably, a sharp squall of wind that might perhaps last half an hour or so, and, if we were in luck, end in a breeze that would carry us across the Line. The moment, therefore, that the sun was hidden we proceeded to make our preparations for the welcome change, beginning by striking the awning, following this by clewing up and furling the mizen topsail, and winding up by close-reefing the fore and main topsails. This task, which kept us all busy until close upon eight bells (that is, four o'clock in the afternoon), left the ship under close-reefed fore and main topsails and fore topmast staysail, which was snug canvas enough to enable a vessel, even as short-handed as the *Mercury* then was, to face anything like the weather which we had reason to expect. Meanwhile, as we found time to notice, the schooner had followed our example and, long before our preparations were complete, had been stripped of everything except her boom-foresail.

By the time that our labours had come to an end, and we were once more free to sit down and await the issue of events, the pall of thundercloud had overspread the entire visible heavens, from horizon to horizon, enshrouding the scene in a kind of murky twilight, under which the ocean, undulating sluggishly in long, low, irregular folds, like the breathings of a sleeping giant, gleamed pallid and lustreless as a sea of molten lead. The atmosphere was still oppressively close, but it was no longer as deadly stagnant as it had been during the earlier hours of the day; for, at intervals, the vane at our main-royal masthead, which hitherto had drooped heavy as a sodden deck swab, save for the swaying motion imparted to it by the lift of the ship to the heave of the scarcely visible swell, lifted and fluttered feebly for a second or two, pointing now this way, and anon in some other direction, showing that, away up aloft there, and as yet too high to reach and stir the surface of the sea, the air currents were awakening under the brooding influence of the coming storm. These movements occurred at first at long intervals, and were of the most evanescent character; but the intervals rapidly shortened, and within an hour of the occurrence of the first manifestation of atmospheric movement it had increased to such an extent as to cause our topsails to rustle and fill, or fall aback, for a moment, while, a little later still, we could feel the light breathings upon our faces, and even note their light touch here and there upon the glassy surface of the water.

Chapter Twenty.

The end of the voyage.

Suddenly the surface of the water darkened away toward the north-west, showing that a breeze was coming along from that direction, and we sprang to the port braces, rounding them in a foot or two to meet it, and hauling taut and making fast the starboard. We worked quickly, not yet knowing quite what was at the back of the coming breeze; but it proved to be only a trifle after all, creeping down toward us very gradually, and scarcely careening the ship when at length it reached her. But, trifling though it was, it was none the less welcome to us all; for it was inexpressibly refreshing once more to feel a wind fanning our fevered faces, stirring our hair, raising a pleasant tinkling sound of water under the bows and along the bends, and stilling the eternal and distracting flap of canvas aloft after the long period of breathless calm through which we had sweltered. Moreover, the ship was once more moving through the water, with her jibboom pointing in the right direction, and every mile that she now travelled was so much to the good, increasing our chances of getting across the Line and making our escape from the awful region of equatorial calms which constitute such a ghastly bugbear to those who go down to the sea in sailing-ships. Our self-congratulations proved, however, to be premature, for the breeze lasted only about half an hour when it died away again, leaving us as completely becalmed as before. But during that half-hour we had succeeded in covering quite two miles; while the schooner, evidently strong-handed, had snatched at the opportunity afforded her and, hastily setting her mainsail and jibs once more, had managed to creep up to within a short mile of us before the breeze died away, leaving both craft once more boxing the compass.

But we were by no means discouraged, for we had only to glance round us at the great lowering cloud-masses, that seemed to have descended almost to the level of our mastheads, to know that there would be plenty more wind before we again beheld blue sky. And, if appearances went for anything, we should not have very much longer to wait for it, for the blackness overhead was working like yeast, and the outfly might come at any moment. Yet another half-hour passed, and nothing happened. Then, while we all stood gazing and waiting, the canopy of cloud that arched above us was rent asunder by a steel-bright flash of lightning so intensely vivid that we were all completely blinded for a few seconds, and the next instant there followed a crash of thunder that would have drowned the combined broadsides of a thousand line-of-battle ships, and the tremendous concussion of which caused the poor old *Mercury* to quiver and tremble from stem to stern.

“Now look out for the rain!” shouted Gurney exultantly, as he sprang to close the skylight covers. “Jump below, Gracie dear,” he continued, “or get under cover before the rain comes and washes you overboard!”

But the rain did not come, at least not just then; but, as though that first flash had been a signal-gun, the whole of the visible heavens seemed to break at the same moment into lightning flashes, and for a full quarter of an hour there was such a terrific lancing of lightning, such a crashing and roaring and rumbling of thunder, that one might almost have thought the navies of the world had foregathered up aloft there and with one accord had set about the task of annihilating each other. During the whole of this time not a solitary drop of rain fell, and not enough stirring of air occurred to extinguish the flame of a candle; we had nothing to do but

simply to stand there, dazzled and deafened, and watch, as far as we might, this wonderful, awe-inspiring manifestation of the conflicting forces of nature.

It happened that the schooner lay right in the wake of the most violent part of the storm; we therefore had her full in view as we stood and watched. Her people were at this time busily engaged in restowing their mainsail and jibs, apparently convinced that the ultimate outcome of all this elemental disturbance must be an outfly of wind against which it would be well to be fully prepared. They had got their mainsail down, and some eight or ten hands were stretched along the length of the boom, tightly rolling up the great folds of canvas, while four more were laid out on the jibboom furling the jibs, when the storm seemed to reach its height, and a great vivid flash of lightning, like a sword of blue-green fire, lighting up the whole scene with its ghastly glare, fell, as it appeared to us, full upon the little craft, and the next instant, as the accompanying peal of thunder crashed and boomed in our ears, we all distinctly saw a flash, as of fire, leap up aboard her, accompanied by a great puff of whitish smoke. It was only momentary, and had the appearance of an explosion; but it was perfectly apparent that something more or less serious had happened to the little vessel. After an appreciable pause on the part of her crew, as though they were collecting their faculties in the face of some sudden disaster, they broke at once into a state of feverish activity, rushing hither and thither about her decks like men who are attempting to do half a dozen separate and distinct things at the same moment. Then came another flash of flame on board her; and all in a moment, as it seemed to us, the whole after part of her burst into a fierce blaze!

“Why, Gurney!” I exclaimed, turning to where the man stood with his sweetheart: “that last flash of lightning seems to have set the schooner on fire.”

“Yes,” he answered; “and she is blazing like a tar barrel. If the rain doesn’t come within the next two or three minutes they will have their work cut out to extinguish the flames.”

“Ay,” cut in Saunders, “you are right there, George. Look how she flares up. Why, she must be as dry as tinder. Ah! there they go with their buckets. But what is the use of buckets against a blaze like that; why don’t they get their hose along and start their head-pump? They’ll never put out that fire by balin’ up water from over the side.”

“No,” assented Gurney, “nor by means of a hose and head-pump either. Nothing but a good downpour of rain will do them any good now, and the rain seems to be holding off. Scissors! that ought to fetch it down”—as another terrific flash of lightning illuminated the whole scene from horizon to horizon.

But it did not; the lightning—fierce, vivid, and baleful—continued to flash, the thunder rolled and crashed and reverberated in one continuous deafening uproar; but the rain held off for a good five minutes longer, during which the fire aboard the schooner gained apace and spread with amazing rapidity. When at length the heavens opened, and the overladen clouds began to discharge their contents, it was not by any means the kind of tropical deluge that might have reasonably been expected, but simply a sudden brisk shower lasting less than a minute, and then ceasing abruptly. It was neither copious enough nor of sufficient duration to be of any appreciable service to the crew of the schooner, and indeed it did not perceptibly check the progress of the flames. To the onlookers aboard the *Mercury* it seemed that the other craft was irretrievably doomed; and such also seemed to be the opinion of her own crew, for they

were presently seen to be frantically busy over the clearing away of the longboat, which was stowed on top of the main hatch, and the safety of which was now threatened by the rapidly advancing flames.

“Do you think that they will succeed in extinguishing the fire, George?” asked Grace Hartley, as she clung to her lover’s arm and gazed with wide-open eyes of anxiety at the progress of the conflagration.

“No,” answered Gurney unhesitatingly; “to be quite candid with you, dear, I do not. Whatever may be the cargo that the schooner carries, it is evidently of a highly combustible character, and now seems to be fairly ignited. The fire gains ground even as we stand and gaze; and if the crew could not conquer it at the outset, they are not likely to do so now. What think you, Mr Troubridge?”

“I quite agree with you,” I answered. “That schooner—”

“Then,” interrupted Grace passionately, with an impatient stamp of her foot on the deck, “if you really think that, what are we all standing here idly for? Why are we not doing something to help those poor fellows who are in danger of perishing in the flames?”

“Because, my dear, there is no need, as yet, at all events,” answered Gurney. “You see,” he continued, “they are clearing away their own boat; and if they can only contrive to get her into the water before she is irretrievably damaged they will be all right. They have but to cross that narrow space of water to reach us and safety. But as for us, we can do nothing. It would need two of us to take one of our quarter boats alongside that schooner in time to be of any service to those people; and with the weather as it is at this moment it would be the height of madness for us to make the attempt. For, suppose that this thunderstorm were to end in a heavy squall of wind—as it may at any moment—catching the boat, with Saunders and me in her, halfway or thereabout between the two vessels, what would be the result? Why, that we should be equally unable to reach the schooner or return to the *Mercury*. We should all part company; and the chances are that none of us would ever again meet in this world! No, no, I suppose we should all be willing to risk a great deal to help our fellow-creatures in extremity; but we must not lightly undertake an adventure that may be fatal to us, while of very problematical advantage to the others. Ah! see, there is the answer to your appeal, Gracie! They have cleared away the longboat, and now they are hoisting her out, none too soon either; for if my eyes do not deceive me, one gang have to sluice her with water to prevent her taking fire while the others are getting her over the side.”

It was even as Gurney had said; the flames had spread with such astounding rapidity that the schooner’s crew only saved the boat by the very skin of their teeth. But presently she splashed safely into the water alongside, and as she did so the schooner’s people seemed to pour over that vessel’s low rail in a body, scarcely giving themselves time to unhook the tackles before they flung out their oars and shoved off. Indeed, there was very urgent need for haste; for not only was the entire after part of the schooner ablaze by this time—the flames shooting straight up in the breathless air as high as the little vessel’s main truck—but within the last minute or so there had occurred that abrupt cessation which, in the case of tropical thunderstorms, is so frequently the precursor of a sudden and brief but exceedingly violent squall of wind. And if that threatened squall should burst its bonds and come shrieking and howling in fury across the

surface of the sea, scourging it into a mad turmoil of foaming, leaping water and blinding spindrift, while the burnt-out crew of the schooner were making their passage across to the *Mercury*, it might be very bad for them; for even should they be fortunate enough to avoid capsizal, it might be exceedingly difficult, if not altogether impossible, for the ship, smitten and bowed down by the might of the tempest, to pause and pick them up.

Of course, as we fully expected, the boat headed straight for the *Mercury*; and the only question now was whether she would reach us before the brooding tempest broke loose and involved us all in its clutches. I glanced anxiously round the horizon, and was not reassured by what I saw; for the aspect of the heavens had rapidly grown so threatening that it looked as though the outburst must inevitably come within the next minute or two, while, strive as they might, the strangers could not get alongside us in less than ten minutes at the least. And we could do absolutely nothing to help them, for at this moment there was not the faintest perceptible movement of the atmosphere, and both craft lay as motionless as logs in a timber pond. I looked aloft at the vane at our masthead; it might have been made of cast iron for all the movement that it betrayed; I wetted my finger and held it up, turning it this way and that in the hope of detecting a draught, however slight; but there was nothing. A glance at the blazing hull of the schooner showed that the flames were shooting heavenward as straight as the flame of a candle burning in a vault. No, there was nothing to be done except to get a number of rope's-ends ready to fling into the boat the moment that she came alongside, should she succeed in doing so; and this we did, flinging the coils of braces and what not off the pins to the deck in readiness to cast at the moment when perhaps a second more or less might make all the difference between life and death to some fourteen or fifteen of our fellow-creatures.

That the occupants of the boat were as fully alive as ourselves to the critical nature of the situation was clear from the desperate energy with which they toiled at the six oars they had thrown out, the stout ash blades bending almost to breaking point at each stroke and sending a long trail of tiny froth-flecked swirls seething and driving astern, as the men sprang and bent their backs to their work, while the water buzzed and foamed under the craft's bluff bows. They were racing for their lives, and knew it! Fathom by fathom the heavy boat surged ahead over the oil-smooth surface of the black water, with the scowling sky writhing overhead, as though the spirit of the storm were struggling to burst its bonds and leap upon them. They were already so near at hand that we could hear their cries as they shouted encouragement to each other, when a sudden puff of air from the north-west swept over the ship, causing the topsails and staysail to momentarily fill, with a report like a musket-shot, with a quick jar and creaking of trusses, parrals, and block sheaves, before the canvas again collapsed to the masts with a rustling sound that to our overstrained senses seemed preternaturally loud.

"It is coming now; look there, over the starboard quarter!" shouted Gurney, pointing; and, putting his hands to his mouth, he yelled to those in the approaching boat: "Pull, men; pull for your lives, or you'll miss us yet!"

I looked in the direction indicated, and, sure enough, it was as Gurney had said. The sky in that quarter was black as night, and beneath it was the long line of white foam that marked the progress of the approaching squall. It was racing down upon us with incredible speed, and, near as the boat was, it was evident that the squall must strike us before she could get alongside. And, once in the grip of that raving fury of wind, no earthly power could save those

unfortunates, who were now fighting like maniacs to reach the ark of safety that floated so near—yet not near enough! Something must be done, some risk must be taken to help them. That we should, without effort of any sort, suffer ourselves to be cruelly snatched away far beyond the reach of those desperately struggling men, leaving them to miserably perish, was unthinkable!

"Back the fore topsail!" I yelled, springing down the poop ladder to the main deck and feverishly casting off the fore braces; "it is the only thing that we can do; we may lose our topmasts, but we must risk that. With our fore topsail aback we may perhaps be able to edge down upon and pick them up, otherwise we shall never set eyes upon them again."

Working like demons, each of us seeming to be possessed, for the moment, of the strength of a dozen men, we got the head yards braced round and the braces made fast before the squall reached us; and then I sprang aft to the wheel, while Gurney and Saunders, snatching up as many loose coils of rope as they could grasp, stood by to drop them into the boat. As I reached the wheel and wrenched it hard a-starboard, the squall, with an indescribable fury of sound, struck us—fortunately well over the starboard quarter. With a report like a cannon-shot and a creaking and groaning of overstrained spars and timbers the *Mercury* buried her bows in the boiling sea and gathered way, paying off square before the wind as she did so. I let her go well off, until the longboat was broad on our starboard bow; then, putting the helm hard down, I brought the ship close to the wind, thus throwing her fore topsail aback, and, by the mercy of Providence, judging my distance with such nicety that the next moment the longboat, by this time full to her thwarts and utterly helpless, was scraping along under the shelter of our lee side, while the ship, suddenly arrested by her backed topsail, careened until her lee rail was level with the foam. Gurney and Saunders hove their rope's-ends fair into the boat; but there was no need for them, the ship was bowed so steeply that the occupants were able to seize her rail and scramble inboard unaided. In as many seconds fourteen strange men had transferred themselves from the sinking longboat to our decks, while the boat, rasping astern along the ship's side, capsized and turned bottom-up as she drove clear. Gurney flourished his hand to me as a sign that all was well, and then, as I once more put the helm up and allowed the ship to go off before the wind, he seized some three or four of the dazed strangers and invoked their aid to square the foreyard.

It was with a mighty sigh of relief that I presently resigned the wheel to Saunders and went forward to greet and welcome the rescued men; for, by the skin of our teeth we had saved them all in the very nick of time, and that, too, without parting so much as a ropeyarn. Furthermore, by an extraordinary stroke of fortune—good for us, although bad for them—we had, in the most unexpected manner, secured the services of enough hands to enable us to work the ship without being constantly worried as to the quantity of sail that we might safely venture to set. Therefore we were now in a position to avail ourselves to the utmost extent of every kind of weather, and could hope to bring our remarkable voyage to a speedy conclusion.

As I joined the group of strangers clustered about Gurney, down on the main deck, it was easy to determine, even before I came within sound of their tongues, that they were British—Australians, that is to say, for they one and all bore the well-marked characteristics of that sturdy, independent, self-reliant race. Gurney at once took it upon himself to perform the ceremony of introduction.

“This, mates,” said he, indicating me, “is our skipper, Mr Troubridge. He is but a youngster, as you may see for yourselves; but you may take my word for it that, so long as he commands, everything will go right with us. Our story is a long one, and a queer one—too long and too queer to be spun just now, so it must wait; but you will all be glad to know that we are bound for the port that you hail from; so, please God, it will not be long before you see your sweethearts and wives once more. This, Mr Troubridge, is Mr Thomson, chief mate of the schooner *Seamew*, blazing out yonder; and the rest are the remainder of her crew, whose names I have not yet had time to learn.”

“Welcome aboard the *Mercury*, Mr Thomson, and men of the *Seamew*!” said I. “I am heartily glad that, since it was your lot to meet with misfortune, we happened to be near enough at hand to pick you up. But what of your captain; where is he?”

“I am sorry to say, Mr Troubridge,” answered Thomson, “that Captain Peters and Mr Girdlestone, our second mate, were both struck dead by the flash of lightning that set the schooner afire; and we were obliged to leave ’em aboard to burn with her, since we had no time to do anything else. The *Seamew* was Cap’n Peters’ own property; and we were out after sandalwood, of which the schooner was more’n half-full when this misfortune happened to her. We fought the flames as long as we could, in the hope of savin’ her; but we never had a chance from the very first, for she was old, and as dry as the inside of a tinder-box, and she burned like a pine splinter. We hung on to her so long that we had to leave all our belongings aboard her, comin’ away with just what we stood up in, and we cut it so fine that if we’d delayed another minute we’d all be in Davy’s locker now.”

“Ay,” said I, “there is very little doubt of that, I think. However, a miss is as good as a mile, they say, and you are all here, except your unfortunate captain and second mate, so you must make yourselves as comfortable as you can until we arrive in Sydney. I am afraid I shall have to ask you to work your passages, for we are very short-handed, as you will have seen; but no doubt when we arrive—”

“Oh, that’s all right, sir!” cut in Thomson; “of course we’ll work our passages, and glad of the chance to do so. It’s a lucky thing for us that you were near enough to pick us up.”

So the matter was arranged, Gurney and Thomson each heading a watch of six men, while the cook and the steward of the *Seamew* respectively took charge of the *Mercury’s* galley and pantry, and Saunders promptly escaped from the cabin to the more congenial atmosphere of the forecastle, where he entertained the men, during the remainder of the voyage, with stories of our adventures, first on the island, and afterwards on the reef. But a timely hint from Gurney, terse and strong, kept his lips closed upon the subject of the pearls, of the existence of which on board not a man of the schooner’s crew ever became aware.

There is but little more that need be said in order to bring this story of a very remarkable and adventurous voyage to a close. The schooner continued to blaze fiercely—the flames fanned to ever-increasing fury by the strength of the wind—for about half an hour after we had run past her, when we suddenly lost sight of her; Thomson’s opinion being that by that time her upper works had been completely consumed, and that the sea had gained access to her interior, sending her charred remains to the bottom. True, the tail of the squall brought along a smart shower of rain that lasted about ten minutes, but it was over again before she disappeared, so

that the alternative theory of Brady, her boatswain, that the rain extinguished the flames, found little acceptance with us. In any case it was not worth while returning to seek her, for, even had she been found, she could but have been a mere burnt-out shell, of no value to anyone. The squall blew itself out in about twenty minutes; but the wind continued to blow strongly all through the night, and it was not until sunrise on the following morning that the weather moderated sufficiently to induce Gurney to send the hands aloft to turn out the reefs and make sail. When I went on deck, however, at seven bells, it was glorious weather; the sky clear, save for a few light fleecy clouds drifting solemnly along out of the north-west, a moderate sea running, and the ship bowling gaily along under all plain sail and her starboard studding sails—a sight which I had not gazed upon for many a long day. We crossed the Equator during the forenoon of that day and, meeting with favourable weather for the remainder of the voyage, entered Port Jackson, without further adventure, some three weeks later, coming to an anchor close to Garden Island.

The arrival of the *Mercury*, so long overdue that she had been given up as lost, created quite a little local sensation, which was vastly increased when the history of the voyage was made public, to such an extent, indeed, that a Government ship was dispatched to the island with authority to arrest Wilde, Polson, and Tudsbery upon a charge of piracy, and bring them to Sydney for trial. The business of the ship, and the fact that Gurney, Saunders, Grace Hartley, and I would be required as witnesses at the trial, detained us all at Sydney until the return of the corvette from the island, some two months later.

The news which she brought back sent a thrill of horror throughout the colony. It was to the effect that upon her arrival at the spot, the latitude and longitude of which I had given, a small islet had been discovered which, upon examination, proved to be the crater of a volcano that had evidently been very recently in a state of violent activity; but no traces of life were to be found upon it, nor had the islet any resemblance to the extensive and beautiful island which we had described. The weather, however, proving favourable, the captain of the corvette had anchored his ship for several days close to the islet, and had caused an extensive series of soundings to be taken all round it, which, upon being plotted to a large scale, were of such a character as to leave no doubt that the islet was indeed the summit of the peak of Wilde's island, and that the latter had most probably been engulfed, with its inhabitants, by the same cataclysm that had imprisoned the *Mercury* among the meshes of the pearl reef! Our escape, therefore, from the common destruction that had overtaken the rest had been an exceedingly narrow one, the margin of safety amounting, in fact, to less than three days; for there can be no question that, had the *Mercury* been at her moorings in the Basin, or even within a few miles of the island, when the catastrophe occurred, she could never have survived it.

The consignees of the *Mercury's* original cargo—the names and addresses of whom were mentioned in the ship's manifest, found by me, with the rest of the ship's papers, in the captain's desk—were of course only too glad to accept the cargo of sandalwood brought from the island, in lieu of the much less valuable merchandise originally consigned to them, and they at once chartered the ship to carry the wood to Canton, one of the partners—a Mr Henderson—going with it in the capacity of supercargo to dispose of it, upon arrival. There was not much difficulty in engaging another master, officers, and crew for the ship; and I subsequently learned that she arrived safely, that the cargo was speedily disposed of, tea purchased with the proceeds, and the ship dispatched with it to England, where she duly arrived; the net result of

the adventure being a big profit for the fortunate consignees. These gentlemen were Scotchmen, and although persons of that nationality have the reputation of keeping a very tight hand upon the bawbees, I am bound to say that they treated Gurney, Saunders, and myself with a liberality, not to say generosity, that left nothing to be desired, although of course we had no claim on them. The result being that not only were we able to maintain ourselves most comfortably in Sydney while awaiting the return of the corvette from the island, but also to return afterwards to England as first-class passengers. That is to say, Gurney, Grace Hartley, and I did so; but Saunders remained in the colony and eventually became a prosperous and exceedingly wealthy sheep farmer. As for Gurney, he lost no time in making Grace Hartley his wife, I officiating as best man on the occasion.

We all three went home together in the cuddy of the same ship, and upon our arrival it was my happy privilege to be the means of opening the negotiations with his father—Sir George Burnley, baronet, of Chudleigh Grange, Devon—that resulted in a complete and permanent reconciliation between the two. Gurney—or Burnley, to give him his correct name—had learned his lesson while passing through the fires of adversity. He had learned, in the school of experience—that best of all schools—that the so-called pleasures of sin endure but for a very brief season and are inevitably followed by misery, suffering, shame, and self-contempt beyond all power of words to express; and he had the resolution and strength to pull himself together and become once more a man, in the best and highest sense of the term, before it was too late and mental, moral, and physical ruin, complete and irretrievable, had overtaken him. He had the joy of seeing his father's belief and pride in him fully restored, and of making that father's declining years easy, pleasant, and happy. Now he reigns in that father's stead, honoured, respected, and beloved by all, and the pride and joy of his wife and children.

As for me, my pearls, when at length I had succeeded in converting them into money, produced so unexpectedly magnificent a fortune that not only was I enabled by its means to obtain a commanding interest in the corporation which owned the Gold Star line of sailing clippers, but also very materially to assist in converting that line from sail to steam. This was, of course, a very gradual process; and by the time that it was complete I was not only out of my apprenticeship but had worked my way up to the position of chief mate. Two voyages in this capacity sufficed to qualify me for the position of master; and now, in the time of my ripened experience, I hold the proud position of Commodore of the fleet, and have the pleasure of walking the bridge as commander of one of the finest passenger steamers that trade between England and the Australian ports.

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