THE ISLAND OF TERROR

BY

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The Island Of Terror

CHAPTER I

JIM MAITLAND tilted his top-hat a little farther back on his head, and lit a cigarette. In front of him twinkled the myriad lights of London; behind the door he had just closed twinkled the few candles that had not yet guttered out. The Bright Young Things liked candles stuck in empty bottles as their illuminations.

The hour was two of a summer's morning; the scene—somewhere in Hampstead. And as he walked down the steps into the drive he pondered for the twentieth time on the asininity of man—himself in particular. Why on earth had he ever allowed that superlative idiot Percy to drag him to such a fool performance?

Percy was his cousin, a point he endeavoured unsuccessfully to forget. In fact the only thing to be said in favour of Percy's continued existence was that since he embodied in his person every known form of fatuitousness, he might be regarded as doing duty for the rest of the family.

He had seen Percy afar off in the club before dinner, and with a strangled grunt of terror had fled into the cloak-room only to realise a moment later that he had delivered himself bound hand and foot into the enemy's hands. For the cloak-room was a cul-de-sac, and already a strange bleating cry could be heard outside the entrance. Percy had spotted him, and relinquishing the idea of burying himself in the dirty towel basket he prepared to meet his fate.

"Jim, my dear old friend and relative, you are the very bird I want. When did you return to the village?"

He gazed dispassionately at his cousin through his eyeglass, and a slight shudder shook him.

"Hullo! Percy," he remarked. "I hoped you hadn't seen me. Are you still as impossibly awful as you were when I last met you?"

"Worse, far worse, old lad. We dine together—what?"

Another shudder shook him; short of physical violence all hope was gone. He was in the clutches of this throw back to the tail period.

"But for the fact that I adore your dear mother nothing would induce me to dine anywhere near you," he answered. "As it is I happen to be free, so I will."

"Splendid. And afterwards I shall take you to a gathering of the chaps."

"What chaps?"

"You'll love 'em, old fruit. We have one once a month. Starts about midnight. Just a rag, don't you know. We're meeting this time in a cellar up in Hampstead. Beer and bones. Or perhaps scrambled eggs. Or even kippers. Except that kippers whiff a bit in a cellar, don't they?"

He suffered Percy to lead him to the dining-room, and as he looked round the familiar room it seemed impossible that it was more than five years since he had last been in it. A new face or two amongst the waiters—though not amongst the senior ones, they were all there; a few new faces, of course, amongst the members; otherwise it might have been yesterday that he was dining there with Terence Ogilvy and Teddy Burchaps preparatory to their departure for the interior of Brazil. And of the three of them only he had returned....

"You're looking very fit, sir."

He glanced up to find the wine steward standing by the table.

"Thank you, Soames, I am. And you?"

"Much the same, sir. There is still some of the Lafite vintage wine left."

Good old Soames! Remembering that after five years. And yet—why not? That was life; to him a member's taste in wine was a thing of paramount importance. Especially, though he did not add this mentally, when the member was Jim Maitland.

That he was a sort of legendary hero in the club, was a fact of which Jim was completely ignorant. And had anyone hinted at it he would either have been annoyed or else roared with laughter. To him a journey to the interior of Turkestan came as naturally as one to Brighton comes to the ordinary man. He had been born with wanderlust in his bones; and being sufficiently endowed with this world's goods to avoid the necessity of working for a living, he had followed his bent ever since he left Oxford.

And the result, had he known it, would have surprised him. For it was not only in the club that a glamour lay round his name, but in a hundred odd places fringing the seven seas. Anywhere, in fact, where the men who do things are gathered together, you will sooner or later hear his name mentioned. And if some of the stories grow in the telling it is hardly to be wondered at, though in all conscience the originals are good enough without any embroidery.

Talk to deep-sea sailors from Shanghai to Valparaiso; talk to cattlemen on the estancias of the Argentine and after a while, casually introduce his name. Then you will know what I mean.

"Jim Maitland! The guy with a pane of glass in his eye. But if you take my advice, stranger, you won't mention it to him. Sight! his sight is better'n yourn or mine. I reckons he keeps that window there so that he can just find trouble when he's bored. He's got a left like a steam hammer, and he can shoot the pip out of the ace of diamonds at twenty yards. A dangerous man, son, to run up against, but I'd sooner have him on my side than any other three I've yet met."

Thus do they speak of him in the lands that lie off the beaten track, the man with a taste for Château Lafite. And as he sat sipping his wine, warmed to the exact temperature by the paragon Soames, there came the glint of a smile into his eyes. Dimly he was aware that near at hand the impossible Percy was drivelling on, but it seemed as far removed from him as the buzzing of an insect outside a mosquito curtain. White tie, white waistcoat, boiled shirt—and six weeks ago...London: the solidity, the respectability of his club—and six weeks ago...

"Have you ever hit a man on the base of the skull with a full bottle of French vermouth, Percy?" he said suddenly. "I suppose you haven't. You'd wait for an introduction, wouldn't you, before taking such a liberty?"

"I don't believe you've heard a word I've said, Jim," answered his cousin plaintively.

"I haven't, thank God! I heard a continuous droning noise somewhere: was that you?"

"Are you coming to-night?"

"Coming where?"

"I knew you hadn't been listening. To this meeting of the chaps in Hampstead."

"Nothing would induce me to. I don't want to see them, and they don't want to see me."

"But they do, dear old lad. I've told 'em about you, and they're all simply crazy to meet you."

"What have you told 'em about me?"

"All sorts of things. You see, I sort of swore I'd bring you along the first possible chance I had, and what could be fairer than this?"

And in the end Jim Maitland had allowed himself to be persuaded. Though he ragged him unmercifully for the good of his soul, he was really quite fond of his cousin: moreover, he was possessed of a genuine curiosity to gaze upon the post-war young in bulk. Since 1918 he had spent exactly seven months in England, so that his knowledge of the genus was confined to what he had read in books.

Presumably they were much the same as the young have ever been au fond. Only conditions to-day afforded them so much more freedom. Certainly the lad Percy could drive a motor-car all right, he reflected. He had one of the big Bentleys. Providence in the shape of a defunct aunt of doubtful sanity endowed him with more money than he knew what to do with. But he drove it magnificently, and Jim Maitland was a man who loathed inefficiency.

The traffic was thinning as they spun across Oxford Street, and Percy who had been silent for nearly five minutes began to give tongue again. He rattled off a string of names—the blokes, as he called them, who would probably be there. And then he paused suddenly.

"By Jove! That reminds me. I wonder if she'll roll up. The last of these shows I went to," he explained, "a girl beetled in who was a new one on me. Came with Pamela Greystone and her bunch. And I happened to be talking about you at the time. Well, as soon as this wench heard that you knew something about South America she was all over it."

"I should think there must be quite a number of people who know something about South America," said Jim, mildly sarcastic.

"Yes, but I was telling 'em, you see, that you knew all about the interior."

"All about the interior!" Jim laughed. "My dear old Percy, draw it mild."

"Anyway, she's damned keen to meet you. Got a brother out there or something."

"As long as she doesn't feel certain that I must have met him as we were both out there at the same time, I can bear it. What's her name, by the way?"

"Haven't an earthly, old lad. As far as I remember, Pamela called her Judy. But I'm not even certain about that. Here we are!"

They drew up in front of a largish house standing in its own grounds. Half a dozen other cars were already there, and two more were in the drive. A large notice board proclaimed that the place was for sale, and Jim remarked on it to his cousin.

"Been for sale for months, old lad. Belongs to the father of one of our push, and he lets us use it. Let's get in: there's most of 'em here already."

He approached the front door and knocked twice, upon which the top of the letter-box was lifted.

"Pink Gin with guest," said Percy.

"Pass Pink Gin and guest," answered a voice, and the door opened.

"To prevent gate crashing," explained Percy solemnly. "We have a different pass-word each time, and it's always the name of some drink."

"I see," said Jim gravely. "A most necessary precaution. What do we do now?"

"Go below to the cellar and drink beer."

"Excellent," remarked Jim. "But why the cellar?"

"My dear old lad, why not?"

With which unanswerable remark Percy led the way.

The cellar was a big room, and Jim looked round him curiously. Some thirty people were there, and every one of them seemed to be talking at the top of their voices. The air was blue with cigarette smoke, and a strong aroma of kipper smote the nostrils.

"That's the filly I was telling you about, Jim," said Percy in his ear. "The girl in grey over there in the corner."

She was talking to two men, one of whom was evidently a licensed buffoon; and Jim glanced at her idly. Then once again his gaze travelled round the room. It all seemed very harmless, and very uncomfortable, and rather stupid. Why a large number of presumably wealthy young people should elect to sit in a cellar in Hampstead and drink beer, when they could have done so in comfort anywhere else they liked, defeated him.

He realised that Percy was introducing him to various girls, and he grinned amiably. Now that he had come he had better make the best of it. And then suddenly he found himself looking into a pair of level blue eyes—eyes with a faintly mocking challenge in them. The buffoon had drifted away: for the moment the girl in grey and he were alone.

"And what," she remarked, "brings the celebrated Jim Maitland into this galaxy?"

"Curiosity," he answered simply. "But why, in Heaven's name, celebrated?"

"Our little Percy has insisted so long and so often that you are, that we've got to believe him in common politeness. Well—what do you think of it?"

"Frankly, I think it's all rather childish," he said. "Does it really amuse you?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"It's a change," she answered. "Let's go into that corner and sit down. I want to talk to you. Rescue some cushions from somewhere."

He studied her thoughtfully as she sat down with legs tucked under her. A slightly tip-tilted nose; a complexion, unaided as far as he could see, that only the word Perfect could do justice to: a slim, delicious figure. Her hands were capable but beautifully kept: her hair clung tightly to a boyish head.

"Well," she said calmly, "do you approve?"

He smiled: said as she said it the remark rang natural.

"Entirely," he answered. "But before we go any further, has it occurred to you that the egregious Percy has omitted the small formality of telling me your name."

"Draycott. Judy Draycott."

She took a cigarette from her case, and Jim held a match for her.

"Tell me, Mr. Maitland, are we very different to the pre-war vintage?"

"That's rather a poser," he said, sitting down beside her. "You see, I've been so little in England since the war that I'm not a very good judge."

"But—this." She waved her hand at the room.

"Good Lord!" he laughed, "what has this got to do with it? This is nothing: a tiny symptom in a tiny set."

"You know you are of what I always call the lost generation," she said. "What Daddy would call the senior subaltern brand."

He stared at her in silence, a little nonplussed by her serious tone.

"You were our age just before the war," she went on, "and you're still young enough to play. But there are so few of you left."

"True," he said gravely. "I suppose my contemporaries took it worst."

"There are the old people, and there are us. But the connecting link has gone—you and yours."

"The lost generation," he repeated slowly. "A nice idea—that."

"And that's why I asked you what you thought of us," she said. "You are one of the few who are qualified to judge."

He lit another cigarette before replying.

"Am I? I wonder. One can see changes—naturally, but who am I to say whether they are for the better or for the worse. This show, for instance. Frankly, I can't quite see this happening twenty years ago. Nor did everyone call everyone else 'darling' on sight."

"Trifles," she said impatiently. "Just trifles. What about the big things?"

"I should say," he answered without hesitation, "no change. Different methods, perhaps: different ways of doing them—but, in the end, the same."

"You don't think we're softer than you were?"

"I think this age is more comfort loving, undoubtedly, if that's what you mean. But that, I suppose, is only natural in view of the advance of science. Then one hacked to a meet—now one goes in a car."

"But are we as keen on adventure?"

Jim laughed.

"Adventure! Where is adventure to be found these days?"

"You ought to know," she said, "if half the stories I've heard about you are true."

"I'm afraid I'm a hard-bitten case," he answered. "But I can assure you that even I have noticed the difference in the last few years. Everything is getting far too quiet."

"Even in South America?" she asked.

South America! Percy's remark came back to him, and he wondered what was coming next. This, apparently, was what she had been leading up to.

"You can get a bit of fun out there at times," he said lightly. "But then if one looked for it I dare say one could get it in London."

"What sort of people are they?"

He laughed again.

"My dear Miss Draycott," he said, "they vary as much as the inhabitants of Europe. But by your question I assume you mean the brand that we generally lump together as dagos. Well—just like every other breed, you will find all sorts and conditions. I have excellent—very excellent friends amongst them. But they

are people who require careful handling. For instance, there is one thing you must never do to a dago, unless you know him extremely well. Never pull his leg. He doesn't understand it: he takes it as an insult. There's another thing too. You stick a knife into one—or shoot him up—and he'll understand it. You hit him with your fist on the jaw and he'll never forgive you."

"Are they very quick with a knife?" she asked.

"Very—and with a gun. Moreover, they will shoot on the smallest provocation. You'll understand, of course, that I'm not talking about the vast majority of them, who are perfectly harmless people. But to show you what I mean about the minority I'll tell you a thing I saw with my own eyes. It was in Buenos Aires about seven years ago, and a festa was in progress. Streets crammed with people and cars: the whole place en fête. I was on the side walk, and a motor-car alongside me was being held up by a man who was standing just in front of the mudguard. So the driver sang out to him to move. He didn't, and after a while the driver very slowly drove forward, and hit the man a glancing blow on the leg. Now it was a blow that wouldn't have hurt a fly: it didn't even make the man stumble. But what happened next? As the driver came abreast of the man, he calmly stepped on to the running-board, drew his gun and blew out the driver's brains. And this, mark you, with the wife in the back of the car."

"But didn't they arrest the murderer?" cried the girl.

"Not a hope," said Jim. "He just vanished into the crowd. No—they want watching, especially if they've got a drop too much liquor on board."

He pressed out his cigarette.

"Is it permitted to ask why you are so interested in South America?"

For a moment or two she hesitated, staring in front of her. Then she turned to him.

"I am almost tempted to use that stereotyped beginning, Mr. Maitland, and ask you not to laugh at me."

"Then I'll make the stereotyped reply and assure you that I shan't," he said quietly.

"I've got a brother," she went on, "a twin brother. Arthur is his name. And for the past two years he's been knocking about in South America. Brazil, Uruguay, and the Argentine. Now I know that must seem very small beer to you—I mean I don't think he's been much off the beaten track. But at any rate he's been out there, cutting away from this."

"Has he been on a job?" asked Jim.

"He went out there to start with for a big oil firm. Quite a good salary. And of course Daddy allows him something. But after two or three months he found he couldn't stick it—his manager was a swine—so he chucked it. Since then he's been drifting about."

"I see," said Jim quietly. Only too many youngsters had he met drifting about on something allowed by Daddy, and the brand did not inspire him with confidence. Then feeling that his remark had been a little too curt, he added—"It's difficult to get jobs out there—jobs that are any good, that is—unless a man is an expert. And it's a devilish expensive place to drift in."

"I know it is," she answered. "Arthur often wrote me to say how fearfully difficult he found it. At any rate he managed to carry on, until he had the most amazing piece of luck about six months ago. And now I'm coming to where I'm afraid you may laugh."

"Risk it," said Jim with a smile.

"If I'd known you were coming this evening I'd have brought his letter, but I think I can remember all that matters. It seems that he did some kindness to a broken-down sailor in Monte Video—an Englishman. And this sailor on his deathbed told him some wonderful story of buried treasure."

Jim's face remained expressionless, though this was worse than he had expected.

"I hope he didn't part with any money for it," he said quietly.

"I thought you'd take it that way," she cried. "I did myself when I first read it. But he didn't pay anything: the sailor gave him the whole secret. And, anyway, he'd only got his allowance: he had no capital to give away."

"What is the secret?" he enquired.

"That I don't know," she said. "He wrote something about a map, and fitting out an expedition, and from that moment I never heard another word till three weeks ago when I got a letter saying he was coming home by the next boat. He also said that if anything should happen to him I should find a letter addressed to me at my bank."

"If anything happened to him," repeated Jim thoughtfully. "Have you been to the bank to enquire?"

"Yes. I was actually in there this morning, and there was nothing."

"Then everything seems plain sailing, Miss Draycott. Presumably nothing has happened to him, and if you got his letter three weeks ago he ought to be in

England by now. And as soon as you see him you'll be able to get the whole story."

"I know. But it is there that I wondered if you could help."

She looked at him appealingly.

"Me! I shall be delighted. But how?"

"By going into the whole thing with him, and telling him what you think. You know so much more than he does, Mr. Maitland, and if there's anything in it, it would be wonderful if we could have your advice."

For a while he hesitated: then he looked her straight in the face.

"I'm going to be perfectly frank, Miss Draycott," he said. "The story, as you've told it to me, is, not to mince words, as old as the hills. From time immemorial drunken seamen have babbled in their cups of treasure trove—gold ingots, diamonds, and all the rest of the paraphernalia. Generally, too, they have a roughly-scrawled map, with, as often as not, a skull and cross bones in the corner to make it more realistic. In fact the one point in which this story differs from the others is that he did not apparently touch your brother for money. Had he done that I should have advised you to dismiss the whole thing from your mind at once."

"You don't think there is anything in it, then," she said despondently.

"I don't want to be brutal," he answered with a smile, "but I fear that is my opinion. I'm not going to deny that there must be treasure—probably priceless treasure—hidden away in odd parts of the globe: relics of the old pirate days. I'm not going to deny that the Spanish Main, and the coast of South America are very likely localities for the hiding-places. But what I do feel doubtful about is the likelihood of a down-and-out seaman in Monte Video knowing anything about it, or getting the clue to its whereabouts."

"But as you said yourself he took no money," she persisted.

"I know that," he agreed. "And I think it is quite possible that the sailor genuinely believed what he was saying—they're the most gullible brand of men on earth. I think it is more than likely that when your brother befriended him he really intended to do him a good turn. What I'm doubtful of is the value of the information. Certainly I would say one thing. Unless your brother, when you see him, has something very much more definite to go on than the ramblings of a seaman on his last legs, and this map he was given it would be nothing short of madness to sink any money in an attempt to discover it."

"I quite see your point," she said. "But would it be too much to ask you to hear what he's got to say? And then give us your advice."

"Of course not," cried Jim. "I shall be only too delighted. The Dorchester Club always finds me when I'm in London, and I shall be very interested to hear what he has to tell us. I know that country better than most men, and if I can be of any assistance—count me in. But for Heaven's sake—don't build any false hopes on it."

A sudden surge of Bright Young Things bearing kippers and beer descended on them, and carried her away, leaving Jim with an intense female who shook him to the marrow on sight. He suffered her for five minutes, at the end of which period, to his inexpressible relief, Percy bore down on him.

"I never thought I should be glad to see you, Percy," he said, as the female drifted away, "but that woman is a menace to society."

"She is pretty grim," agreed his cousin. "What price the other girl? I saw you with your noses touching for about half an hour!"

"A nice little soul," said Jim. "Do you know anything about her?"

"Just been asking Pamela. Her father is a retired General: got a house down in Sussex."

"Has he got any money?"

"Hullo! Hullo! Hullo!" Percy dug him in the ribs. "So that's how the land lies, does it?"

"Don't be such a damned fool," said Jim curtly. "To say nothing of being infernally offensive."

"Sorry, old man. I but spoke in jest. As a matter of fact, I think not. In fact Pamela said he was darned hard up. There's a pretty useless waster of a son, I gather. Out in South America somewhere."

Jim glanced at his watch: the time was two o'clock.

"Not going yet, old lad, are you?" cried Percy. "We're only just beginning."

"You needn't come," said Jim. "I shall walk. This terrific excitement is too much for me. Do I have to whisper some mystic countersign to get out of the place?"

"No, just open the front door and beetle away. Sure you don't want me to take you in the bus?"

"Quite," said Jim, and beetled.

Thus did we find him, top-hat tilted, pondering on things in general with the lights of London in front of him. He strolled slowly along drawing in great lungsful of fresh air. Lord! what an atmosphere there had been in that cellar. And what a damned-fool performance. Yet, in a way he was glad he had gone: the girl in grey was rather a dear. Stupid of him not to have asked her address: probably get it when this young brother of hers rolled up.

He grinned to himself: the hidden treasure yarn had whiskers on it even when compared to the old Spanish prisoner chestnut. No less than four times had it been put up to him—vouched for chapter and verse. Still he was sorry for the girl, especially as there was not much money. Probably been building on it a bit: only natural that she should. But the brother must be a fool as well as a waster to be taken in by it.

A belated taxi homeward bound hailed him, but he shook his head. He was not in the least sleepy, and the combined reek of smoke and kipper still clung to him. Young asses! He tried to picture what any of them would do in a really tight corner. That fellow who had been thumping the piano for instance, and thumping it damned well, to do him justice. But imagine him in a bar in Valparaiso, for instance, when a rough house started.

He threw away his cigarette: was he being quite fair? After all, none of them had had any experience of such a show. And maybe if they did do the wrong thing it would be from lack of knowledge, not from lack of guts. It wasn't given to many to have the opportunities he had had, even if the desire to have them was there.

Men had often told him that he looked for trouble, but that was not quite the case. There was no need for him to look: it came of its own accord. True, he never went out of his way to avoid it: he would even admit that he welcomed it with both hands. Something out of the ordinary, off the beaten track: something with a spice of danger in it—that was all he asked of life. And up-to-date life had given him full measure, pressed down and running over.

He glanced up at the houses he was passing: solid lumps of respectability, symbolic of everything that he was not. In them reposed lawyers, stock-brokers, city magnates—men who formed the backbone of the Medes and Persians. Not there was adventure in London to be found: the mere thought of it was an outrage. In Dockland, perhaps, but that was cheap: the glamour of Limehouse exists only in the imagination of the novelist. No—though he had told the girl that it could be found he was wrong: it could not be found anywhere these days....

And at that moment, clear and distinct in the still, night air, there rang out the sharp crack of a revolver shot.

CHAPTER II

JIM MAITLAND stopped dead in his tracks, and then with the instinct bred of many years he sought the cover of a neighbouring tree. In the country he had just come from he would not have given the matter a second thought—gun work was part of the ordinary day's round. But in London, especially in this part of London, it was a very different affair. The sound had come from the house in front of him—a house very similar to the one he had just left, save that it was not for sale. It was in darkness, but some kind of subconscious instinct told him that there had been a light in one of the upper windows a few seconds previously.

He glanced up and down the road: not a soul was in sight. He looked at the two neighbouring houses: there was no sign of movement. And then, as was his way, he summed up the situation. He was unarmed: whoever had fired the shot obviously was not. Short of breaking in there was no way in which he could get into the house. And finally it was no earthly business of his. Wherefore, by three very good reasons to nil he should have continued his leisurely walk towards home. Which was quite sufficient to decide him to do nothing of the sort. He would give it a few minutes at any rate to see if anything further happened.

He turned the collar of his evening overcoat up so as to cover the white patch of dress shirt. Then motionless as a statue he seemed to merge himself into the trees in front of him. For a while nothing happened: then from one of the windows there came a gleam of light. It was extinguished almost at once, only to appear in the one just below it and then go out again. Someone was coming down the stairs. It shone for a second over the front door, and then the door itself opened, and two men came out.

Jim realised they would have to pass within a few feet of him, and pressed himself still closer against the trees. He could hear their voices—one furiously angry, the other seemingly apologetic—though as yet he could not make out their actual words. One was a big man, the other a head shorter, and it was the big man who was in a rage.

"You damned, blithering fool, Ernesto."

The words suddenly rang out clearly as they approached the gate.

"You've wrecked the whole thing."

The latch clicked, and Jim waited for the smaller man's reply.

"He should not have struck me," he said. "I do not like to be struck."

The two men stood peering up and down the road.

"Not a cursed thing in sight," growled the big man. "However, perhaps it is as well. No one heard. We'll walk. But we've got to get a move on."

They strode off, and Jim waited till their voices died away in the distance. The big man was obviously English: the other from his accent and name seemed Spanish. Or possibly South American. And it struck him that it was a queer coincidence that he should have been mentioning that characteristic of the dago to the girl only a little time previously—their hatred of being hit.

He came out from behind the tree, and began to size things up. In the house in front of him was a man who had been shot. He might be dead: he might only be wounded. The great point was—was there anyone else inside? If there were servants, some of them at any rate would have been roused by the noise of the shot, and lights would have been turned on. But the house was still in darkness. On balance therefore he decided against servants.

What about the owner of the house? Was it the big man himself? That seemed quite probable, and if so what was he going to do? To leave a dead man, or even a seriously-wounded man lying about the place would prove an awkward matter. He recalled his last words about getting a move on. What had he meant? And putting himself in his place Jim decided that the only possible course would be to take the body away and dump it elsewhere. It would be unsafe even to leave it till the following night, since any doctor would know that the man had been dead some time, and it would be most improbable for a corpse to lie through the day in the open undiscovered.... It would therefore give a strong pointer to the police that the body had been moved after death, whereas if it was done at once they might be deceived. So it boiled down to the fact that if he was going to do anything at all, it must be done at once. He crossed the pavement rapidly, opened the gate and skirted up the short drive keeping in the shadow of the bushes.

That he was proposing to break into somebody else's house disturbed him not at all. His position, even if he was discovered, was a far stronger one than the owners who would have to explain the presence of a dead or wounded man on his premises. But he had no intention of being discovered. Amongst other attributes possessed by Jim Maitland was an almost catlike gift for silent moving at night, and he proposed to utilise it to the full.

He glided up the steps like a dark shadow, only to find as he had expected that the door was locked. Yale latch-key: no hope there. Then keeping close to the

walls he made a circuit of the house. There was a basement and with any luck he hoped to find a window open, or at any rate one he could force easily. There was just sufficient light for him to see without having to strike matches, and suddenly he gave a little exclamation. There, straight in front of him, was a broken pane of glass. He reached down, unfastened the bolt, and a moment later he was inside.

The darkness now was far more intense, and after taking two or three cautious steps forward he struck a match. It was a risk, but the window by which he had entered was at the back of the house, so the light could not be seen from the road. He held it above his head, and as he peered round a puzzled frown came over his face. The shortcomings of modern servants he had been told about, but the filth of the room called for some further explanation than that.

The dust was thick on the table and on the floor: clearly the place had not been touched for months. And when he opened the door and continued his exploration he found it was the same everywhere. Kitchen, scullery, and larder were all in like condition: the basement evidently was not used. Where, then, did they do the cooking?

A flight of stairs led to the next floor, and he went up them noiselessly. Luckily the door at the top was not locked. He opened it, and at once became aware of a strong odour of stale tobacco smoke. Directly facing him a faint light filtered in through the fan-light over the front door: he was in the hall.

He stood motionless, listening intently: the house was absolutely silent.

The smokers, whoever they had been, were there no longer. Then, step by step, he felt his way forward. And the first thing that struck him was that the condition of the basement was certainly not duplicated on this floor. His feet almost sank into the carpet, so rich was the pile, and a match carefully screened by his hand showed him that the whole place was furnished de luxe.

He found the staircase, and began to ascend on a carpet as thick as that in the hall. The second storey was his goal, and if he realised that every step he took now materially increased his danger his pulse beat no quicker. Every third or fourth stair he paused and listened: still the same deathly silence.

The smell of stale smoke seemed to be growing stronger the higher he mounted, till it reached a maximum on the first landing. His eyes were growing accustomed to it now, and in the very faint light that filtered in from a window at the end of the passage, he saw an open door just beside him. He stepped through it, and realised that he had found the origin of the smell of smoke.

Here the darkness was absolute, and after a moment's hesitation he struck another match. And by its feeble glimmer he solved one, at any rate, of his problems. A single glance showed him what he had stumbled into, and the mystery of the dirty basement was explained.

The place was a private gambling den, and as soon as he realised the fact, he realised also that much of the need for caution was gone. The house was empty: he would not be disturbed until the two men returned, if they returned at all. He shut the door and switched on the light.

Heavy black curtains covered the windows, and the room which ran the whole depth of the house was sumptuously furnished. At one end stood a cold buffet, with the remains of many plates of sandwiches on the table. Empty champagne bottles galore littered the floor behind it: the spread was in keeping with the furniture. In the centre of the room was a roulette board: on each side of it all the usual paraphernalia for baccarat and chemin de fer lay scattered on two tables.

No servants kept, he reflected: provisions ordered in from a caterer. And in his satisfaction at having settled one point, for a while he forgot that there was a second far more important one to be enquired into. Moreover, that time was getting on.

He could move more freely now, and having switched off he went boldly up to the next landing. If he had been right about the light in the window just before the shot, the room would be one facing the road. That narrowed the choice to two, and for a while he hesitated, wondering which to try first. Both doors were shut: it was a toss up. Finally he took a chance, and as luck would have it he was right.

A big roll-top desk stood in the centre of the room, which was furnished like an office. Two or three leather chairs: a few books of reference in which Who's Who and Burkes figured prominently: some sporting prints on the walls, and a big safe in one corner comprised the rest of the stuff. Except for a pair of legs that stuck out beyond the desk....

He had turned on the light as he entered, and before examining the body he crossed to the window and drew the curtains closer together. Then he returned to the desk and stared down at the man lying on the floor. His face was in shadow but a glance was sufficient to show that he was dead. He was in evening clothes, and in the centre of his white shirt was a dark-red stain. One arm was thrown up as if to ward off the shot: the other, with fist clenched, lay outstretched along the carpet. He had been plugged through the heart.

There was no stain on the carpet, which proved that the bullet was still inside him. And in that curiously-detached mood which is experienced by some men when the circumstances are dangerous or unusual Jim found himself commenting mentally on what a very fortunate fact it was for the murderers, if they intended, as he assumed they did, to put the body elsewhere. The bleeding had ceased, and even the most bovine policeman would smell a rat if there was a wound in a dead man's back and no blood on the ground underneath it.

He was far too accustomed to battle, murder, and sudden death to feel particularly upset about the matter. What had happened seemed fairly clear. There had been some row below, and the three of them had come up to the office to settle it. The dead man had lost his temper, hit the dago and the dago had shot him. So much seemed obvious. The point was—what was his next move?

In certain countries the answer would have been one word—nothing. But in England things were different. It was perfectly true that if he now walked out of the house as he had walked in, no one would be any the wiser. But he felt a strange disinclination to let the matter drop. A telephone was on the desk, and for a while he stared at it. Should he ring up the police? And then it struck him he didn't even know the name of the house. It was absurd to state that he was in an unknown house with a dead man on the floor beside him. Almost equally absurd to ask the Exchange where he was. To find out he would have to go down and look outside the gates. Even then it might only be a number, and as he was also ignorant of the name of the road, he would be no better off.

At the same time it seemed equally fatuous to remain where he was. If the two men returned he knew that one of them, at least, had a gun which he did not scruple to use. And if there was one thing more than any other that he disliked, it was a balance debit in the matter of firearms. If they did not return it would be daylight in less than an hour, and he might be seen leaving the house, which would prove awkward.

Suddenly it struck him that as yet he had not examined the dead man's face. The eyes were wide open and staring: the teeth were set in a snarl: the expression, in fact, was just what he would have expected in a man killed instantaneously in the middle of a quarrel. And so it was not that that caused him some few seconds later to rise to his feet with a look of incredulous amazement on his face. The thing was impossible; frankly impossible. And yet there was no mistaking the likeness of the murdered man to the girl he had been talking to that evening.

Jim Maitland had none of the popular disbelief in coincidence. He had met so many amazing ones in his life that he took them as a matter of course. So that it was not so much the strangeness of the affair that worried him, but how this new development affected his course of action. If this was Judy Draycott's brother—and in view of the likeness he felt but little doubt on the fact—the whole thing became very much more personal. He liked what little he had seen of her immensely, and here he was confronted with the dead body of her twin brother, knowing full well that the murderer was a dago whose Christian name was Ernesto.

His course of action was obvious. Ring up the Exchange: explain briefly what had occurred, and ask them to tell the police to come round. With the clues he could give them it should prove a very easy matter to lay hands on the man who had done it. Moreover he realised that if he did not take that course of action, and it should ever transpire that he had been mixed up in it the girl would never forgive him. And yet he hesitated. Twice did his hand go out to pick up the receiver: twice did he refrain.

It was certainly not due to any desire to shield the murderer. Even if the dead man had been a bit of a waster that was no excuse for a dago plugging him. His hesitation came from a very different cause. The instant the police came into the matter he automatically went out. And he was not sure he wanted to go out. The coincidence of the thing, and the strangeness of the whole episode had intrigued his curiosity.

When talking to the girl he had poured cold water on her tale about buried treasure, but now he found himself wondering. Was it possible that this was not a mere gambling quarrel, but something bigger? After all, no one would come home after a long absence abroad and spend his first night playing chemin de fer without even letting his people know he had returned. And clearly the girl had no idea that her brother was back.

A liner had berthed that morning: the dead man then had been in London well over twelve hours. Surely he would under normal circumstances have got in touch with his relatives.

Jim realised that the reasoning was thin, but it afforded him just sufficient excuse not to do his plain duty and use the telephone. Which was negative, not positive: to decide what you are not going to do is easier than deciding what you are.

If his supposition was right: if this youngster had been talking out of his turn with regard to some genuine proposition in South America one thing was vitally

important. He must have a closer look at the two men who had been responsible for the murder. The girl would be coming into it, and he could help her far more by spotting the enemy unknown to them than by handing one of them over to the police. And it was as he arrived at this satisfactory, if somewhat unmoral, conclusion that he suddenly straightened up with every nerve taut. From outside had come the unmistakable sound of a door opening....

He looked into the passage, and realised he was a sitting target for a man with a gun: the only hope was to tackle him as he came in. And in one bound he was beside the door, pressed against the wall.

A board creaked close by, and Jim waited tensely. Then there stepped into the room a strange figure. It was that of a small man hardly more than five feet high, clad in a silk dressing-gown. His head, covered with a skullcap, moved quickly from side to side like that of a bird: his hands were stretched out gropingly in front of him. And suddenly Jim understood: the man was blind.

"Monty: is that you?"

The voice was querulous, and high pitched—almost like a woman's, and a feeling of repugnance almost akin to nausea gripped Jim Maitland. He felt an overwhelming temptation to seize this little monstrosity by the throat and throttle him, and in the days that were to come he often recalled the fact. What a lot of trouble would have been saved if he had yielded to the impulse.

"Monty: where are you?"

It was almost a hiss, and the blind man's head gradually moved slower and slower until at length it became stationary with the sightless eyes staring at Jim. With that strange sixth sense given to those who cannot see he had located the stranger in the room. With a feeling of unreality Jim stared at him: the whole thing seemed like a dream. There was something so hideously abnormal about the little man apart altogether from his blindness. The hands were huge but beautifully made: the shoulders had that great depth and width which showed strength far above the average. But the incongruous thing was the look of almost devilish malignity on the face, instead of the gentle peacefulness generally seen on the features of the blind.

Suddenly the man spoke again in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

Jim thought quickly. Should he say he was a policeman, and demand details of the crime? If he did he would have to carry the bluff through; an impossible

thing if the others returned. And evidently the blind man was expecting them back, or at any rate someone called Monty. Better not: he would find out more if he kept silent. There would be no difficulty in eluding this little devil if it became necessary, or, should the worst come to the worst, in knocking him out. And then came the thing he had not expected. There was a click, and the room was in darkness.

For a moment he did not realise the significance of the move: then low breathing close beside him put him wise. The absence of light made no difference to his adversary, but it made all the difference to him. He stepped quickly backwards, and the other man chuckled gently. A hand touched his shirt front, and the chuckle was repeated.

"Evening clothes," came a whisper. "You foolish fellow."

Again Jim backed, but all the time he knew the other was following him. And suddenly there came to him a feeling he had experienced so rarely in his life that he refused to acknowledge it—fear. He had an almost irresistible desire to blunder about wildly: to hit out with all his force into the black, impenetrable wall around him. There was something abnormal about this squat, misshapen form which he knew was close beside him—invisible and yet so real.

He forced his nerves into control, and listened intently. Was that the sound of breathing behind his left shoulder? He swung his fist round, and cursed under his breath as he hit the wall. And once again came that odious chuckle from somewhere in the centre of the room.

A new idea came to him which steadied his nerves at once. With the room lit up he would have had the greatest compunction in hitting a blind man: it would have offended his sense of fair play. But now in the darkness things were different. The advantage was quite definitely on the side of his adversary. Superior strength was a legitimate weapon to use provided the other conditions were on an equality. He would lay the little swine out, gather what further information he could, and then clear out. And even as he arrived at this conclusion he heard the gentle click of a drawer shutting: the blind man was by the desk.

He took a step forward, and promptly blundered into a chair. Where the devil was he: he didn't remember any chair in that part of the room at all. He had lost his bearings completely: he did not even know in which direction the door lay. Or the switch. And with the thought of the switch he gave a sudden, short laugh. Assuredly the flesh pots of London had atrophied his brain. He had actually forgotten that in his pocket was a box of perfectly good matches. He

fumbled in his coat, and it was then that, too late, he realised the folly of having laughed. It all happened with incredible swiftness. He had hardly felt that hands were touching him behind before they were on his shoulders. Then came a heave, and the legs of the blind man were gripping him by the waist, whilst two arms were flung round his neck. And in the pitch blackness the fight began.

From the beginning it was a foregone conclusion, but the only feeling he was conscious of was one of rage at having been such a fool. Immensely powerful though he was, he knew at once that as far as strength in the arms was concerned the blind man was his match. Moreover he was fighting under the most disadvantageous conditions possible. To dislodge even a comparative weakling from such a position is no easy matter: to get rid of an abnormal monstrosity was an impossibility. And he knew it.

With every ounce of strength he possessed put forward he tried to release the iron grip round his neck: then he went for the legs. And for the third time the chuckle was repeated. He blundered round the room till he bumped into a wall: then with his back towards it he crashed his burden against it time after time. If only he could wind the little brute there would still be a chance. But beyond a grunt of rage at each bump it was useless: the grip merely tightened round his throat.

He was weakening, and the knowledge drove him wild. He began staggering haphazard about the room, whilst the roaring in his ears increased. Once he hit the desk and nearly fell, only recovering himself with a vast effort. But it was his last kick: there was a limit to what even he could stand. His lungs were bursting: the veins on his forehead were standing out like whipcord. Hazily he realised that the room had suddenly been flooded with light, and that two men were standing by the door. Then with a crash he pitched forward on his face and knew no more....

He awoke to find himself in a small, bare room. The walls were whitewashed: the furniture non-existent save for the very hard apology for a bed on which he was lying. The door had a singularly solid look: the window was barred. And for a while he stared round trying to pull himself together.

Gradually recollection returned. The blind dwarf: the dead man: the gambling den. And now where the devil was he? He sat up: his shoes had been removed. And into his still bemused brain came a sudden light. He was in the cell of a police station.

In his mouth was a foul taste, the significance of which he realised only too well. Once, in his extreme youth, he had been shanghaied out east, and the after-taste of a drug can never be mistaken for anything else. After he had been throttled into insensibility, dope of sorts had been forced down his throat: so much was obvious.

He glanced at the window: the sun was streaming in. Then he looked for his watch only to find it had been taken away.

"Awake, are you? What we might describe as some blind—what?"

The man's tone was good-humoured and Jim staggered to his feet.

"Then the description would be wrong, sergeant," he said shortly. "Doped, my boy: drugged. At my age, too, by the Lord Harry! For the love of Pete, give me some water. I've got a mouth like a volcano in eruption."

The sergeant shouted an order, and then looked at Jim curiously.

"Drugged, were you? Are you sure?"

"Am I sure? Of course I'm sure."

He took a long gulp of water from the glass that a constable had brought.

"If you'd got a head like hell with the lid off, and a mouth like a refuse heap, you'd be sure."

"I'm not denying," said the sergeant, "that I had some suspicions of it myself. At the same time nothing seemed to have been taken from you. We have"—he consulted a piece of paper he took out of his pocket—"a gold watch, a gold and platinum cigarette-case, and twenty-six pounds, five shillings, and four pence in cash. Now, sir, you say you were drugged. Who by, and where?"

"I can't tell you the name of the gentleman," said Jim grimly, "though I propose to find it out at the earliest possible moment. Nor can I tell you the exact locality. The nearest I can get to that is that it was somewhere in Hampstead."

"Hampstead!" ejaculated the sergeant. "Hampstead!"

"Why not?" said Jim irritably.

"Well, you know where you are now, don't you?"

"Not an earthly. How the devil should I?"

"You are in Streatham, sir. You were found on Streatham Common by the policeman on duty at seven o'clock this morning."

"What is the time now?" demanded Jim.

"Just after half-past three. You've been insensible for nearly eight hours."

For a time Jim stared at the officer without replying. His brain was beginning to work again normally and it was evident that he must do some pretty quick thinking. What had happened was, up to a point, clear. Having drugged him, they had put him in a car and dropped him as far as possible from the house where the thing had taken place. The two men he had seen just before he finally lost consciousness must have done it. But the immediate point to be decided was the important one. Should he tell the sergeant the whole story or should he not?

Reduced to the baldest terms the story sounded a bit thin. In a house—name unknown, situated in a road—name also unknown, somewhere in Hampstead he had found a dead man. He had then been attacked by a blind dwarf and doped. If he told it and stuck to it the police would be forced to investigate it which would mean publicity. And he did not want publicity. He was very angry, and his definite intention was to deal with the matter himself. At the same time he realised that he was now in England, and that if he said nothing about the murder he was—if the facts came out—bringing himself quite definitely within the scope of the law as being an accessory to the crime. What, then, was to be done? The sergeant was beginning to look suspicious at his silence, and something had to be said. He decided to compromise.

"Do you people know of a private gambling den in Hampstead?" he asked.

"We certainly shouldn't know it here, sir, and I can't tell you what information they have up there. Whereabouts in Hampstead?"

"I don't know," said Jim. "I could probably identify the road, but with regard to the house I'm not so sure."

"Then it was the first time you'd been there?"

"It was."

"But if you don't know the house or the road how did you get in?"

"I was taken there by a man I met," said Jim. "He was a stranger to me, but he seemed a decent sort of fellow."

"Surely you know his name, sir?"

"Sorry, sergeant: I'm afraid I don't. I like a gamble, and he assured me this place was run on the straight. It wasn't: and that's all there is to it. I started throwing my weight about, and got my liquor doped for my pains."

"You'd know this man again if you saw him?"

"If I saw him—certainly," agreed Jim. "And you can take it from me I propose to look for him."

The sergeant shook his head disapprovingly.

"Well, sir, all I can say is that it serves you right. A gentleman of your age ought to know better than to run your head into a fool trap like that."

"Exactly, sergeant," said Jim mildly.

"I'll get on the 'phone to Hampstead and find out if they know anything, but unless you can be a bit more explicit it looks pretty hopeless."

"Would you at the same time, sergeant, get on to 3B Half Moon Street—Grosvenor 3X21—and tell my man Brooke to bring my clothes here at once. I don't want to drive through London in this rig. By the way," he added with a grin, "am I going to be charged with being drunk and disorderly or anything?"

"We'll let you off this time," said the other. "But if you take my advice you'll steer clear of that sort of thing in future."

The worthy officer departed closing the door, and Jim sat down on the bed. Save for a stiff neck, and a splitting headache he felt none the worse for the performance. At the small cost of appearing a fool in the sergeant's eyes he had accounted for his condition, and now he was left as a free agent to carry things on in his own way.

To say that he was angry would be to express it mildly. Jim Maitland was furious. That he should have been outed in Hampstead of all places, got the better of, fooled completely, made him wild. But since he never made the mistake of belittling an adversary he admitted to himself that no matter where it was, the blind man, given the tactical advantage he had possessed last night, would always do him in. Therefore he must never be allowed to obtain such a position again.

It was the question of the other two that worried him. It was possible but not probable that he might recognise their voices if he heard them again, but that was all. Outside it had been too dark to see their faces: inside he had been too far gone to notice anything except that two men were there. They might not even have been the same. But the annoying fact remained that two of the opponents knew him by sight, whereas he did not know them. Which started him at a grave disadvantage.

His property had been returned to him and he lit a cigarette. Percy would be able to tell him the name of the road, and he felt fairly confident that he could spot the house again. But even if he did, was it going to do any good? Was

there anything further to be found out there? It would please him immensely to slog the blind man good and hearty, but it would not advance things much if he did. That they had left the body there was most improbable: if not, what had they done with it?

He opened the door, and hailed the sergeant.

"Got an evening paper there by any chance?" he cried.

An Evening News was forthcoming, and he scanned the headlines. There was no mention of the discovery of any dead body. To question the man was obviously absurd, so he returned it with a word of thanks.

"Hampstead knows nothing about any gambling den, sir," remarked the officer. "They'd be glad of any information you can give them. And your man is coming along at once with your clothes."

Jim returned to his cell and lit another cigarette. A faint smile flickered round his lips as he pictured Brooke's face on finding him in his present position. Then he grew serious again: now that he had definitely committed himself by his story to the sergeant he began to doubt whether he had been wise. After all, the probability of there being anything further in it than a mere gambling quarrel was small. And if that was all, he had played straight into the murderer's hands. It was impossible for him to alter his story now.

"Your clothes, sir."

He looked up: Brooke, a suitcase in his hand, was standing stiffly in the doorway with an expression worthy of an early Christian martyr.

"And this note, sir, was left by hand this morning."

He took the letter and glanced at it: the writing was unfamiliar. Inside was a half sheet of paper, on which some words were written in block capitals.

LAST NIGHT YOU DREAMED: TO-DAY YOU AWOKE.

SHOULD YOU DREAM AGAIN YOU MAY NOT BE SO FORTUNATE.

"Who left this?" said Jim curtly.

"A messenger boy, sir. About ten o'clock this morning."

"Is there any letter in my evening coat, Brooke?"

"Only this, sir."

It was an invitation to a public dinner addressed to him at Half Moon Street, which he had slipped into his pocket meaning to send a reply from his club. So that was how they had traced him. Assuredly the dice were loaded pretty

heavily in their favour. They knew him by sight: they knew his name: they knew his address. But his face was quite impassive as he continued dressing. The bigger the odds, the better the sport. Moreover, the other side had committed, had they but known it, the one irreparable error. For a threat to Jim Maitland was even as a strawberry ice is to a greedy child.

CHAPTER III

AFTER a further admonition from the sergeant to be careful of the company he kept in future they parted on excellent terms. The necessity for a long drink and a strong drink was urgent: unfortunately a misguided legislation decreed that such a thing could not be at that hour. So sending Brooke on in the taxi he went for the most important thing—a shave.

The effects of the drug had very nearly worn off, and the need for formulating some plan of campaign was evident. And the first thing to do was to put himself in the enemy's position. Their assumption, it seemed to him, would be that he would most certainly tell the police. It would be the obvious thing that ninety-nine men out of a hundred would do in similar circumstances. In fact he would have done it himself but for the extraordinary coincidence of his previous conversation with the girl—a conversation about which they could know nothing. Taking that as a basis—what next? They would anticipate a visit of inspection from the police very shortly after he recovered consciousness. They could not know that he was blissfully ignorant even of the name of the road.

The strong probability therefore was that by now all traces of their occupation of the house would have disappeared. They had no time to lose: even the roulette and baccarat tables would involve them in unpleasant notoriety if discovered by the authorities. The point would have to be confirmed, of course, but it seemed to him that that was the obvious starting-point from which to begin. And if so, the problem became a simple one to propound, but a difficult one to solve. How was he to get in touch with them again?

The crude and stupid threat had presumably been written on the assumption that he would not receive it until after he had communicated with the police, and led them, apparently, to a mare's nest. They hoped that it would catch him in a mood of irritation and annoyance at having not only been made a fool of himself, but also for having made a fool of the police. And it was not hard to imagine what the police would have said if he had taken them to an empty and harmless house, on the plea that it was a gambling den where a man had been murdered. In fact with some men the threat might have fulfilled its object, and made them drop the whole thing. That he was not in that category was neither here nor there. Was it a sound move to let them think that he was?

He told the barber to give him a couple of hot towels, and under their soothing influence he followed up that line of thought. They would soon find out that he

had not told the police: what would they deduce from that? Surely it would be confirmatory evidence that he was only too anxious to let the matter drop altogether. They might think he was a business man unwilling to be mixed up in any scandal. And the more he sized up the situation, the better it seemed to him to give them that impression.

The only point against it was that if he left them alone, they would certainly do the same to him. The last thing they wanted was to be interfered with. Between them they would have to account for a murder, and even if they succeeded in bringing home the actual deed to the man called Ernesto, they would all be guilty of complicity. So what chance was there of getting any further with it, unless he carried the war into the enemy's country?

A big point, certainly—almost a vital one. To let the matter really drop was unthinkable, but what was he to do? At the moment he was at a hopeless disadvantage. If only, while apparently letting things go by the board, he could get hold of some pieces of evidence which would give him a clue as to their whereabouts. If only, unknown to them, he could start all square knowing them even as they knew him. He was under no delusions: it would be sheer luck if he did it. But Jim Maitland was a believer in luck, and it was a hopeful portent that as he entered his club the clock showed half-past five. No longer did the law interfere with the consumption of alcohol.

The first person he ran into was Percy, who looked at him in some surprise.

"By Jove! dear old lad," he burbled, "you look a bit under the weather—what! The right eye resembles a poached egg: the general bearing hardly of that martial order which is the hall-mark of our family."

"Dry up," said Jim. "It's the result of that devastating performance of yours. Look here, young Percy, what is the name of the road in which that house is? Where you drove me last night."

"Haven't an earthly, old fruit. I mean, who could be expected to know the name of a road in Hampstead?"

"But you've often been there, you blithering ass."

"I absolutely agree, dear heart. Absolutely. Times and again, and then some. I could find my way there in the dark with my eyes shut, but I couldn't tell you the name of the bally road to save my life."

Jim regarded him dispassionately.

"Your claim to continual existence grows more microscopic daily," he remarked at length. "However, it is you who will suffer. At eleven o'clock to-night you will

call for me here in your car. You will then drive me to the scene of your ridiculous entertainment last night. After that you can go and play by yourself."

"But, my dear man," spluttered Percy, "what the deuce do you want me to do that for? None of the birds will be there this evening."

"A fact for which one can but give pious thanks to high heaven," said Jim, lighting a cigarette.

"Then why do you want me to drive you there?" persisted his cousin.

"So that I may mark it in my mind as a spot to avoid in the future," said Jim.

"Cut it out, old lad," cried Percy. "Joking apart, what is the blinking game?"

Jim Maitland stared at him thoughtfully. And after a while an idea, engendered perhaps by his conversation with Judy Draycott, began to take root in his mind. Here in the shape of his cousin was a test case. What lay behind that vacuous exterior? Supposing things did begin to move, how would Percy behave in a tight corner? And moved by a sudden impulse he signed to him to come closer.

"I am about to order you a drink, young feller," he said, "and while you put your nose in it I am going to tell you a little story. But before I begin I want your word of honour that what I say to you goes no further without my permission."

"You have it," said Percy quietly.

"After I left you last night, whilst strolling along to get the foul smell of those kippers out of my nostrils, I heard a revolver shot. It came from a house I was passing. Impelled by my usual curiosity I broke into the house, which I found to be a gambling den. Amongst other odds and ends I found a murdered man lying about: he'd been shot through the heart. Shortly afterwards I was doped, and I've spent to-day in Streatham police station."

"Go to blazes," laughed his cousin. "If that's your idea of a leg pull it is pretty poor, laddie."

"It happens to be the truth, Percy," said Jim gravely. "Now listen to me."

Without embroidery he told his cousin the whole story, omitting only one point—his strong suspicion that the murdered man was Judy Draycott's brother. That and all the implications that might follow with it, was not at the moment a thing he wanted to pass on to anyone. And by the time he had finished Percy's eyes were nearly goggling out of his head.

"But how perfectly priceless," he spluttered ecstatically. "Of course, old lad, you can count me in. Your idea is to go and have another look at the house to-night. Do a bit of amateur detective work. And, by Jove! that reminds me. There is a gambling place up in those parts: I've heard of it myself. Bloke in the club here told me about it—Teddy d'Acres."

He hailed a passing waiter.

"Is Lord d'Acres in the club?" he demanded.

"His lordship is playing cards, sir," said the man.

"I'll get hold of him, Jim," cried Percy, getting up.

"Not a word, don't forget," said the older man. "Just get the details of the place: nothing more."

"You leave it to me, laddie."

He rushed off to return in a couple of minutes with the information that Teddy was just finishing a rubber and would join them at once.

"Tell him," said Jim, "that I'm on the look out for a gamble, and want a straight place."

"It's a pity," opined his lordship, a few moments later, "that I didn't meet you last night. I was playing myself and I could have taken you along. And to-night I'm afraid I'm booked up three deep."

"What's the name of the house?" demanded Percy.

"Damned if I know, old boy," said the other. "It's a number, I think. But the road is Oakleigh Avenue."

"That's it," cried Percy, turning to Jim, "I remember now. That's where we met last night."

"As a matter of fact," went on d'Acres, "it's perhaps as well you weren't there. A poor evening. We generally carry on till three or four, but this morning we broke up about one."

Jim looked at him thoughtfully.

"Any particular reason?" he asked.

"Bloke there half screwed, who was asking for trouble. Began swearing he'd been cheated, which was all tripe. I've been to the damned place for months, and it's run absolutely square. Then he swore he'd get the police, which seemed to little Willie the moment to quit."

"Did he get the police?" asked Jim casually.

"Ask me another," said d'Acres. "I got to bed at a respectable hour for once."

"I wonder if he was the fellow I met at dinner," continued Jim, catching Percy's eye for a second. "Distinctly elevated even then, and asking everyone if they could tell him where to get a game. Big fellow and fat, with fair hair."

d'Acres shook his head.

"Not guilty. This was a slight, dark bird. Haven't an earthly what his name was, but he'd just come from South America, where according to him gambling was gambling, and not messing about with chicken food."

Not too good, reflected Jim. The evidence as far as it went at present seemed to point to nothing bigger than an ordinary gambling row as the cause of the shooting. And if so it would have been far better if he had telephoned the police from the house, for all interest would have left the situation as far as he was concerned.

"Who runs the place?" he asked.

"A syndicate, I believe. Cagnotte of five per cent—drinks and sandwiches chucked in."

He rose.

"Let me know any time you want to go," he remarked. "But give me a bit of warning, because I'm pretty full up. And if I can't manage it—you must be introduced the first time by someone who is known—I'll get old Monty to take you. He's always there: believe he's one of the syndicate, as a matter of fact. From all I hear, the old lad needs every penny of boodle he can lay his hands on."

Not a muscle of Jim's face twitched: his expression was one of polite interest.

"Monty," he murmured. "Monty who?"

"Monty Barnet," said the other. "Thought everyone knew old Monty. Well—so long: you just let me know when you feel like a flutter."

He lounged away, and Jim turned to his cousin.

"Who the devil is Monty Barnet when he's at home?"

"Good Lord! man—it can't be him your blind friend meant. He's Sir Montague Barnet, umpteenth Bart. Got a big place not far from Crowborough."

"At the moment I don't give a hoot where his place is," remarked Jim. "What sort of a man is he to look at?"

"Great big fellow with a small, dark moustache. Rather red in the face."

Jim Maitland lit a cigarette with some deliberation.

"If that is so, Percy," he said quietly, "the betting is just about five to one on your umpteenth Bart being one of the birds I want. Your description fits, and we have it from your pal d'Acres that he uses the place considerably. It may, of course, be only a very strange coincidence, but as a basis to work on I propose to start with the assumption as correct."

"But what are you going to do?" demanded Percy. "You can't go and accuse the bloke of murder."

"There are moments, little man," said Jim kindly, "when the thought that the same blood runs in our veins drives me to thoughts of suicide. Run away now, and play, and return at eleven o'clock in a dark suiting bringing an electric torch in your pocket."

He glanced at his watch: it was just on six. With luck he would have time to catch the man he wanted before he left his office. The firm of Henley Bros.—fifty pounds to ten thousand advanced on note of hand alone—kept late hours.

"And don't forget," he gave a final warning, "not a word to a soul, or I'll break your darned neck."

He penetrated the holy of holies at Messrs. Henley Bros. without difficulty. An oleaginous clerk outside informed him that such a thing would be out of the question, but on being requested to guess again and guess quickly he consented to take his name to Mr. Henley, with a result that surprised him.

"My dear Misther Maitland, thith ith a pleasure indeed."

A small, obese Jew almost concealed behind a vast cigar rose at Jim's entrance. He indicated a chair which his visitor took: he proffered an equally vast cigar which his visitor refused. Then sitting back in his chair he contemplated Jim with a watchful look.

"And what can I have the pleasure of doing for you, Misther Maitland?"

"I do not want a thousand pounds, Isaac," said Jim shortly. "Not being a millionaire I couldn't repay you. What I do want is some information."

"What sort of information?"

"Information which even if you can't give me now, you can find out for me. I don't like your trade, Isaac, as you know very well: but you may remember that day in Marseilles when I saved your somewhat worthless life."

Isaac Goldstein remembered it only too well, as the sickly pallor which spread over his face at the mere recollection of the incident testified. It was in the days before he had become Henley Bros., though his method of earning his livelihood had been the same, if on a smaller scale. And some of the inhabitants of Marseilles had suddenly decided that a thousand per cent was too much of a good thing. They stand not on the order of their going, do the people of that district: their habits are crude and summary. In short, but for the timely intervention of Jim Maitland who happened to be passing, Isaac Goldstein would not have been sitting in his present position smoking his fat cigar. And being well aware of the fact he had a feeling of gratitude towards this large Englishman with an eyeglass. He would even have gone as far, he told himself, as to reduce his terms for him—than which no more can be said.

"I remember it well, Misther Maitland," he said humbly. "Those sonths of dogs."

"Cut it out, Isaac. You richly deserved all you got. However, you can now do something to repay what I did. Don't turn pale: as I said before it is information, not money, I want. Now in the first place—what do you know of Sir Montague Barnet?"

The Jew stared at him shrewdly.

"I suppoth you don't mean whath written in Whoth Who?" he remarked.

"Correct," said Jim.

"Well, I don't know anything perthonally, but..."

He waved his hands deprecatingly.

"Precisely," cried Jim. "But. Get on with it, Isaac: I want my dinner. No good pretending to me that you fellows are not all hand in glove with one another."

"Well, in the course of bithineth we do hear things," admitted the other. "And a friend of mine did tell me that he had accommodated Sir Montague two or three timeth."

"As man to man, Isaac, is he in Queer Street?"

And for once the Jew did not beat about the bush.

"Yeth, Misther Maitland: he ith."

"So far, so good. What you've said merely confirms what I've already heard. Now for the next item. Do you know anything about a private gambling den in Oakleigh Avenue up in Hampstead?"

And for the fraction of a second there appeared in the moneylender's eyes a look which Jim found difficult to interpret. Almost it seemed to him there was fear in them: certainly surprise. It went as instantaneously as it appeared, but it did not escape the notice of one of the finest poker players in the world.

"Never heard of it, Misther Maitland," said the Jew.

"You're lying, Isaac," said Jim quietly. "I should have thought a man in your profession would have more control over his face. Now I realise there is no reason why you should answer me: at the same time I did you a good turn once. So once again I ask you the question. What do you know of that gambling den?"

"Why do you ask, Misther Maitland?" said the other at length.

"Why does one generally ask a question?" remarked Jim. "Because, Isaac, I want to hear your answer."

And once again the other hesitated.

"Get on with it, man," said Jim impatiently. "You've admitted now that you know about it: you can either tell me or not as you like. But I don't want to sit here all night."

"There certainly ith a houth in Oakleigh Avenue where they play," said the Jew suddenly. "But I've never been there mythelf."

"Is this man Barnet mixed up with it in any way?"

"He may be, Misther Maitland: he may be."

"And where does a blind dwarf come into the affair?"

The question shot out like a bullet from a gun, and the effect on the moneylender was remarkable. He sat up as if he had been stung by a hornet, and the hand holding his cigar trembled visibly.

"A blind dwarth, Misther Maitland," he muttered. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Assuredly," said Jim wearily, "you are the world's most indifferent liar. If you don't know what I'm talking about, why did my question bring on an attack of blind staggers? I'm interested in that man, Isaac," he continued gently, "and I would greatly appreciate any information you can give me about him. What, for instance, is his name?"

But the Jew shook his head.

"I know nothing about any blind dwarth, Misther Maitland," he said doggedly. "As I told you I've never been to the houth, and if there ith a blind man there I don't know who it ith. I'm thorry I can't help you."

"Won't, you mean—not can't," said Jim curtly.

He rose, and ignoring the other's proffered hand, went to the door.

"So long, Isaac. I'm not sure it wouldn't have been wiser to have let you fend for yourself in Marseilles that time."

He strolled back to his club, turning the conversation over in his mind. That Isaac Goldstein knew the blind man was obvious, and he regretted now that he had ever been to see him. He had done no good by the interview, and if, as seemed more than likely, the moneylender passed on the fact that he had been to see him it would be definitely disadvantageous. The others would know that he was not going to let the matter drop.

Still the mischief could not be undone. On the spur of the moment he had fired the question at the Jew, and he could only make the best of it. One thing, however, was clear. Not only did the moneylender know the dwarf, but he also stood in fear of him. Nothing else could account for Goldstein's whole manner when speaking. And he found his curiosity with regard to the blind man growing.

Common sense told him that the Isaac Goldsteins of this world are not generally afraid of men of unimpeachable morals. And the point that arose was what niche in the social scheme the dwarf adorned. Was he merely the owner or part owner of a gambling house, or was he something bigger? If the former there was no adequate reason for Goldstein's nervousness: if the latter it seemed possible he was getting into deeper waters than he had anticipated. In which case the sooner he got further information the better. And as he turned in to his club it suddenly struck him that there was another source of obtaining it available. Clement Hargreaves dined there most evenings, and though he was as secretive as an oyster it was possible he might be persuaded to open his mouth. There were few people connected even remotely with the underworld whom Clem did not know, and the dwarf would be an easily recognisable figure.

He found him, as luck would have it, sipping a glass of sherry in the smoking-room, and tackled him forthwith.

"Are you still in your hush-hush job, Clem?" he demanded.

"I still do my poor best to safeguard righteous citizens," answered the other with a grin. "Have a drink, Jim: it's about five years since we met."

"I want you to tell me something, old man, if you will."

"And if I can."

"Ça va sans dire."

He lit a cigarette: he had decided to adopt the same line as he had done with the sergeant at Streatham.

"Last night I went to a house up Hampstead way for a bit of a gamble. Organised place, you know."

"I don't," said the other. "They spring up like mushrooms, those spots. Go on."

"And there I met a gentleman who interested me. He stood about five foot high: he possessed the chest and shoulders of a giant: he was blind. Do you know anything about him?"

Hargreaves finished his drink, and in his turn lit a cigarette.

"In what capacity did you meet him?" he enquired at length.

"I should imagine he had something to do with the place," said Jim.

"And is that the reason of your interest in him?"

"You cautious old devil," laughed Jim. "Are you asking for information, or am I?"

But there was no answering smile on the other's face.

"I know your record better than most men, Jim," he said quietly. "And I know there is no one of my acquaintance more capable of looking after himself than you are. Nevertheless, if you and the man you've described fell foul of one another last night in any way, I can only give you one piece of advice. Do not go near that house again."

"We progress," said Jim. "It is clear that you know the bird. Why this animosity against him?"

"There can't be two men answering to your description," continued Hargreaves. "And I have no hesitation in saying that he is one of the most dangerous swine out of prison at the moment. He passes under the name of Emil Dresler, and he possesses an American passport. His activities are many and varied. At one time he was mixed up in the white slave traffic, but as far as we know he has given that up now. He's a blackmailer, and a drug trafficker. He is a

moneylender on a large scale. We are also practically certain that he is responsible for at least two murders."

"Splendid," said Jim mildly. "Would it be indiscreet to ask why this charming individual is out of prison?"

"The reason is simple: we can't get any proof. He's a damned sight too clever. He covers his tracks with such infernal skill that we can't bring anything home to him. He is the brain, and he leaves other people to do the job. And they in their turn pass it on to someone else, till in the end it is impossible to trace his hand in it at all. It's the old question—we know but we can't prove. If we had half a chance we'd deport him like a shot, but so far he hasn't given it to us."

"He seems a cheery lad," laughed Jim. "So you think I'd better cut him off my visiting-list?"

"I can't imagine how he ever got on it. He's a gentleman who keeps himself very much in the background. And if he is running a gambling den, you can bet your bottom dollar there's more behind it than what he makes out of the cagnotte. Was the place on the square?"

"Quite, as far as I could see," answered Jim. "But in view of your warning I shall not revisit it."

He turned the conversation: further questions with regard to the place might prove difficult to answer. The last hour had provided him with more information than he had dared hope for, and with a nod to Hargreaves he sauntered off towards the dining-room. On the way he picked up an evening paper. It was the latest edition, but even the Stop Press news contained no mention of the finding of any dead body.

In itself the fact proved nothing. He was more than ever convinced after Hargreaves's remarks that he would find the place closed down. The bigger the man behind it the less would he be disposed to run any risk of trouble with the police. And connection with a gambling den would be quite enough to give the authorities the chance they needed to deport Mr. Emil Dresler. So what really was the object in going there at all?

He pondered the point over the soup: he ruminated on it over the fish. And by the time the Scotch woodcock arrived he had decided—to go. Object or no object he knew that he would have no peace of mind until he had made sure for himself that the body was not there still. What he proposed to do about it he was not sure: sufficient unto the moment would be the decision thereof.

The hall-porter beckoned to him as he left the dining-room: a letter had just arrived for him. It was in a woman's handwriting—one that was unknown to him, and having ordered a brandy with his coffee in the smoking-room he opened it. And the first words that caught his eye were the signature—Judy Draycott. He opened out the sheet and began to read.

Wednesday afternoon

37a Langham Square

Telephone: Grosvenor A123

Dear Mr. Maitland,

You may remember that we met last night—or was it this morning?—at the beer and bones party. And I then inflicted on you a long and I'm afraid boring story about my brother and hidden treasure in South America. Well, this morning a development has taken place. I told you, didn't I, that Arthur had written to me to say that if anything should happen to him I would find a letter addressed to me at my bank. And though I suppose you think I'm foolish I've been down every morning to see if there was anything. This morning there was. The envelope was a mere scrawl, though I recognised his writing at once: the post mark was London. And inside was a half sheet of paper with a drawing on it and some words. The drawing looks to me like a map—there's a north point marked on it: but the extraordinary thing is that it's not all there. It's sort of like half a map. Some of the words are cut in two, or if not, they don't make sense.

However, I could explain it so much more easily to you than write it. You see apart from whether it may mean anything or not I'm so terribly worried as to whether anything has happened to him. He must have been in London yesterday, so why hasn't he been to see me? Or rung up, or something? Do you think he has had an accident? I've rung up Scotland Yard, and looked in all the papers, but I can't find out anything.

I hate to bother you, but could you possibly come round and see me to-morrow morning some time? I'd suggest this evening, but you may not get this letter in time, and anyway we've got a ghastly dinner party on. I'll stay in until lunch in hopes of your being able to manage it.

I do hope you don't think I'm a terrible nuisance, but I really am most awfully worried.

Yours sincerely,

Judy Draycott

With a faint smile Jim Maitland folded up the letter and put it in his pocket. Then the smile faded, and he sat staring in front of him. This was an unexpected development, and one that required thought. It confirmed—if confirmation was necessary—that the dead man was her brother, but it did not make things any easier with regard to telling her. And yet what was he to say when she asked him—as she undoubtedly would—if he thought any accident had happened? He must either tell her the whole thing, or keep it entirely dark.

For the moment he dismissed that side of the problem, and concentrated on the other. A kind of map. It was clear that there was something in this yarn about the treasure, or at any rate that her brother had thought there was. Had the boy then had some premonition of danger which had impelled him to send it to her bank? And why did she say like half a map?

There came back to him suddenly the big man's words the night before—"You damned fool—you've wrecked the whole thing." What whole thing? It was a queer remark to make over the murder of a man after a gambling quarrel. It might, of course, allude to the fact that it would be necessary to shut down the house: on the other hand it might not. And the more he thought of it, the more probably did it seem to him that there was something bigger in the whole affair than met the eye at first sight. Or, as he had qualified it before, that there was something which certain people thoughtwas bigger. Which came to the same thing at the present moment.

He pressed out his cigarette and rose: there was one thing he could do at once which would not commit him to any particular course of action in the future. He went to the telephone and rang up Grosvenor A123. A man's voice answered and he asked to speak to Miss Draycott. She came almost at once, and her first words were—"Is that you, Arthur?"

"I'm afraid not, Miss Draycott," he said gently. "It's Maitland speaking."

He heard the little sigh of disappointment, and felt horribly guilty. Poor girl! if she only knew the truth.

"I got your note," he went on, "and I'll come round to-morrow about noon. And in the meantime I want you to be sure that that piece of paper is not lost. Is there a safe in the house?"

"No: there isn't," came her voice. "Mr. Maitland, it's most extraordinary that you should have rung up about that. Do you think it's really valuable?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm certain that while we were at dinner to-night somebody tried to burgle my room."

"Hold hard," said Jim. "Where are you speaking from? Where's the telephone? Wait a minute—don't answer. Only say yes or no to my questions. Is it in the hall?"

"Yes."

"Can you be overheard?"

"Yes."

"Then be careful. Now one more question—are you prepared to trust me implicitly?"

Came a soft laugh. "What can I say but—yes?"

"You haven't known me very long, have you?" he answered. "And what I'm going to ask you to do will entail a lot of faith in a comparative stranger. Now is there a letter-box anywhere near your house? Just say yes or no."

"Yes."

"Could you slip out and post a letter there now at once?"

"Yes: quite easily."

"Then would you put that paper in an envelope, address it to me here at the club, and post it?"

"Well, if you think..."

There was the faintest perceptible pause and her voice sounded a little doubtful.

"I do think," said Jim quietly. "His Majesty's post is the safest thing in the world, Miss Draycott. But put it in the box yourself. I will bring it round with me to-morrow, and we'll discuss the whole thing."

"All right," she said with sudden determination. "I'll do it now."

"Good!" he cried. "And one word more. Do not, if you'll take my advice, talk about it to anyone."

"I see that you do think there is something in it." There was a note of excitement in her voice.

"There may or may not be," he answered guardedly. "If there isn't it doesn't matter: if there is that paper is safer in the post than in your house. Good night, Miss Draycott: I'll be round about twelve to-morrow."

He rang off and left the box thoughtfully. So she seemed to think that someone had tried to burgle her room. Was that another coincidence? Surely it could not be. And as Jim Maitland reentered the smoking-room he proposed a silent but hearty vote of thanks to his cousin for having taken him to the Bright Young Thing's entertainment.

CHAPTER IV

"DO you think we'll have any luck, Jim?"

"I haven't a notion, my dear fellow. I'll answer your question in half an hour."

The two men had just turned into Oakleigh Avenue. The car had been left in a garage in Hampstead, as Jim Maitland feared it might prove conspicuous if left standing in the road. Moreover he had no idea how long his visit would take. The road was as deserted as the previous night: save for an occasional taxi homeward bound with a theatre party they saw no one for the first quarter of a mile.

"I think I'll recognise the house," he said at length. "If not we'll go to where you had your party and cast back. I'll get it then for a certainty. Hullo! what's the excitement in front?"

He paused, pulling his cousin into the shadow. A car was drawn up about a hundred yards ahead and some men were standing by it. An altercation of sorts was in progress: their voices—though not the actual words—could be clearly heard. And one, at any rate, seemed very angry.

"We'll saunter on slowly, Percy. For it seems to me they must be fairly adjacent to the house we want."

"I tell you it's a damned scandal." Suddenly the sentence came distinctly. "We'll break the blasted place open. It's a club, isn't it? They've got no right to shut."

They were close now, and by the light of a street lamp, they could see what was happening. There were four men in evening clothes, and three of them were trying to pacify the fourth, and get him back into the car.

"Shut up, you fool," cried one of them, glancing over his shoulder. "The place is closed." And then in a hoarse mutter as he saw Jim and his cousin—"Police."

Still protesting angrily the fourth man allowed himself to be pushed into the car, which drove rapidly away.

"Took us for plain-clothes men," said Jim with a laugh. "And that answers one of our questions. Evidently no gambling to-night. And it also marks down the house."

He inspected it carefully and after a while he nodded.

"Yes: this is the spot. There's the tree I stood behind last night. But they're all so confoundedly alike, these houses up here. Now, Percy, my boy, the fun begins—or let's hope so."

"I suppose you're right, laddie," said his cousin gloomily. "Personally it's not my idea of laughter and games. The bally place gives me the willies."

Jim laughed.

"Cheer up," he cried. "It's much livelier inside."

He took a swift glance up and down the road: then he opened the gate and stepped into the drive. And then for a moment he paused with his eyes fixed on a patch of ground on which the street lamp shone.

"See that," he said quietly. "That deepish track. There has been a heavy vehicle in here to-day. Probably a pantechnicon. The birds have flown all right, or I'm a Dutchman."

"You're quick, Jim," said his cousin. "I'd never have noticed that."

"Because your eyes aren't trained," answered the other. "You see, but you don't observe. Come on—there's no good standing here. Though I'm afraid we're going to have our trouble for nothing."

He led the way swiftly to the back of the house. The window was open, just as he had left it, and without further ado he swung himself into the room.

"Not a sound," he whispered, as his cousin joined him. "Keep your torch handy."

Carefully screening his own from the window behind him, he switched it on. And for the second time he stood very still with his eyes fixed on the ground.

"Do you see that?" he breathed. "I wonder what it means. It's odd—very odd."

The dust still lay thick on the floor, and as he turned his torch from side to side his cousin began to grasp what he was driving at. Across the centre of the room were the imprints of very visible footmarks which went from the window towards the door. In one of them Jim Maitland placed his foot: it fitted exactly. They were his tracks of the previous night. But they were not the only ones. Sometimes crossing one another, but for most of the way as clear and distinct as those made by Jim were other footsteps. And it was at these that he was intently peering.

The foot was small—like a woman's, and the distance between each step was short—so short, in fact, that the tracks might have been made by a child. That they were all the work of one person was obvious, but beyond that Percy's

brain failed to advance. Some small girl presumably had been running round the room, and he failed to see why the matter should interest his cousin.

"What do you make of it, Percy?" came in a whisper from Jim.

"Looks as if a girls' school had been having a dancing lesson, old lad. Let's push on: this room gives me the hump."

"You fat-headed blighter. Do you mean to say you can't read those marks? Look at that set of tracks."

Jim focussed his torch on one of them.

"Which way was the person going who made those?"

"From the window to the door," answered his cousin.

"Good boy. And now those?"

"From the door to the window."

"Getting quite bright. Now take the last lot."

"They are from the window to the door."

"Right again. Now think it out. Two lines from the window to the door, and only one from the door to the window. And all the same person."

Percy's brain wrestled with the problem manfully.

"Whoever did it must have been ga-ga," he said at length. "I mean, fancy running about this place for fun."

"And how did the person run? Where did he start from—the door or the window?"

Once again Percy's brain creaked.

"Window to door," he muttered. "Door to window: window to door."

"Not quite right, Percy—but near enough. So where is he now?"

And suddenly the full significance of it sank in.

"Good Lord!" he cried. "He must be in the house."

"Precisely," said Jim. "Therefore don't shout, and keep your wits about you. For it was no small girl who made those tracks. Now—follow me."

They passed up the stairs into the hall. Percy close on his cousin's heels. What had seemed perfectly priceless in the club was not turning out quite such good value as he had expected. From outside came the sound of a passing car: then the same deathly silence settled on the house again.

"Jim," he whispered.

There was no answer, and putting out his hand he encountered air. His cousin was not there.

"Jim." The whisper was louder, and the next instant a hand gripped his arm, so unexpectedly that he almost cried out.

"Shut up, you young idiot. I thought you were behind me. I've been up to the first landing."

"How jolly," remarked Percy. "Are you going up again?"

"To the second floor," whispered Jim. "Had a look at the roulette room: everything dismantled, as I expected."

He was creeping up the stairs as he spoke, and at the top of the flight he paused.

"Do you hear anything?" he breathed in the other's ear.

But Percy could hear nothing save the thumping of his own heart, and was only conscious of a strong desire to flee. If this was the normal manner of a burglar's life he proposed to stick to bigamy in the crime line.

"Perhaps I was mistaken," whispered Jim. "Come on."

They crept up the next flight, and again Jim stopped.

"I'm going to switch on my torch," he muttered. "If we're caught—we're caught."

But the passage was empty, and he flung open the door of the room where the body had been. Then like a flash he stepped back: opening doors can be a dangerous occupation. But nothing happened, and after a while he entered.

The room was as he had left it, save that there was no trace of the dead man. None of the furniture had been moved: papers still littered the top of the desk.

"Stay by the door, Percy," he said quietly. "No—not in the centre, old lad: stand to one side. And keep your ears skinned for any sound."

He flashed his torch over the papers on the desk, but beyond a few bills and receipts there was nothing of any interest. They were made out to Mr. M. Johnson, which might have been genuine or might not: anyway, they did not advance things.

He knelt down on the floor where the body had been, and after a while his attention was attracted by a small piece of paper that was lying just under the bottom of the desk. It was so placed that had he not been on his hands and

knees he would never have noticed it, the desk would have hidden it. He picked it up and examined it: then he whistled softly to himself.

It was clearly one corner of a larger piece of paper. It had been torn off violently; the distortion of the paper was obvious. Moreover it was discoloured as if it had been held tightly between a finger and thumb which were warm. Was it possible, he reflected, that this scrap had been in the dead man's hand, and had fallen under the desk when he himself fell?

He held it up to the light and studied it carefully. The two letters WE had been written in indelible pencil, and were presumably part of a longer word. But the main point of interest lay not so much in what it might mean—with such a small clue that was bound to be a closed book to them for the time—but in the fact of its presence at all. Because it seemed to Jim that that scrap of paper justified his line of action. There was something more to it than a mere gambling row, and it was going to be his job to find out what. He put it carefully in his pocket-book, and straightened up. And he was on the point of telling his cousin that they would hook it when he heard the unmistakable sound of a board creaking in the passage outside. He signalled to Percy to stand still: then he waited motionless, his torch focussed on the floor. He knew that in a moment or two he would see again that misshapen figure, and in spite of the element of surprise being absent a queer little thrill ran through him. There came another creak, and the dwarf was standing in the room.

He saw Percy give an uncontrollable start: then for a while the three of them stood without movement. Suddenly the blind man switched on the light, walked to the desk and sat down. He picked up the telephone, and Jim made a sign with his hand towards the door. If possible he wanted to get away without being discovered, and as silently as a cat he crossed the room.

"Is that Exchange? Mr. Johnson, of 95, Oakleigh Avenue, speaking. My call is for rather an unusual purpose. Would you make quite sure you have the name and address correct? Perhaps you would repeat it. Yes: that's quite right. Well, would you make a special note in case a call comes through for him, that a Mr. Jim Maitland is with me at the moment? Yes: Jim Maitland. Thank you so much. I regret having to trouble you."

He put down the receiver and lay back in his chair with a smile, while Jim Maitland stood in the centre of the room staring fascinated at him. As far as he knew he had not made a sound, and yet the little devil had spotted him.

"Good evening, Mr. Maitland." His voice was suave. "Won't you introduce your friend? You can, of course, if you prefer it go away. At the same time, having taken all the trouble you have, a little chat might clear the air."

"How long have you known I was here?" asked Jim curiously.

"Ever since you arrived," replied the other. "You are the most silent mover, Mr. Maitland, that I have ever met, and I congratulate you on it. But I have certain advantages, as you know. I trust your little experience last night has done you no harm."

Jim Maitland lit a cigarette, and pulling up a chair, sat down. The situation was a novel one for him. Not for many years had he found himself similarly placed. On several occasions he had been in tight corners, where only quick shooting and his great strength had saved him. But that had been physical: this was mental. And not since he could remember, did he recall having been up against one man who so definitely threatened him with an inferiority complex.

"Quite right," continued the blind man. "Make yourself comfortable. And your friend too. By the way, you still have not introduced us."

"It would be a little awkward for you if he happened to be connected with the police," remarked Jim.

"A little," agreed the other. "But I happen to know he is not. The police do not as a general rule own Bentleys or belong to the Dorchester club."

"True, Mr. Dresler—very true."

"Did that rat Goldstein tell you my name?" snapped the dwarf.

"Your information with regard to my movements seems fairly complete," remarked Jim. "It is refreshing to find something you don't know. However, for your benefit it was not Goldstein. He disowned all knowledge of you, though I fear he did not do it very well. No, Mr. Dresler, it appears that you are quite a well-known character in the criminal world."

"You flatter me," said the other. "At the same time your use of the word criminal is hardly polite."

"And I was just wondering," continued Jim, "what would be the result if I used your telephone, not for the exchange, but for the police station."

The blind man waved a deprecating hand.

"I admit, Mr. Maitland, that such a course is possible. Though I should hate to think that you would do anything so crude. What, incidentally, would you tell them?"

"The truth," said Jim briefly. "As seen by me last night."

"As I said, such a course is possible," repeated the other. "Nevertheless, there are one or two small points that strike me. In the first place what are you both doing in this house, and how did you get in?"

"You know quite well how I got in."

"My dear sir, of course. But the police would want to know. And to the official eye it looks very like house-breaking. A serious offence, Mr. Maitland. Then there is a further point. Why not tell the police at Streatham this afternoon whatever story you are proposing to tell them now?"

"Agreed," said Jim. "They would probably be very angry with me. But, Mr. Dresler, they would, I think, be even more angry with you."

"I doubt it. After all, your conduct to the official eye has been most reprehensible. You arrived here last night, having broken into the house, in a condition of disgusting drunkenness. So violent did you become that I was on the point of summoning assistance when mercifully you fell asleep. And two friends of mine very kindly laid you out to cool somewhere."

"Do you deny that a man was shot in this room last night?"

"My dear Mr. Maitland—what an absurd delusion. You must have been more drunk even than I thought. It is perfectly true that a man was knocked down. But—shot! Why, where is the body? What has become of it? And if that is the accusation you have to bring—the gravest of all, murder—it was doubly reprehensible of you not to tell the police at once."

In spite of himself Jim laughed.

"You damned little scoundrel," he said. "Where is this conversation leading to?"

"That, my friend, remains to be seen," answered Dresler. "To be quite truthful, Mr. Maitland, I had to assume that you would pass on your strange delusion to the police as soon as you recovered. I therefore made my plans accordingly. When, however, I found that you had said nothing I revised my estimate of your character. I had you shadowed from the time you left the police station, and it soon became clear that you were going to play a lone hand. Your conversation with Goldstein confirmed the fact."

"So he passed it on, did he?" said Jim.

"At once," replied the other. "Now I like people who play lone hands. They belong by unquestioned right to the fellowship of one. Shall we play on the same side, or not? Shall we join forces, or shall we fight?"

"The proposition requires thought," said Jim, with a warning glimpse at his cousin who with his mouth open and his eyes almost falling out of his head had been following the conversation in silence.

"What advantage is it to you," he continued, "if we amalgamate?"

"I will be candid," said the blind man. "From enquiries I have made about you to-day I have learned several things. You are, I gather, one of those men who like adventure for adventure's sake. You are further an almost legendary figure as far as a scrap is concerned. Last night I managed to control your drunken frenzy, but I am not under any delusions that I should be able to do it a second time. And, while I think of it, may I apologise for that absurd note you received. It was sent when I had no idea as to the manner of man you were."

Jim laughed again.

"I accept your apology," he said gravely.

"Very well, then," continued the other. "It is clear to me that you and I are going to see more of one another in the future. Your presence to-night proves that you are of—shall we say—a curious disposition. And, in brief, I would sooner have you on my side than against me. What do you say?"

"Your side in what?" asked Jim mildly. "Forgive my denseness, but you speak in riddles."

"Is that so, Mr. Maitland?" said the other leaning forward. "Just how much do you know?"

"It would seem," remarked Jim, "that there are one or two things on which you are not omniscient. However, I still await an answer to a very simple question. Your side in what? Running a gambling den?"

The blind man sat silent, motionless: almost it seemed as if he was trying by some form of telepathy to read the other's brain. And his problem was as clear as if he had spoken aloud. Was it merely the sound of the shot that had brought Jim Maitland in the night before? Was it pure coincidence, or was there something more behind it? It was impossible for the dwarf to know of his acquaintance with Judy Draycott: at the same time men of Dresler's kidney are by nature ultra-cautious. And knowing as he did that Jim had recently returned from South America, the reason for his hesitation was obvious.

"No: not that, Mr. Maitland," he said at length. "In fact owing entirely to you our little club below has ceased, as you doubtless observed on your way up. But it is possible that in the near future we might be of great assistance to one another."

"You flatter me," said Jim.

"My strong point, if I may say so, lies more in the planning of schemes, and in their organisation, rather than in actually carrying them out. My infirmity is a great handicap. And as I say, I have great hopes that very shortly I shall be in a position to put a suggestion in front of you which will appeal enormously to a man of your temperament."

"Why this altruism, Mr. Dresler?"

"For the reason I have already stated. I would sooner have you on my side than against me. And from the estimate I have formed of your character it will be impossible to do what I would most prefer—dismiss you altogether."

"Very frank," laughed Jim. "And what is the nature of this suggestion?"

"Should you accept my proposal I will tell you in due course. I may say that it is perfectly legal."

"That must be rather a novelty for you, Mr. Dresler," said Jim rising. "Of course, you will quite understand that it is impossible for me to commit myself in any way until you are more explicit. But at the same time, should your scheme appeal to me, I shall be quite prepared to consider it on its merits."

"Excellent," remarked the dwarf. "And in view of our very amicable chat I can only regret that I took such an unnecessary precaution as to ring up the exchange. I think we understand each other perfectly."

A faint smile crossed Jim's face, which would have caused the dwarf considerable uneasiness had he been able to see it.

"Perfectly," he agreed. "I shall await your suggestion with interest."

"And in the meantime," said the other, "we may dismiss the question of the police, I take it?"

"Assuredly," answered Jim. "A meddlesome body of men. Good night, Mr. Dresler. I have greatly enjoyed our chat."

He signed to his cousin to follow him, and a few moments later they were both in the drive.

"Don't speak," he said quietly. "I don't want to run the slightest risk of him hearing your voice. You may come in very useful later, my lad."

They walked a hundred yards in silence, and then Percy exploded.

"Good Lord! man," he said, "you can't mean to join forces with that little reptile?"

"Just as much," grinned Jim, "as he means to join forces with me. A thoroughly dangerous man, Percy, but unless I'm much mistaken, we've got five to four the better of him. In fact we've done a damned good evening's work."

"He bluffed you good and hearty over the police," said the other.

"Did he? I wonder. A lot that he said was perfectly true. They'd have asked me some very awkward questions."

"Yes, but dash it all, old boy, it's a bit tough on the wretched blighter who was shot. I'd like to see somebody get it in the neck over that."

"You can take it from me, Percy, that someone is going to get it in the neck before I've done with them. There's a good deal I haven't told you as yet: I wanted confirmation before I passed it on. To-night I've got it."

"Confirmation of what?" demanded the other.

"The fact that there was more in the whole thing than met the eye."

"You mean that last night's shooting was not a mere gambling quarrel."

"Possibly. But a better way of putting it would be that the man who was shot did not go there primarily to gamble. He went in connection with the scheme our friend suggested I should come in on."

"I wonder who the poor devil was. A pity you don't know."

"I do," remarked Jim. "And that, my lad, is where we've got five to four the better of him. He was Miss Draycott's brother."

"Rot," said the other incredulously, stopping dead in his tracks. "How on earth do you know?"

"The likeness of two peas to one another could not be greater," said Jim. "He only landed from South America yesterday—at least that is when the mail boat berthed—and what his movements were after that until he found himself in that gambling den I can't tell you. Who it was who persuaded him to go there I don't know. It may have been the dago who finally shot him: it may have been Barnet. The point is immaterial, anyway. What is important is that he had in his possession information which he believed to be of value. And what that

little swine was trying to puzzle out to-night was whether I knew that fact or not. So finally he fenced. He alluded to a scheme, but said no word of what it was."

"Have you any idea?"

"I have a very shrewd idea. And I have a further shrewd idea, Percy, that there's going to be a lot of fun in the near future for both of us—that is, if you care to come in."

"You bet I will. I rather enjoy this sort of thing. But isn't it a bit rough on the girl, old lad—little Judy."

"I know what you mean," said Jim. "But I acted with my eyes open. Telling her won't bring him back to life, and would inevitably have brought the police in. It might have resulted in the dago swinging, but I doubt it. So in the fullness of time we will take the law into our own hands and shoot him. But not yet."

"Easy over the bricks," cried his cousin. "In my case the condemned man would not eat a hearty breakfast."

"We won't do it here, Percy. I think we shall be going to South America shortly, and it is easy out there."

"South America! What the devil are we going there for?"

"Sea trip with a nice breath of ozone. And in the meantime just remember two things. First we have not been to Hampstead to-night: second and by far the more important, Miss Draycott and I have never met. A still tongue, Percy, and a sharp eye, and you'll be quite a credit to the family before I've done with you."

They drew up at the door of the Dorchester, and Jim got out.

"Night night, old lad. I'll put you wise to everything before long."

CHAPTER V

IT was with real curiosity he awaited the arrival of his letters the next morning. What was this strange document the dead man had sent to his sister? Was the whole thing a mare's nest, or could it be possible that by some strange fluke he had stumbled on something genuine?

He recognised the writing at once, and sitting down in a deserted corner of the smoking-room he opened the envelope. There was a short covering note that he glanced at first.

"Dear Mr. Maitland"—it ran:

I enclose the map. Am expecting you about twelve.

Yours sincerely,

Judy Draycott."

Then he turned his attention to the enclosure. It was as she had said a map, or rather half a map. Evidently the original had been cut in two, and the murdered man's idea was obvious. He had kept one half himself: the other he had sent to his sister.

The drawing was crude: the writing illiterate—just what might have been expected from an uneducated sailor.

It was clearly meant to represent part of an island: the word CLIFFS proved that. HILL was clear, but what A was struck him as doubtful: possibly a tree. CKS and OMP he gave up. The writing at the bottom was no assistance either. Presumably the first word was FROM, in which case the first line read—FROM

THE HILL A LINE SOUTH.

He took out his pocket-book and studied the scrap of paper he had found the night before. From its shape and the position of the letters, it must be the bottom left-hand corner on the other half, and it seemed to him that WE might be the first half of west, so that he got—FROM THE HILL A LINE SOUTH WEST. RER LURKS AND TRESUR RICH was meaningless without the context. In fact the whole thing was useless without the other half. Whether it would prove of any value even with the other half was neither here nor there: without putting the two together no one could get any further.

He leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette: the main points of the situation were clear. Dresler and his friends had one half—save for the torn-off scrap in the corner: he had the other. But while he knew they had it, they were not in

the same position over him. Which was where, as he had said to his cousin, he was five to four the better of them.

That they had intended to kill young Draycott he did not believe for a moment: if they wanted him out of the way it could be done more easily and far more safely by methods other than shooting him in a house in London. But it happened and they had had to make the best of it. They had acted promptly and cleverly: but for the amazing freak of fate which had caused him to meet Judy Draycott just before he heard the shot he would actually have been in the position in which they thought he was—an accidental passer-by who had heard a shot. And had it not been for the fact that the Dago apparently knew his reputation, much of last night's conversation would not have taken place. Dresler feared him because his name was Jim Maitland, with a reputation for looking for trouble, and not because he knew anything of this particular affair.

A new train of thought started. Did the other side know that half the map had been sent to Judy Draycott? Her remark to him over the telephone about her room having been tampered with while she was at dinner pointed to the fact that they did. It also pointed to the fact that they did not think the map was valueless. What proof they had, other than the dead man's word, he had no means of telling, but men like Emil Dresler do not embark on schemes unless they are sure of their facts. And if that was so, the point that arose was how was he to see the half that was in his? Or if possible to do more than see it, and actually get it? He would have not the slightest compunction in stealing it from them if he could—it was Judy Draycott's property, anyway: and then with the complete map in front of him he could use his own judgment as to whether the thing was worth while following up or not. But how to set about it was the problem. That it was a case for guile and not force was obvious, but beyond that main generalisation for the time being he could not get. And it was not until he had sat there for more than an hour that the glimmerings of a scheme began to dawn in his mind.

Once more he studied his half of the map intently, only it was not at the drawing he was looking but at the paper. And the question he was debating in his mind was whether it would be possible to obtain an exactly similar quality and brand in London. It was cheap white paper, with a faint watermark that looked like a crown in the corner, and it had been made in all probability in South America. Could an exact replica be found here? On that point depended the whole idea, which was this.

He could keep the Eastern and Western boundaries of the island exactly where they were: he would keep CKS and OMP in their proper positions; in fact he

would alter nothing along the line of the scissor cut. But after that he would draw an entirely new map. The hill could be placed in a totally different place: also the thing marked A. And the wording at the bottom could be changed. As long as the two halves joined when put together, no suspicions would be aroused, provided always the paper matched exactly. And it thus might be possible to get a good look at the genuine other half, whilst only showing a fake of the one he held in his hand.

There were many details to fill in, but he felt instinctively he was working on the right lines. And the first thing to do was to find out about the paper. But before going out he decided to telephone Judy Draycott.

In view of the attention paid him by Dresler the preceding day, he would almost certainly be followed again. And at this stage of the proceedings it was vital to keep the other side in ignorance of the fact that they knew one another. It was too risky to go to her house: the point to be decided was where to meet her.

"Hullo! Jim, how's life?"

Percy had just come in, and Jim drew him on one side.

"I've got a job of work for you, young feller," he said. "I was just going to telephone, but you can take a message instead. It's safer. Go and see Miss Draycott, and tell her that I do not propose to come to her house this morning. Explain to her that for reasons which I'll give her later it would be most unwise for anyone to know that she and I have met, and that since I may be followed I don't want to go to Langham Square. And then, Percy, you will bring her to the ladies' entrance of the club here, and I will join you in due course."

"Right you are, old boy. Presumably no word about last night?"

"No word about anything—yet. And certainly no word about the brother, for she will almost certainly talk to you about him."

He gave his cousin some ten minutes' start before following him into the street. And then he seemed in no great hurry. He stood on the pavement, his stick swinging loosely in his hand apparently enjoying the air. But when Jim Maitland was apparently doing something the betting was largely in favour of the fact that in reality he was doing something else. And in the short space of time he remained there before hailing a taxi his lynx eye had picked up two men whose appearance he mistrusted. They were both loitering there a little too obviously.

He glanced backwards as the car turned into Pall Mall: they had got into another one and were following. And it occurred to him that there might be the

possibility of a little fun. So leaning out of the window he told his driver to go slowly round St. James's Square until he told him to stop.

"Round and round," he remarked. "The air there is peculiarly beneficial."

Now, as all the world knows, there are five roads that lead out of St. James's Square, and it put the two gentlemen in a quandary. They dared not stop for fear their quarry would slip them by one of the five: at the same time when Jim had completed the circuit for the sixth time the situation became strained. And it became even more so when he stopped his machine and waved a genial hand at them.

"Good fun, isn't it?" he called out as their car went past him. "Are we going to continue, or are we not?"

The car pulled up and one of the men got out.

"Were you speaking to us?" he demanded.

"No, no, laddie. To the sparrow twittering in yonder tree."

"Cut it out," snarled the other with a quick look round, "or you'll find yourself with a thick ear, my boy."

Jim began to laugh silently.

"You rat-faced excrescence," he said pleasantly, "you couldn't give a thick ear to a baby in arms. But I warn you quite seriously that if you continue to follow me I'll give you in charge to the nearest policeman. Your face and that of your friend are enough to turn the milk sour.... Ah! would you?"

It happened quickly. Enraged by Jim's remarks the other had aimed a definite blow at his eyeglass. It failed to connect by at least a foot, but it was enough for Jim. And a moment later the man was standing helpless with his arm in a grip that felt like a steel vice.

"God! man," he muttered savagely, "you're breaking my elbow."

"No: merely bending it," Jim assured him. "And since you are in this position, I think I will call that policeman who has just entered the square.... Officer," he hailed.

But the other man was not waiting for any policeman. With a tremendous effort he wriggled free, and ran back to his car which at once drove rapidly away. And Jim was again laughing silently when the majesty of the law approached.

"Did you call, sir?" he said.

"A mistake, officer," he remarked. "My friend who has just left me wanted to know the way somewhere, but I think he's found it."

"Drove off pretty fast, sir."

"Yes," agreed Jim. "He did seem in a bit of a hurry, didn't he? Well, good morning, officer. Sorry to have troubled you."

"Where to, sir?" asked the driver, as the policeman moved on.

"Go to Hyman's in Little Portland Street," he answered. "It's a big paper shop."

"Ugly sort of customer that, sir," went on the driver with a grin.

"A damned fool," said Jim tersely. "I've seen some pretty inefficient efforts at following in my life, but that took the cake. Keep your eyes skinned in case we see them again, but I don't think we shall."

Which proved to be correct: there was no sign of the other car when he paid off his own. Nevertheless he proposed to take no chances, and when one of the assistants asked him what he required he insisted on going to a remote corner of the shop.

"Sorry to appear mysterious," he said with a smile, "but there's a bit of a jest on. And I don't want to be spotted."

He produced the map from his pocket-book.

"I want to know," he went on, "if you can match this paper exactly. Very nearly is no good. The likeness must be so good that when the two halves are side by side anyone looking at them would say they were originally the same bit that had been cut in two."

The assistant took it in his hand and examined it minutely.

"There oughtn't to be much difficulty in that, sir," he pronounced at length. "I'll get a book of samples."

They found what was wanted almost at once—a paper that was literally identical with the original, and Jim ordered half a dozen pieces. Then he started to stroll back towards his club. So far, so good: unfortunately it was not very far. The main part of the problem had still to be solved. To draw a faked substitute was now an easy matter, but how was he going to utilise it to the best advantage when he had done so?

If it could possibly be avoided he did not want the other side to find out that he knew anything about the map. At the same time his whole scheme depended on the fact that the other half of the map should be seen. It was useless merely

getting the fake to them by some method: that would give only a negative result to each side. He turned it over from every angle and at length the only possible way out occurred to him. It might fail, but he would have to take the risk. Judy Draycott was the person who must do it.

Whether Dresler and his bunch knew that half had been sent to her or not didn't matter. It would arouse no suspicions in their minds when they found she had it in her possession. And so, somehow or other, she would have to contrive to see the other piece for long enough to memorise it roughly. Presumably it would be as simple and crude as the half he had, and given a minute or so to study it in, she should be able to reproduce it sufficiently accurately for them to have something to go on.

One weak point lay in the fact that they might not let her see the other part. Another was the difficulty of her approaching them, so to speak, out of the blue. Why should she know anything about them at all? He did not even know if she and Barnet were acquaintances. Still those were minor difficulties: he was satisfied that the main idea was right. Judy Draycott was the only person who could do it, without giving things away. And if she did pull it off, and obtained a reasonable mental picture of the other half they would be in the pleasant position of having the truth, whilst the opponents possessed the map of an island, a large portion of which was completely imaginary. At which point in his reflections he turned into his club to find his cousin waiting for him with a worried look on his face.

"She's gone, Jim," he said briefly.

"Come on into the smoking-room," remarked Jim. "Now, then," he continued, after they had found two chairs, "what's this? You say she's gone. Where to?"

"Can't tell you, old lad," answered the other. "The house belongs to an ancient gorgon—Lady Somebody or other, with whom Judy is staying. Well, I blew in and asked for the girl, but the butler pushed me into the presence of the most devastating old ruin you've ever imagined. Shook me badly, laddie, I don't mind admitting."

"'Are you Mr. Maitland?' she boomed.

"I admitted the soft impeachment, and she inspected me through lorgnettes.

"'I confess I do not understand present-day mentality,' she went on, 'but Judy's brain must have left her temporarily. She said you were very good-looking and had a magnificent figure.'

"Well, I thought she might have put it a little differently, but the family spirit pulled me through.

"'That's where you scratch the wrong bite,' I said breezily. 'She alluded to my cousin who, I have been told, does bear a slight resemblance to me. He belongs to one of the cadet branches of our family.'"

"You blithering idiot," Jim grinned. "Get on with it."

"Apparently I'd said the wrong thing," continued Percy. "She sat there for quite a while with her mouth opening and shutting, and no noise occurred. I thought she'd slipped her uppers and was wondering what the devil to do if they zoomed into the hearth-rug, when she suddenly gave a harsh, croaking sound which turned after a while into semi-articulate speech.

"'Scratch! Wrong bite! You wretched young man—how dare you?'

"Well, I managed to pacify her: assured her it was a bit of modern slang, and at length, thank God! her breathing became normal again, and the deep magenta look left her face.

"'Now,' I said chattily, 'what about our little Judy? We both, I expect, have to do this and that before worrying the mid-day bone.'

"And little by little I extracted the account of the morning's doings. It appears Judy was giving the once over to the matutinal kipper by herself in the dining-room, when a woman called to see her. She couldn't tell me what sort of a woman as she herself does not shatter the morale of the house by appearing at breakfast. At any rate this woman had brought Judy a message from her brother."

"What's that?" cried Jim sitting up. "Her brother?"

"Just how I felt, old lad, when she said it," remarked Percy.

"You didn't give anything away, did you?"

"My face remained completely sphinx-like," said his cousin. "To continue. The result of the message was that Judy departed with this female, leaving a message for you to the effect that your proposed party at noon would have to be off."

"Did she say where she was going?" demanded Jim.

"Apparently not. At any rate not to the old trout. And I didn't quite like to ask to see her maid."

"And she said nothing as to when she intended to return?"

"Not a word. So having bowed to the Presence I left the house."

He lit a cigarette, and gave an order to a passing waiter for the necessary.

"So bringing the grey matter to work, Jim," he continued, "one thing becomes obvious. Either you made a mistake, or it is a trap."

"Exactly," agreed his cousin. "And since I did not make a mistake..."

He left the sentence uncompleted: how would this development affect his plan? That they contemplated doing any harm to the girl he dismissed from his mind: no possible object could be served by hurting her. Their object clearly was to get possession of her half of the map, and it therefore proved that they knew she had it. It further proved that they did not know she had sent it to him. But how long would they remain in ignorance of that fact? How long would it be before she told him?

He frowned thoughtfully: another point had struck him. What were they going to do about the brother? The girl having been lured away by what she took to be a message from him would naturally expect to see him. Moreover, she would become very suspicious if she did not. And as they could not show her his dead body with a bullet hole through the heart it became a little difficult to see what they were going to do.

He crossed to one of the writing-tables: the sooner he prepared the faked map the better. Things might eventuate at any moment, and he wanted to be prepared. For a while he again studied the map carefully: then he took one of the sheets of paper he had bought and picked up an indelible pencil.

"That ought to do the trick," he muttered to himself ten minutes later. He put the genuine one in an envelope, and sent it with a covering letter to his lawyer: the fake he put in his pocket-book. Then picking up an illustrated paper he threw himself into an armchair. There was nothing he could do but wait.

Just before lunch Percy returned from what he described as a cocktail date with a hen, and demanded the latest bulletin.

"That's deuced bright of you, Jim," said his cousin admiringly when he had explained his idea. "But now that Judy has actually gone to them it's going to make things a bit harder."

"You're right," agreed Jim. "We can only wait and see what happens. And since they haven't got what they wanted, something is bound to happen soon. She may tell 'em she sent the map to me: she may not. And until we know that, we're left guessing."

"They won't do her any harm, will they?"

"No," said Jim positively. "They'll guard her as the apple of their eye until they get the map And before they do that we step into the picture."

They lunched, and then began an interminable afternoon. Jim did not dare to get out of reach of the telephone: Percy refused to run any risk of missing the fun. And so, sternly dismissing from their minds the fact that Patsy Hendren had been sixty not out at the luncheon interval, they dozed.

The message came through just after five o'clock. A page roused them from their slumbers: Mr. Maitland was wanted on the telephone.

"You go, Percy," said Jim. "If it is Miss Draycott find out where she is speaking from. If it sounds at all risky do the silly-ass stunt. But if she is in London get her round to the ladies' side here, the same as we arranged for lunch."

"Right ho! laddie," cried the other. "You leave it to me."

He came back almost immediately.

"Speaking from Langham Square," he said. "She's coming at once. And, Jim, unless I'm much mistaken, there have been doings. Her voice was rather like that of an agitated hen."

"Good!" cried Jim. "The sooner we get to it the better."

"Do you want me to attend the pow-wow?" asked his cousin.

Jim nodded.

"But say nothing, at any rate at present, about her brother!"

Judy Draycott was as good as her word: she came at once. And it struck Jim as he shook hands that she was even more attractive than he had thought at first. But there was a look of tense anxiety about her that brought him back to business at once.

"What is the trouble, Miss Draycott?" he said as they sat down.

"Mr. Maitland," she answered earnestly, "there's some devilry going on. I'm just worried to death."

"I don't expect it's quite as bad as that," he said with a smile. "Young Percy and I have been having a lot of fun over your affairs too."

"What do you mean?" she said in amazement.

"You shall hear in good time, Miss Draycott," he answered. "Let's get to your doings first. All that we know is that a female of sorts called on you at breakfast this morning, bringing a message from your brother, and you went away with her."

"She had a car waiting outside," began the girl—"and I got in without hesitation. All that she had said in the house was that Arthur wanted me to come, and to bring with me the letter he had sent to my bank. That, of course, I couldn't do without coming round and getting it from you."

"Which you'd have had considerable difficulty in doing," put in Jim quietly. "Did you mention you'd sent it to me?"

"I did not. And really I can't think why I didn't—then. Because at the time I had no suspicions. I did think it a little strange that Arthur should have sent a woman as a messenger, but I was so keen to see him that I didn't bother about it much. I just dashed upstairs, told my aunt, and started off. It was a closed car, and a chauffeur in livery was driving. And after a while it began to strike me that my companion was very uncommunicative. Every question I put to her she answered in monosyllables. So at last I tackled her point blank."

"'Is there anything the matter with my brother?'"

"She tried to evade it for a bit, but I insisted. And to my horror I found he had been involved in a bad accident."

The eyes of the two men met, but the girl was too intent on her story to notice.

"He was in a nursing home, and his eyes had been affected. It was a motor accident, and his face had been badly cut about."

"'Who is looking after him?' I demanded."

"A Doctor Phillips, she told me, was in charge. I asked where the house was. It was on the outskirts of Mayfield in Sussex."

"'But what on earth was he doing motoring down there,' I cried in amazement, and she shrugged her shoulders. She had no idea why he had been there: all she could tell me was that the crash had occurred about half a mile from their lodge gates and some workmen had carried him in.

"We arrived at half-past eleven, and when I saw the house my heart sank. It was the most gloomy, depressing spot: anything less suited for a nursing home it would be impossible to imagine. And I think it was as we drove up to the door that suspicion first started in my mind. I caught the woman's eyes fixed on me, and though she immediately glanced away, there had been a funny look in them. And it was then, as I say, that I first began to wonder if all was well.

"The door was opened by a man-servant, and as I stepped into the hall suspicion increased. The place was furnished after a fashion but there was a sort of musty smell about everything that you only get in a house that has been

empty for some time. However, I said nothing, of course, and a moment later a man came down the stairs.

"'This is Doctor Phillips,' said my companion.

"He shook hands, and led the way into one of the downstair rooms.

"'An unfortunate home-coming for your brother!' he said. 'Our matron has told you, I suppose?'

"'She tells me that Arthur has been badly damaged in a motor accident,' I answered. 'And I should like to see him at once, please.'

"He held up his hand.

"'One moment, my dear young lady,' he remarked—and if there's one thing that drives me to drink it's being called that—'we must have a little chat first. To begin with, your brother is in a very excitable condition just at present—a condition which in view of the injuries to his face and eyes...'

"'Eyes!' I cried.

"'Didn't the matron mention that? Yes: I am sorry to say his eyes are involved. It is for that reason that we are keeping him in a dark room. But do not alarm yourself. With care and good nursing I feel confident he will retain his sight unimpaired, if—and this is very important, if—we can keep him calm. Any mental excitement is the worst possible thing for him. Now I naturally have no idea what he is talking about, but the very first moment he began to speak coherently last night he kept asking about some letter he had sent you. He must have it: he must have it at once. In vain for me to point out to the dear fellow that he couldn't read it: that it was safe with you until he had recovered. It was no use. And so I entrusted the matron when she came to get you to be sure and mention it, so that you could bring it. It will pacify him enormously. You have it, of course?'

"And it was then, Mr. Maitland, I did some pretty rapid thinking. I was as convinced as I could be that there was something wrong. I knew that house was no nursing home, and I felt pretty well certain the man talking to me was no doctor. He was too suave and oily. Besides, genuine doctors don't allude to a complete stranger as a dear fellow. But what was I to do? I hadn't got it, and what was going to be the result when I told him so? I was convinced that it was the letter this man was after, and if he found out it wasn't there, he would pull more of his medical jargon out, tell me it would excite Arthur too much if I saw him without the letter, and insist that I should go back to London and get it before I could visit him. And I was determined that that should not happen. I

was determined that by hook or by crook I would talk to Arthur before I left the house.

"It's taken a long time to describe what I felt: it actually took a second to decide.

"'Naturally,' I said. 'I'll hand it to him myself.'"

"Well done," remarked Jim quietly. "How did he take that?"

"Not very enthusiastically," she answered, "which merely increased my determination to see Arthur. But short of snatching my bag from me by force he could do nothing, and at last with a very bad grace he rose and left the room mumbling about seeing if Arthur was ready.

"The instant the door was shut I flew to it and listened: he and the woman were having an argument in the hall outside. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but it sounded distinctly acrimonious. And again my suspicions increased: I knew the show was crooked.

"The man came back in about five minutes, accompanied this time by the woman. He seemed to have recovered himself, and his smile was more oily than ever.

"'This way, my dear young lady,' he said. 'And you will remember, won't you, that you may find your brother a little strange. The vocal chords—everything has been affected.'

"We went upstairs, and my heart began to thump. Mr. Maitland—the house was empty. No sign of movement: no nurses: nothing at all that you always see in a nursing home. And he seemed to sense what I was feeling.

"'Very slack time just now,' he remarked. 'Which will enable me to give all the more care to your brother.'

"He flung open a door: the room beyond it was pitch dark.

"'Ah! my dear fellow,' he cried, 'good news for you—joyous news. Your charming sister has arrived.'

"I could see a man dimly in the darkness, whose face was covered with bandages.

"'Arthur, old boy,' I cried, 'what rotten luck.'

"'Hullo! Judy,' he said querulously, 'how are you? Have you got the letter? Have you brought it?'"

The girl paused for a moment, and neither man spoke.

"How I didn't scream," she went on, "I don't know. I'd suspected a lot before, but never this. The man with the bandaged face wasn't Arthur at all. It was just conceivable that the voice might have passed muster, but Arthur has never called me Judy."

"'Humour him, please,' whispered the doctor to me, and then turned to the man. 'All right, my dear chap, your sister has got it. She's just going to give it to you.'

"'The letter. I want the letter, Judy.'

"My hands were trembling so much I could hardly open my bag. But one thing I realised—whatever happened I mustn't let them suspect that I knew it wasn't Arthur.

"'Here it is, old boy,' I said, and then turned horror-struck to the doctor. 'Good heavens! Doctor Phillips,' I whispered. 'I forgot to put it in.'

"And just for a moment I thought he was going to murder me.

"'Forgot to put it in?' he snarled, and I saw the woman nudge him in the ribs. He pulled himself together.

"'Forgive me, Miss Draycott,' he said, 'but a shock like that to my patient is very dangerous indeed.'

"He turned back into the room.

"'Now, old fellow,' he said, 'your sister, naughty girl, was so overjoyed at the prospect of seeing you again that she forgot to bring the letter. Don't let it worry you: don't let it excite you: I know she will go back to London at once and get it. Won't you, Miss Draycott?'

"'Of course I will, Arthur,' I said. 'I'm sorry I was so stupid.'

"'Yes, get it, Judy, at once,' he answered. 'It's important.'

"And then the so-called doctor hustled me out of the room and down the stairs.

"'A most unfortunate mistake, Miss Draycott,' he said gravely. 'Had I suspected for a moment that you had not got the letter in your possession, nothing would have induced me to allow you to see your brother. We can only hope that the effect will not be serious. But I must beg of you to remedy it as quickly as possible. The car is there. Fly back to London in it, and return as soon as you can. As you see for yourself, he is in a most excitable condition, and he must not be worried in any way.'

"So I started off alone in the car, and then came a real stroke of luck. The car broke down, and so I got rid of the chauffeur and came back by train. And now, Mr. Maitland, what I want to know is why they are keeping a man who isn't my brother in a nursing home that isn't a nursing home? And where is Arthur? And what does it all mean?"

For a moment or two Jim hesitated. He realised that the time had come when she would have to be told the truth about her brother, and he did not exactly relish the prospect.

"It's pretty clear, I'm afraid, Miss Draycott," he said gravely. "You realise, don't you, that your brother sent you half the map and kept the other half himself? He did it for safety, in case anything happened to him. And I'm very sorry to have to tell you that something has happened to him."

"You mean he's hurt?" she whispered.

"Worse than that, I fear. Miss Draycott, it's going to be the devil of a shock; but your brother is dead."

She gave a little cry, and the two men rose and stood with their backs to her staring out of the window. And for a space there was silence in the room.

"Do you mean he was killed?" she asked at length, and Jim nodded.

"How do you know all this, Mr. Maitland?" she continued steadily.

Briefly he told her the whole story. And when he had finished her eyes were bright and defiant: of the tears he had expected there was no trace.

"Just tell me what you want me to do," she said, and Jim looked at her approvingly.

"Great girl," he cried. "I knew you'd feel that way. Now this is how the land lies. The gang we are up against have in their possession the half of the map that your brother carried. What they are trying to get is the half he sent to your bank, and which you sent on to me. Evidently he must have told them what he had done: hence this elaborate scheme of to-day. And I think you can be extremely thankful, Miss Draycott, that you kept your head when you realised the man with his face bandaged was an impostor. Our opponents are not people who stick at trifles. Had you given yourself away then, I am more than doubtful if you'd be here now. However, that is by the way. You bluffed it through magnificently, and I want you to carry on the good work."

"I'll do anything you say," she said, and once again he gave her a quick look of admiration.

"You may remember I rather laughed at you when you first told me the hidden treasure story," he went on. "I'm not laughing now at all: I honestly believe there may be something in it. And if that is so you see where we stand: we must get their half. That is where you come in—if you feel like it."

"Of course I feel like it!" she cried.

"You know," he said doubtfully, "I must make it clear that if you care to you can go to the police and tell them what has happened to you."

"What will occur if I do?"

"I should think you would find that the birds have flown," said Jim. "And in addition to that we shall have given ourselves away to the other side. It will be a case of stalemate: each side will have one half of the map. And I want..."

He broke off and lit a cigarette.

"So do I, Mr. Maitland. Let's wash out the police."

Jim grinned.

"Good for you. We'll wash out the police as you say. Now I don't suppose for a moment we'll be able to get their half, but with a little diplomacy we might get a good look at it. Perhaps even..."

He paused, and a sudden gleam of ecstatic joy came into his eyes, a gleam that many men had seen to their cost.

"However, that's my palaver," he continued. "Now I'm gambling on one fact. They expect you to go back there to-night—and you're going. Percy is going to drive you down. And you will take with you—this."

He gave her the faked map, and she stared at it.

"But this is different to what I sent you," she said.

"Very different," he agreed. "I drew it myself. The genuine one is at my lawyers. But that one joins on to the other half. Which brings me up to the point I'm gambling on. They are not the sort of gentlemen who leave anything to chance, and I'm banking on them having their half there, to make sure on the spot, that you haven't sold them a pup."

"So that I can get a look at it," she cried. "I see: I'll do it."

"Supposing it doesn't come off we are no worse off than we were before. Leave them that: it's useless to them. They've got an island inspired by my second pink gin. We shall just have to try something else."

"But where do you come in, old lad?" demanded Percy.

"I don't," said Jim happily. "I shall remain outside the nursing home. Unless—I see an opportunity of entering with advantage. In which case I shall enter, and you, Miss Draycott, will exit. So should you hear two short blasts on Percy's klaxon, hop it like blazes in the car and leave me to my own sweet devices."

CHAPTER VI

"YOU'RE a damned bungler, Waterlow. The girl isn't an imbecile, and this place looks as much like a nursing home as it does like a night club."

A big man in a light overcoat was the speaker. His face was coarse and dissipated, and suddenly he pulled a flask from his pocket and took a deep drink. The only other occupant of the room shrugged his shoulders.

"You were in such an infernal hurry," he said, "that this was the best I could do in the time."

"But why were you such a fool as to let her go upstairs," snarled the first speaker. "Her twin; and you imagine she won't spot it."

"Dry up, Barnet," answered the other angrily. "I'm getting fed to the back teeth with you. She said she'd got the thing on her, and I believed her. Even if I hadn't, what do you suggest I should have done? Snatched her bag out of her hand to make sure. Of course she wouldn't have suspected anything then, would she? Might have gone further and slogged her over the head with a poker: that's what the doctor in charge of a home generally does to his female visitors."

Sir Montague Barnet took another drink.

"All right: all right," he grunted. "Don't go off the deep end about it. I know you did all you could. That slab of misery who fetched her should have seen that she brought it."

He glanced at his watch.

"She should be here by now if she's coming," he said uneasily. "It's past nine."

"I'll go and see that everything is ready," remarked the other. "And don't smoke that cigar, and have the smell all over the house."

"Perhaps you're right," grunted Barnet, replacing it in his case. "Though once we've got it," he continued with a leer, "she can suspect what she likes."

"Can she?" said the other significantly. "I'm not so sure about that."

He went out of the room, leaving the baronet cursing under his breath. And it was not until the flask had been requisitioned for the third time that he took from his pocket the counterpart of the map sent to Judy Draycott, and put it on the table in front of him.

For the twentieth time he studied it only to give it up as a bad job. Where the deuce was A? Until they could get that point fixed it was useless. And he was just replacing it in his pocket when he swung round in his chair with a strangled cry. For the blind man had entered noiselessly and had touched him on the shoulder.

"Good God! Emil, I wish you wouldn't do that," he snarled. "I'd no idea you were here. My nerves are all to hell."

"Judging by the aroma," sneered the dwarf, "you have been doing your best to raise them from the lower regions."

"It isn't you who have had the strain," cried Barnet angrily. "So less of your damned sarcasm, if you don't mind."

Then he pulled himself together.

"Look here, Emil," he said, "there's no good in our quarrelling. What are we going to do supposing this girl goes to the police? I don't see how she can avoid finding out that it isn't her brother."

"Provided she brings the paper—what matter? She has no idea her brother is dead, and even if the worst should happen here, all Waterlow has to do is to say that he made a mistake. It is not a criminal offence to think a man is a girl's brother when he isn't."

"No, but it might prove deuced awkward. Anyway, Emil, if anything should come out: if Maitland, for instance, should give trouble, you and I know it was Ernesto who did it."

An evil smile flickered over the blind man's lips.

"Do we?" he murmured. "My dear Monty, I heard a shot, and you tell me it was Ernesto who fired it. And with my sad affliction I have to take your word."

"You little devil," said the other hoarsely, the veins standing out on his forehead. "You know as well as I do that it was the dago."

"As I say, I take your word for it, my dear fellow. In a court of law, however, I fear that that would not count for much. No, no, Monty—please remember that. You understand, of course, that I merely mention it to ensure you taking every precaution against being found out. Of course I am the one person who could not have done it, so it does not really matter to me. I am merely being altruistic."

For a moment it looked as if the baronet was going to strike him. His big hairy fist was raised above his head, and murder was in his eyes. Then with a great effort he pulled himself together, and his hand fell to his side.

"You were present, anyway," he said sullenly.

"True. But a poor blind man is so helpless," said the dwarf gently. "And he had to take precautions to safeguard himself in this harsh world. And that's why I just mentioned it to you, Monty. You would hardly believe it, but there have been times in my life when scoundrels—men I have befriended, men I have been working with—have tried to double-cross me. So just remember won't you? I have no idea who fired the shot, which might prove awkward for you."

For a moment or two the other stared at him, fascinated: then his teeth bared in an evil snarl. But his voice was normal when he answered.

"I'll remember," he said.

"Good! And now it might be well to see if our friend is compos mentis again. His snores were reverberating through the house a little while ago."

"I'll go and get him," said Barnet, and the dwarf was left alone. For a while he stood motionless: then feeling his way with an uncanny delicacy of touch he proceeded to explore his unfamiliar surroundings. At length he seemed satisfied, and drawing up a chair, he sat down as the door opened and Barnet came in with an odd-looking character behind him. He was a short, thick-set man dressed in a blue reefer suit, and as he stood there fingering his cap, and staring a little fearfully at the dwarf, it required no Sherlock Holmes to deduce his profession. He was a sailor, and quite clearly he had been celebrating his time ashore in a manner not unusual with his class. He rolled slightly as he took a few steps forward into the room, and as he came under the light a large jagged scar down one side of his face showed up vividly.

"Good evening, Mr. Robinson," said the dwarf gently. "I trust you have recovered from your—er—jag."

"I'm all right, guv'nor, thank you," said the man still twisting his cap nervously in his hand. "I understand as 'ow you wants to ask me summat."

"That is so," agreed Dresler. "I was making some enquiries the other day for a seaman with an intimate knowledge of the east coast of South America, and your name was given to me."

"I reckons I knows every port from Georgetown to the Horn," said the sailor.

"Excellent. I understood that most of your time had been spent in the coasting trade. Now have you, in the course of your wanderings, ever struck a place called by the English, Lone Tree Island?"

"Lone Tree Island! South of Santos. You bet your life I know it, guv'nor; know it well enough to give it a mighty wide berth."

"Most interesting. And may I ask why you would give it a wide berth?"

"Because, guv'nor, the man who doesn't don't have no second chance. There be things on that island wot no man may see—and live. It be accursed."

"Really: really. You grow more and more interesting, Mr. Robinson. And may I ask how you know this? Is it merely what you've heard from other people, or have you been there yourself to see?"

"Both, guv'nor. I've been there myself: we lay up once for well-nigh a week to the south of the island with a damaged shaft. And I've 'eard from other men too: things wot they've seen. Gawd! I wouldn't spend the night on that island not for a 'undred quid. Straight—I wouldn't."

"What sort of things, Mr. Robinson?"

"Monstrous things, guv'nor: 'orrors. Things that was never made of 'uman parents. Aye! you may laugh, sir"—he turned to Barnet, who was smiling incredulously—"but wot I tells you is the truth. You ask any sailor who knows the coast and 'e'll tell you the same as wot I do."

"I am quite sure that what Mr. Robinson says is correct," said the dwarf. "And we're both very much obliged to him for his information."

"No trouble, gentlemen. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"If you don't mind waiting a little longer, Mr. Robinson, I hope to be able to show you a map of it. And I should very much like your confirmation that it is the island we've been talking about. Monty, my dear fellow, our friend is probably a little thirsty after all his talking. I have no doubt there is some whiskey in the kitchen."

"Well," he continued, as the baronet returned a few moments later, "the matter becomes increasingly intriguing. 'Things that were never made of 'uman parents: 'orrors.'"

"Do you believe the man, Emil?"

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders.

"Those who go down to the sea in ships are proverbially spinners of tall yarns," he said. "There may be some substratum of truth in it, which has been exaggerated into what we've just been told. And, anyway, I have yet to find the being, whether made by human parents or not, who is proof against a high-velocity rifle."

Sir Montague Barnet started to pace to and fro.

"I wish we knew for certain if it was worth going on with it," he said.

The dwarf smiled contemptuously.

"Life would be a pretty tedious affair," he remarked, "if one always knew for certain. You know the enquiries we've made: you know our sources of information. And even if it should prove to be wrong—what is the cost? A few hundred pounds—a thousand at the most. Which sum, Monty, I am finding, do not forget."

The door was flung open and Waterlow put his head in.

"Car coming up the drive," he said. "Everything is ready."

"Listen, Waterlow," said Dresler quietly. "If it is humanly possible, we do not want the girl to suspect anything. It will save us an infinity of trouble if she doesn't. And so, as soon as she has handed it over, get it down to this room somehow. A minute will be enough for Monty to take a tracing. Then if she wants it—she can have it back."

"I get you," answered the other going into the hall and closing the door.

The car had pulled up at the door, and contrary to the usual custom the driver seemed to be trying to find out how much noise he could make with his engine. He accelerated in bursts, until Barnet swore angrily under his breath.

"He'll wake the whole damned neighbourhood—that fool of a chauffeur," he muttered.

But the chauffeur seemed quite oblivious of his unpopularity: at intervals he raced his engine with an ear-splitting roar—so ear-splitting in fact, that even the blind man's supersensitive hearing was of no avail for any other sound, such as a man might make as he cautiously opened the window a little more and a little more each time. And with the final, full-throttled burst Jim Maitland, who had been reconnoitring the house for the last twenty minutes, found himself with only a blind barring his way to the room. Then silence fell, broken only by Waterlow's voice.

"Really, Miss Draycott, your chauffeur might remember that this is a nursing home."

"So sorry, Doctor Phillips," came her apologetic reply, "but the car is not going very well. That's why I'm so late. How is Arthur?"

A look of relief spread over Barnet's face: evidently she suspected nothing.

"Better now, Miss Draycott. He was very worried and upset this morning after you left but I succeeded in pacifying him. I trust there is no mistake this time, and that you have brought it with you."

"Of course, Doctor, and I shall never forgive myself for being so stupid this morning."

Their voices died away as they mounted the stairs, and the dwarf smiled easily.

"It marches well, Monty," he said. "She would appear to be eating out of our hands. Now get that sailor in."

The blind stirred slightly as the door opened—a natural phenomenon in the faint night breeze—and Jim Maitland's keen eye took in every detail of the room. From above him came the sound of the girl's voice: evidently the interview with the supposed brother had commenced.

He drew back a little as Barnet returned, accompanied by Robinson, though he could still see the whole of the room.

"Now, Mr. Robinson," said the blind man, "we shan't detain you much longer. May I take it that you would recognise a map of the island if you saw one?"

"Well, I ain't much of a hand at maps, gentlemen, but I'll 'ave a shot at it."

"No one can do more," said Dresler genially as the door opened and Waterlow came in.

"Here it is," he said hurriedly. "And get a move on. She knows all about everything, and wants to see the other half."

"Does she suspect about her brother?" asked the dwarf.

"Doesn't seem to. She's chatting away quite cheerfully."

"Right. Go back. And the sooner you get her away the better. Now, Mr. Robinson," he continued, as the door closed, "perhaps you would have a look."

"We've got it, Emil," said Barnet triumphantly. "The two pieces fit perfectly. Now is that the island?"

He laid them on the table, and the sailor bent over them.

"Aye," he said, "that looks like the place. Ancorage: that's right. That's where we lay: south of the island. And all the eastern part is swampy. Crocks—why, that river is full of them, and other things too."

"Good!" cried Barnet, rapidly adjusting a piece of tracing paper. "Emil—we've got the map complete except for that torn-off bit in the bottom left-hand corner."

"Does it give the location of what we want?" asked the dwarf.

"Yes," said the other laconically. "I'll work that out later."

For a moment Jim hesitated. To knock out Barnet and snatch the map would be easy—a matter of seconds. But he would certainly be recognised, and—what was even more important—Judy Draycott was not yet safely away. He craned forward trying to see, but the baronet's back was between him and the map. And he was on the point of chancing it when once more Waterlow came in.

"She's getting suspicious," he said hurriedly. "Wants to see the other bit. Is it safe?"

"Yes," answered the dwarf quietly. "It's the lesser of two evils. Well, Mr. Robinson, I don't think we need detain you any more. Good night, and I'm much obliged to you. Waterlow—show him out. Now, Monty," he went on as the door closed, "have you got that tracing finished?"

"Just finished now," said the other.

"And you have a copy of our half? Good. Put the tracing in your pocket, and we'll have the girl in. You're another doctor, don't forget. And don't get near her: you reek of whiskey even at this range."

There was the sound of voices coming down the stairs, then Judy came in followed by Waterlow.

"Here is Miss Draycott, Professor," he announced.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Draycott," said the dwarf courteously. "May I introduce my other colleague, Doctor Arbuthnot."

Barnet bowed.

"Your brother is, I think, as well as can be expected under the circumstances," went on Dresler. "It is indeed fortunate that the accident should have taken place so close to my nursing home."

"Very fortunate indeed," said the girl, quietly. "And I am most grateful to you for all your kindness."

"My dear young lady"—the dwarf lifted a deprecating hand—"that is what we are here for. And now that you have brought him the other half of his map, his mind will be at rest."

"Is that it on the table?" she asked innocently. "What is it all about?"

She crossed over and looked at it.

"It all seems nonsense to me."

"I fear you're quite right," said the dwarf. "It is nonsense. But so long as he is in his present state he must be humoured."

"He keeps on talking about hidden treasure," she went on. "Where is this supposed to be?"

"I've got no idea," said the dwarf. "He tells me he got it from some sailor in South America. And I fear if the truth be known that it is like so many sailor's stories—complete imagination."

"You don't think this is a real island?" she asked.

"Frankly, Miss Draycott, I do not. And even if it is I'm afraid the chances of there being any treasure on it are remote. Other people would have heard of it long ago, and removed it."

"I suppose so," she said a little sadly. "And the poor boy does seem so keen about it too. However, I have promised him to do all I can, so I suppose I must. But it seems rather a waste of time."

"What are you doing, Miss Draycott?" cried Barnet, and Jim began to shake with silent laughter. For the girl was calmly folding up both parts of the map and putting them in her bag.

"He's just asked me to find out anything I could for him about it in London," she explained, and Jim shook still more. "When you were out of the room, Doctor Phillips. He seemed so keen that I don't like to disappoint him. So I'll just pretend."

Barnet and Waterlow were staring at her in perplexity: their dilemma was clear to the delighted witness outside the window. They both knew that the girl was lying. But they couldn't say so, without giving themselves away. And it was the dwarf who took charge of the situation.

"Quite right, Miss Draycott," he said calmly. "Do anything that will keep his mind at rest. Humour him in every way. And when shall we be seeing you again?"

"To-morrow, I think, or perhaps the next day," she answered, rising to her feet. "Good night, Professor. Thank you again for all you've done for Arthur."

"It is a pleasure, my dear young lady. Good night."

"Well, I'm damned," said Barnet, as the door closed. "Why did you let her get away with it, Emil?"

"At times, my friend, I despair of your brain. What else was there to do?"

"But don't you see," fumed the other, "that it is proof positive that she suspects. Johnston never said that to her: she was lying."

From outside came the noise of a self-starter—a splutter, a roar—and as the car swung down the drive Waterlow re-entered.

"The fact had not escaped me," said the dwarf languidly. "Though there is a bare possibility that she herself suggested it to Johnston, and he perforce had to agree."

"That is soon settled," cried Waterlow going into the hall. "Johnston—come down here."

A man of about thirty entered mopping his face.

"Those cursed bandages are the limit on a hot night," he remarked.

"Did that girl make any remark to you about taking the map up to London with her?" said the dwarf.

"Yes. Seemed dead set on it. I didn't know what to say so I left it vague."

"Do you think she suspected you?"

"Didn't seem to. She called me Arthur and patted my hands."

"You see, Monty," said the dwarf quietly, "it was far better to let her take them. What harm can she do? What is the good of that map to anyone unless they know where the island is? And what chance has she got of finding anyone who would be able to tell her? Unless..."

He broke off, and sat brooding.

"Unless what?"

"For the moment I thought of Maitland," remarked the dwarf.

"I wish we'd done the damned fellow in that night," said Barnet savagely. "He knows every inch of South America."

"Hardly that, my dear Monty, though I admit I should feel happier if he was out of the way. And you must remember two things. One—we don't know that he

knows the girl: and two—even if he does, it is very improbable that he knows where the island is. Still, I admit Maitland is a distinct problem, and one that we may have to solve. However, that can wait. The immediate thing is to clear out of here at once. Order my car round, Johnston, and shut this place up. I fear if the lady comes here again she will have a slight shock."

Noiselessly Jim backed away from the window, and keeping on the grass he went down the drive at a steady lope. There was nothing further to be learned, and things had succeeded beyond his wildest expectations, entirely owing to the girl. He had complete faith in his ability to spot where the island was: there were many old pals of his down in Dockland who knew the coast of South America as they did the palms of their hands.

And then suddenly out of the darkness there loomed an immediate solution to the problem—to wit, Mr. Robinson stumping along the road. He could give him the information he needed, but speed was imperative since at any moment the dwarf's car might be on them. Percy was waiting for him a little way ahead, but he wanted no chance of being overtaken.

"Good evening, Mr. Robinson," he said as he came abreast.

"'Oo the 'ell are you?" was the uncompromising answer.

"Someone who is proposing to give you a fiver if you'll run," said Jim with a laugh.

A stationary red light had just come in sight in front of them.

"Run as far as that light with me, Robinson, and I'll give you a lift to London as well, in exchange for a little information," continued Jim.

"Gaw lumme! Fivers seem easy to-night."

He pounded along beside Jim, until they reached the car.

"My friend, Mr. Robinson," cried Jim, "who is coming back to Town with us. Hop in in front, my lad, and Percy, tread on the juice."

He sank down beside the girl in the back seat, and as the car gathered speed he could just see the exquisite profile so close to him.

"Well done," he said quietly. "Well done, indeed."

She made no reply; and merely stared in front of her.

"Miss Draycott! Judy! what's the matter?" he asked gently. "A penny."

She gave a little sigh that was half a sob.

"It's Arthur," she said. "I've had time to think; that's all."

And now the tears were coming unchecked.

"Killed by those brutes the very day he returned. It's wicked. I want them to be punished; I want someone hanged."

A sudden feeling of guilt assailed him: he had actually forgotten all about her brother.

"Listen, Judy," he said gravely, "while I say my little bit. I know exactly how you're feeling: it's only natural. And perhaps I was wrong in not calling in the police at once. But I happen to be one of those blokes that don't instinctively go for the police if anything happens: I suppose I've lived too much in places where there aren't any to go for. And it was the extraordinary coincidence of the whole thing that struck me, coming as it did just after I'd left you. The dago, your story about the treasure, everything combined to make me hesitate. And then, as you know, I was outed and it was too late. But what I'm getting at is that now I am glad I acted as I did. Honestly I believe that there is something in this yarn, and the best way of revenging your brother's death is to do those swine down."

The girl did not answer, and gradually her tears ceased. And then somehow it came about that her left hand fell off her lap and encountered Jim's right. Which, of course, was purely accidental, and may be treated as an irrelevant and extraneous detail. Almost as irrelevant in fact as three remarks which were made five minutes later.

"Percy, you blighter, this isn't Brooklands. Ease up, confound you."

And the voice was male.

"Ever so much slower, Percy dear. I'm being blown to bits."

And the voice was female.

"Thank Gawd for that, guv'nor."

And the voice was that of a man in whom some faint hope of life had been rekindled. Mr. Robinson's idea of speed did not coincide with Percy's.

It was past eleven when they drew up finally outside Jim's flat.

"But why the dickens did you want me to go slower, after telling me to tread on the juice?" demanded Percy indignantly.

"One is so much more exposed to things in the back seat, Percy dear," said the girl. "But you drove very nicely."

"Why, we've taken as long to get up as we did going down counting in the twenty minutes we waited while Jim went ahead. Rotten."

"Push inside, and don't talk so much," remarked Jim. "As an ornament to the doorstep I'd prefer a gargoyle. I expect you could do with a drink, Robinson."

"Well, sir, I don't mind if I do," agreed the sailor. "Them machines seem to make one thirsty like."

Jim smiled, and led the way. And as a hardened bachelor he noted with a certain misgiving that installing Judy in his best chair was a very pleasant occupation. Not, of course, that there would ever be anything in it: he had merely held her hand in a comforting, fraternal way. Still—a very pretty girl: very pretty indeed.

"Now, Robinson," he said when they were all settled, "I'd be glad if you'd tell me one or two things. First of all how did you get mixed up in that bunch?"

"That's easy, sir. I was lodging down in Mother Shipwells—she takes in us seafaring men chiefly—when a bloke shoves 'is 'ead round the door at dinner-time to-day and sings out: ''Oo knows South America well?' I says I do. 'E h'asks me a few questions, and then says: 'Would you like to earn a fiver?' I says: 'Stop kidding.' 'E says: 'It's strite.' All I 'ad to do was to go and see some guys in the country that wanted h'information. That's how it 'appened, sir."

"Good," said Jim, "that's clear. Now, from what I heard this evening, you were talking about some island."

"That's right, sir. The first thing that little terror of a dwarf asked me was if I knew Lone Tree Island."

"That was before I got there," said Jim. "And you did know this island?"

"There h'ain't many men, sir, 'oove been in the coastal trade there 'oo don't," answered the sailor. "I knows it all right, as I told them guys down there. Knows it so well, as I says to 'em, that I wouldn't spend a night on it for a 'undred quid."

"But why the deuce not?" cried Percy, staring at him. "I mean, I'd spend a night in a temperance hotel for that."

"Look 'ere, sir," said the sailor to Jim. "A lot of you gentlemen—and you too, Miss—seems h'interested in Lone Tree Island. Now I'm only an h'uneducated man, and maybe you don't pay much count to what I says. But there's a man just 'ome from the West H'Indies 'olding a master's ticket 'oo knows more'n I do about the place. 'E's lodging not far from Mother Shipwells—Cap'n Blackett...."

"Wait a minute," cried Jim. "Big man with a hook nose, and blue eyes, who used to have an old tramp called the Indus?"

"That's the man, sir. Do you know 'im?"

"Know Bill Blackett? I should think I do!"

"Well, sir, he'll tell you h'everything, better'n than I can."

Jim put his hand in his pocket.

"Here's some money, Robinson. Get in a taxi, and go and see Captain Blackett. Tell him Jim Maitland wants him, and bring him back with you to-night. And if his memory wants jogging, just say—'The Union Bar, Pernambuco!'"

"Aye, aye, sir. If 'e's there, I'll bring 'im. Evening, mum: evening, gentlemen."

They heard the front door slam, and Jim, his eyes gleaming with excitement, began pacing up and down the room.

"Bill Blackett! A damned good man. We'll get the truth from him, my children, if we can get it from anyone."

And suddenly Judy Draycott understood the reason of Percy's hero worship. Just as a hunter quivers and fidgets at the sound of hounds, so was this man at the thought of adventure. And a little ruefully she realised that in all probability he had completely forgotten that he held her hand in the car.

"A pity that I sent the other half to my lawyers," he went on. "Still, it was safer, I suppose. And we can get to the maps later, after we've heard what Bill has to say."

He came with Robinson an hour later.

"By Jove! Mr. Maitland," he said as he shook hands, "you are the only man in London who could have got me out of bed at this hour."

"Good for you, Bill," cried Jim, and introduced him to the other two. "Take that chair, and you'll find the necessary beside you. I want some information out of you."

"So I gather from Robinson," said the other gravely. "I hear you've been making enquiries about Lone Tree Island."

"That seems to be the name of the spot," agreed Jim.

"Have you got the map of it?"

"Only half: the other is at my lawyers. There it is."

Bill Blackett stared at it for some time.

"Yes—that looks to me like a rough sketch of the southern part of the island. And if it is, Mr. Maitland, or if you—and I know what you are—have any idea of paying it a visit, my advice to you is to tear that up into tiny pieces and forget it."

"But why, Captain Blackett?" cried the girl breathlessly.

"Because, Miss, there are certain things in this world which it is best to leave alone. Mr. Maitland is a match for anything on two legs, as I very well know, but neither he nor any other man is a match for what ever it is that lives on that island. It's accursed: the island is accursed."

"Bill—you're pulling our legs," said Jim banteringly.

But there was no answering smile on the other's face.

"Was the case of the Paquinetta before your time?" he enquired.

"I don't seem to recall it," said Jim.

"Then if it won't bore you, I'll tell you the story."

"Fire ahead, Bill," cried Jim. "The night is yet young."

CHAPTER VII

"LONE TREE ISLAND," began Blackett, "lies south of Santos. In size it is about five miles north to south, and a little less from east to west. The eastern side has a biggish area of swamp which is practically impassable: the western side is mostly dense tropical forest. The northern part—the map of which isn't here—has one conspicuous conical hill, and west of that hill one even more conspicuous tree standing by itself on high ground."

"That confirms the accuracy of the other part of the map," said Jim.

"The first time I heard of it," went on the other, "was in '06. I was serving then as mate in a small line with its headquarters at Buenos. One day we got sudden orders from the owners to go there, which struck me as being pretty strange, seeing that there was no question of any cargo, and tramps don't generally go on pleasure cruises. And what struck me as even stranger was our old man's manner after we'd sailed. He wasn't a chatty card at the best of times, but that trip I couldn't get a word out of him. What was more, there was something wrong with the men. So at last I took the bull by the horns one morning when he came up on the bridge.

"'What's all the trouble, sir?' I said. 'The crew are as windy as if they were a girls' school.'

"'How long have you been out here, Mr. Blackett?' he answered.

"'About a year,' I told him.

"'You may remember the Paquinetta left Buenos six weeks ago sudden like,' he said.

"The Paquinetta was another of our line.

"'I do,' I answered. 'Rather mysterious about it too. Nobody knew where she was bound for.'

"'Not only that,' he reminded me, 'but she sailed under a new captain and a specially picked crew.'

"I stared at him hard. He was right—she had, but I'd forgotten it.

"'In your year out here, Mr. Blackett, have you never heard any stories of Lone Tree Island,' he went on.

"Well, I hadn't—not at that time, and I told him so. I hadn't even heard of the island before.

"'Not surprising,' he said, 'it lies well off the beaten track.'

"'What are we going to do there?' I asked him.

"'Find out what's happened to the Paquinetta,' he said gravely, and went below.

"Well, Mr. Maitland, you know I'm not a nervy sort of cuss, but I give you my word that that simple remark sent a shiver right down my spine. Don't forget that in those days wireless wasn't fitted to most of the smaller tramps, and the Paquinetta had none. At the same time there had been no dirty weather and she was a first-class sea boat. So I told myself not to be a fool—what could have happened to her? But there was the old man with a face a yard long: there was the crew, who somehow or other had got hold of our destination, as nervous as a basketful of monkeys, and there was this mystery about the Paquinetta.

"Well, we sighted the island about noon on the third day out. We were steering north-east, and that high ground with the cairn of stones on top, that you can see marked on the map, hid the anchorage until we were close in shore. Then as we rounded the point we suddenly saw her right in front of us, anchored not three cables' length away. So we went hard astern and anchored ourselves."

He paused and took another drink.

"It was obvious," he continued, "at the first glance that something was very wrong. There was no sign of smoke, no sign of life on board her, and when we gave a blast on the siren there was no answer.

"'Lower away a boat,' ordered the skipper. 'I'm going on board.'

"'I'd like to come too, sir,' I said, and the old man looked relieved.

"'I reckon I'll be glad to have you,' he answered. 'There is some devilry afoot.'

"So we rowed over. The companion was down though two of the guys had come adrift, and it wobbled drunkenly as we climbed up. The deck was deserted, and the heat beat up from it as we stood there looking round. Not a sign of a soul: not a sound.

"'We'll go below, Mr. Mate,' said the old man and led the way.

"She was practically the twin of our own packet so we knew our way about. We made for the saloon. It was empty, same as everything else, and on the table were the remains of a meal. Half a cup of tea congealed and rancid, and some meat that was crawling, it was so bad.

"'They've been gone some time, sir,' I said, pointing to it.

"'But what manner of man is it, Mr. Mate, who leaves his ship without a soul on board. Tell me that.'

"And I couldn't. The old story of the Marie Celeste came to my mind, but she at any rate was found drifting at sea. This was different: the whole lot of them must be ashore. But as the skipper said it pointed to a strange man in their captain.

"'We'll try the chart-room,' said the old man, and even as he spoke there came a sudden chuckle from outside the door. And you can take it from me that we were round in a flash, each of us with a gun in our hands. It was repeated, and there was something in the sound of it that fairly froze my blood. We watched the door opening slowly, and then our revolvers fell to our sides. One of the cook's mates was standing there and it needed but one glance to see that the poor chap was as mad as a hatter.

"He looked at us foolishly, and after a while he began to mumble something.

"'Half men: half beasts. Half men: half beasts.'

"On and on he went saying it, again and again and pointing with a shaking hand through the porthole. We couldn't get anything else out of him, and at length he shambled away again.

"'What the devil does he mean, sir?' I cried. 'Half men: half beasts. Of course, he's plumb crazy.'

"'And what made him crazy, Mr. Mate: what made him crazy?'

"The captain looked at me with sombre eyes.

"'Crazy men aren't signed on, are they, Mr. Mate? And sane men don't go crazy for nothing.'

"He led the way on deck, and for a while he stood there shading his eyes with his hand and staring at the undergrowth that came down almost to the water's edge. Then he turned abruptly and went up on the bridge.

"'Get the log,' he said. 'It may tell us something.'

"So I went to the captain's cabin, and wished I hadn't. For the sight inside was terrible to see. The bunk, the walls, the table, the chairs, the floor—every part of that cabin had great patches of red spattered over it, as if someone with a vast brush had daubed it indiscriminately on anything he saw. And it was blood.

"I turned: the captain was standing beside me and his face was the colour of chalk.

"'God in Heaven!' he muttered, 'there's been butcher's work in here.'

"I went over to the table, on which some papers were lying and picked them up. They, too, were stained with blood, but the writing was still legible. And at last we realised we had some sort of clue, though not one that advanced us much. For the top was evidently part of a rough form of diary kept by the skipper, and the captain pointed to the date—April 26th.

"'18th May now, Blackett,' he said. 'Three weeks ago.'

"'Cannot understand silence of shore party,' ran the entry. 'Three days overdue and no sig——'

"It broke off abruptly in the middle of a word. Signal, perhaps or sign—it didn't matter. But the same thought was in both our minds: what grim tragedy had occurred as he laid down his pencil three weeks before? Whose was the blood that covered everything? The faint sickly reek of it still hung about, and we stumbled back into the fresh air—two badly shaken men.

"'What's it mean, sir?' I cried. 'You knew something before we got here: the crew knew something. What is it?'

"'Rumours,' he said slowly. 'There have always been strange rumours about this island, Mr. Mate. And, by heck! I'm beginning to believe that they're true.'

"He gripped my arm suddenly, and with his other hand he pointed to the shore.

"'Do you see anything moving?' he cried. 'By that tree with the purple flowers, half-way up the hill.'

"I picked out the tree, and stared at it. And after a while it shook, though everything around it was motionless in the stilling mid-day heat. I went on staring: was it my imagination or was there something at the foot of the tree that was moving? We had neither of us brought our glasses, and in the shimmering haze it was difficult to be certain. So at length we gave it up and continued our exploration though we knew from the outset it was hopeless. The ship was empty save for us two and a crazy cook. Where were the rest of the crew?"

He paused, and Jim refilled his glass. And in the silence of the room you could have heard a pin drop.

"The first thing to fix was what to do with the madman, and the skipper decided to leave him where he was for the time.

"'As I see things,' he said to me, 'he has been alone in this boat since April 26th, and it's not going to hurt him to be alone two or three days more. And we'll have trouble with our own men if we take him back with us.'

"'What do you propose to do, sir?' I asked.

"'Explore that river, Mr. Blackett. We've got to try and solve this mystery somehow.'

"So we pulled back to our own ship, and I gave the necessary orders. The men were standing about in bunches talking in low voices, and it wasn't until the old man got going that they bestirred themselves. Of course they'd scented trouble—anyone with half an eye could have seen it after one glance at the Paquinetta—but they were not given much time to think about it. We hoisted in the small boat, lowered away the big one, and a marline spike removed any reluctance to man it. The second mate was left in charge, with strict orders to keep a sharp look out, and we started off.

"It had been hot in the creek, but once round the bend of the river out of sight of the open sea it became almost unbearable. Not a breath of wind stirred, and the air seemed to press down on one like a wet blanket. Dense tropical undergrowth hemmed us in on each side: the place reeked of malaria and yellow jack. And crocodiles. I've never seen so many in my life as there were in that river, and the grim thought came to me that they might furnish a possible solution. There would be no traces left of anyone who fell into that water. I said as much in a low voice to the skipper, and he stared at me a moment or two before replying.

"'It's a rum crocodile that can climb the bridge of a ship, Blackett,' he said.

"We rowed on. He and I were sitting side by side in the stern each with a revolver on our knees. Gradually the river narrowed till the blades of the oars were almost touching the banks and the trees met overhead. It was obvious we could not go further, so the skipper gave the order to cease rowing.

"'No good trying to land here,' he remarked. 'We'll try a shout or two. Now then, lads, all together with me.'

"We bellowed 'Ahoy' at the tops of our voices, and then listened. But save for the startled whirr of birds as they rose from the tree near by there was no result—just the same steamy silent heat. We tried again, but it was useless and there was nothing for it but to return to the ship. And it was on the way back that I became conscious of a very peculiar sensation. I mentioned it to the captain afterwards, and found that he had experienced it also, though I think the men were too busy rowing to notice it. And the sensation was one of being

watched. Something was keeping pace with us on one bank, something that I never saw, but yet was acutely aware of. It was not imagination, and the skipper agreed with me.

"Well, that ended our first endeavour to solve the mystery, and the point arose as to what to do next. So we held a council of war, and finally arrived at the conclusion that the best thing would be to steam slowly round the island hooting with the siren at frequent intervals, and looking for a place where we could land a party with safety. For the skipper flatly refused to let anyone go ashore in the wooded part, even if we could have got the men to volunteer, which I doubt.

"So we made the circuit of the island with the siren going every half-minute, and the result was nil. No trace of a man did we see, but the time was not wasted since we got the geography of the place in our heads. And it was clear that there was one obvious spot to land—a beach on the north of the island almost at the foot of the conical hill. But it was too late to do anything more that day, so we decided to anchor again, and wait for the next morning.

"Now the Paquinetta was lying inside us about two hundred yards from the shore, and a quarter of a mile from us. The night was dead still, and the moon was due to rise about three. And though I was tired when I came off watch at midnight I found I couldn't sleep. I couldn't get this amazing affair out of my head, so I lay down on my bunk and picked up a book. Full sea going, watch was being kept, and I could hear the second mate pacing up and down the bridge.

"Suddenly the footsteps ceased just above my porthole, and I heard him give an exclamation. And the next moment he was in my cabin.

"'There's something going on in the Paquinetta, sir,' he cried.

"I was out like a flash, and up on the bridge. Sure enough a light was moving across the deck, but it wasn't an ordinary ship's lantern. It looked more like a smoky torch, such as boys carry on Guy Fawkes's day. We watched it in silence, until it disappeared below.

"'It's that crazy fool of a cook,' I said. 'He'll probably set fire to the ship.'

"And I was on the point of rousing the skipper, when there came across the water a scream of terror so blood-curdling that I felt my hair lifting from my scalp. It was not repeated, and before I had time to decide anything, the captain joined us.

"'Did that scream come from the Paquinetta?' he asked.

"'Yes, sir,' I said. 'And there was a light moving on the deck... By Jove! there it is again.'

"The three of us stood there staring at it. As before it moved across the deck, but this time it disappeared over the side. And it seemed to me that it was moving in a curiously jerky fashion.

"Now the gangway was on the far side of the Paquinetta and the explanation of the light's movements seemed obvious. Someone had boarded her, gone below, and then left her. And while he was below something had happened to cause that ghastly scream.

"The skipper didn't hesitate, though if it had been me I'm not ashamed to confess that I think I'd have left it till dawn. He ordered a boat to be lowered and called for a couple of volunteers to go aboard the Paquinetta. We got 'em readily—a big Swede, and an Englishman. One of them took a crowbar, and the other a pickaxe, whilst the skipper and I carried our revolvers. Then with four lanterns we rowed across. Hit, and hit to kill, were the orders if we met anything.

"We came alongside the gangway, and the first thing we saw by the light of the lanterns was blood on the steps. There was a trail of it the whole way up, a trail right across the deck, a trail of it leading down below. And we followed the trail—the skipper leading and me bringing up the rear. It led past the saloon, and finished in the cook's quarters.

"Ye Gods! the place was a shambles. Just as we had found the captain's cabin, so was this, only now the blood was wet. And the skipper cursed savagely. Somebody or something had battered that poor crazy loon to death, but whatever it was it had disappeared. We searched the ship thoroughly: she was empty. And at last we pulled back to our own.

"And that very nearly brings me to the end. The next day we landed a party and climbed the hill. From it the whole of the island could be seen stretched out like a map at our feet. But of life there was no sign. Dense forest and swamp, and not a thing that moved, save that occasionally a flock of birds would rise from some tree, and then settle down again as if they had been disturbed by something passing below.

"I suggested to the captain that I should take a party of volunteers and try some exploration in the forest, but he absolutely refused to allow it.

"'We've only got three revolvers on board,' he pointed out, 'and very little ammunition. If the crew of the Paquinetta were anywhere down there they'd have heard our siren yesterday. They're dead, Mr. Mate—every man jack of

them, and I'm not going to risk a similar fate for my own. You'll take command of the Paquinetta with an emergency crew, and as soon as you've got steam up—we sail.'

"And that is the story of the Paquinetta, from which you can draw your own conclusions. Every sort of theory was put forward at the time, and the one that most people accepted was that a mutiny had taken place. The landing-party which the captain had alluded to in his diary, had come on board, and having killed the skipper and the rest of the crew had gone ashore again leaving only the mad cook. Then when we arrived, fearful that the madman might say something which would give them away, they completed their work by butchering him. They dared not reply to our siren knowing what they'd done, and finally yellow jack broke out and that was the end. For the bald fact remains that from that day to this no word has been heard of any member of that crew."

"And is that your theory, Bill?" asked Jim quietly.

"No, Mr. Maitland, it isn't. Call me a superstitious sailor-man if you like but I believe the solution of the mystery is something far more horrible. And I believe it is to be found in the words of that crazy cook—'half men, half beasts.' I believe that lurking in that dense forest are beings of a certain degree of intelligence—witness the torch, which shows that they understand fire—of inner physical strength—the captain of the Paquinetta was a powerful man—and of incredible ferocity. I believe that the landing-party was butchered to a man, and that then, taking advantage of a dark night, these creatures had either swum or rowed out to the ship, and murdered those who remained on board. Why they left the mad cook I don't profess to say: perhaps he managed to hide himself from them. In brief, I believe that the legend of the Guardians of the Treasure is true."

"Now we're coming to it, Bill," said Jim. "Let's hear something about this treasure."

"It was to find it, Mr. Maitland, that the Paquinetta was fitted out. The story is that in 1600 or thereabouts one Don Silva Rodriguez, having on board his galleon a fabulous load of gold and precious stones which he had obtained in Brazil, was driven ashore on Lone Tree Island and completely wrecked. He waited and waited, spending each day on the top of the hill scanning the horizon for a sail, but never seeing one. And at length his rage and fury drove him mad. There was he with unlimited riches in his pocket so to speak, condemned to spend the rest of his life on an island where they were useless to him. And in his madness he entered into league with the devil. If the devil

would send a ship, he would leave half his treasure hidden on the island where no one could find it, for the exclusive use of the devil. And the devil agreed, provided he could instal his own guardians. You smile, Mr. Maitland—and told here in this room I admit the story sounds fantastic. Nevertheless, even if the origin of the yarn is incredible, I still believe that there lurks in that forest a breed of creatures that are neither man nor beast."

"That's right, sir." Robinson, who had been almost forgotten in his corner, suddenly spoke. "The Captain's right. 'Orrors: 'orrors that ain't 'uman."

"So you've heard this story too, have you?" said Jim thoughtfully.

"May I ask what causes your interest in the place, Mr. Maitland?" said Blackett.

"You certainly may, Bill. And I can tell you in a few words. We have in our possession a map that purports to show the spot on the island where the treasure is buried."

"How came you by it?"

"It was given to my brother, Captain Blackett, by a sailor he befriended in Monte Video," said Judy Draycott. "And my brother has since been murdered by a gang here in England who want to get it."

The sailor whistled in astonishment.

"That's bad luck, Miss," he said awkwardly. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Now, Bill, the position is this," remarked Jim. "By a subterfuge we have obtained the genuine map as given by the sailor to Miss Draycott's brother. We have also presented the gang with this."

He joined the faked half on to the genuine one and Blackett studied it.

"That, as you will see, Bill, is wrong. The southern half is correct: the northern is not."

"Aye: that's so. The tree and the hill are reversed."

"Well, I'm jiggered," said Robinson. "To think I never spotted that."

"I'm very glad you didn't, Robinson," said Jim. "It would have upset my plans very considerably if you had. To continue, Bill. The other party have no idea that there is anything wrong with the map they've got. It is possible, of course, they may show it to someone like yourself who knows the place, in which case they will discover they've been tricked. But if they don't do that, they won't find their error out till they arrive there."

"Arrive there!" cried Blackett. "Lord save us, you don't mean to say they're going to the island."

"You bet your life, Bill," said Jim. "And so am I."

"You are a fool, Mr. Maitland," said the sailor gravely.

"So are you, Bill," answered Jim, beginning to pace up and down the room. "Because you're coming too. And little Percy."

He paused for a moment with his eyes on the girl.

"Pity—but I'm afraid it's not quite in your line, Miss Draycott. I don't like the sound of that yellow jack."

"Don't you," said the girl, with a sweetness that would have augured danger to him if he had not been so preoccupied.

"Foul thing—yellow jack. Still we're all pretty well pickled against fever, and as far as Percy is concerned he can bite the microbe first. Microbes flee from you, don't they, old lad? Suppose they must draw the line somewhere."

"I had a sort of idea, Mr. Maitland," continued Judy even more sweetly, "that the map of the island was mine."

Jim stared at her.

"By Jove! yes—so it is," he cried. "But it's understood, of course, that when we discover the old tin can buried by Bill's Spanish pal, it's absolutely yours. Bill—when can you start? Fares and all expenses, of course, are mine."

"Are you really serious?" demanded the other.

"Serious as be damned, old lad. And the marvel to me is that I've never heard this perfectly gorgeous yarn before."

And it was just as well for his peace of mind that he did not see the look on the girl's face as she watched him.

"If you don't come," he went on, "I'll have to rope in someone else who can do the sailoring part. But I'd dearly like to have you with me, Bill."

And suddenly the sailor laughed.

"Right you are. I'm with you."

"Great," shouted Jim. "I'll fix details with you to-morrow, Bill, and show you the complete map."

His eyes were gleaming with excitement.

"Speed: speed—that's the order of the day," he continued. "We've got to get there first. And I see no reason why we shouldn't. They suspect nothing, so as far as they are concerned there's no urgent need for hurry."

"Well, we'll have a look at things to-morrow," said Blackett, getting up. "I think you're a fool, Mr. Maitland, and I know I am, but anyway I'm going to bed. Good night, Miss," he added with a grin. "Can't you make him see reason?"

He stumped down the stairs followed by Robinson, and Jim grinned too.

"A priceless fellow," he remarked. "Worth two in a scrap."

"Do you think there's anything in his story about the things in the forest?" said the girl.

"Frankly, I don't," answered Jim. "As he admitted himself sailors are a superstitious bunch, and their stories rarely lose in the telling. But it was a queer yarn, wasn't it, about the Paquinetta? I should say myself that the generally accepted theory was correct—mutiny and yellow jack. For all that you'll have to learn to pull a pretty useful trigger, Percy."

But at the moment Percy slept quite shamelessly.

"How will you go?" demanded the girl.

"Either Purple Star or Union Mail as far as Rio. I'll have a look at the list of sailings to-morrow. Then from Rio I'll charter something or other to get to the island in."

"And where will you stay in Rio?" she asked.

"Probably the Gloria," said Jim. "Judy—I wish you could see Rio. It's one of the most divinely beautiful places in the world."

"So I've always heard," she remarked. "You must bring me back some picture postcards of the place."

Jim looked at her suspiciously.

"What are you driving at, Judy?" he said. "The tone of your last remark was very peculiar."

"Sorry about that," she answered. "I was really thinking of something else. What a wonderful judge of character Captain Blackett is."

"Bill! Judge of character! I don't know that I've ever noticed it particularly."

"I mean when he called you a fool. Do give me a match, will you?"

"Not a match do you get until you tell me what you're driving at."

"Well—you must be one. Do you really imagine, Jim Maitland, that I'm going to sit at home here while you and that snoring monstrosity go gallivanting off on a perfectly priceless trip like this which you'd never have heard about but for me. Not so, my lad: you guess again."

"But, Judy," he said feebly. "My dear—think of the fever. And the discomfort. And there may be something in Blackett's story after all," he added as a brilliant afterthought.

"Cut it out," she said calmly. "Where Percy the poop can go—I can go. It's my map, and as a great favour I'll allow you to come with me. Now give me a match."

He still hesitated.

"Judy," he said seriously, "I know it is your map. I know you have every right to take up the position you have. But—honestly, I don't think you quite realise what you're letting yourself in for. The risk of fever is not an imaginary one: that part of the world simply reeks of it. Further there's going to be very real danger from the gentlemen we've been up against to-night. I don't think you ought to come."

"I'm still waiting for that match," she reminded him. "Now, look here, Jim," she went on when her cigarette was alight, "whatever you say, I'm coming. You may remember that conversation we had the first time we met concerning the youth of the present day. Well, now that they've killed Arthur this is my show. And any risks that you run I'm going to run too. Which ultimatum having been delivered the young maiden intimated her intention of retiring. Percy—you horror—wake up."

"Did anybody speak to me?" grunted Percy sleepily.

"Wake up, you fat-headed ass. I want to go home."

"All right, my loved one. Have you kissed James good night?"

And then occurred an amazing phenomenon. For Judy Draycott, usually one of the most self-possessed of girls, began to blush. Furious with herself, she blushed still more. And Percy howled with joy.

"My invariable present is an order up to five bob on Woolworths," he said dodging rapidly to the door. "Five minutes, my children—and don't forget to turn off the light in the passage when you leave."

"You unspeakable ass—get out," roared Jim, trying not to laugh.

"I go, James. But that is not the way mother taught me to address a chaperon."

"I really must apologise for him, Judy," said Jim, as Percy went down the stairs. "He becomes more of a half-wit daily."

He was holding the door open for her as he spoke, and for a while she looked at him in silence. Then she suddenly smiled.

"Are all your family half-wits?" she said softly, and a moment later he was alone.

CHAPTER VIII

SPEED, as Jim Maitland had said, was the vital thing. He had not the heart to try and dissuade Judy Draycott from coming: nor, as he frankly admitted to himself, had he the ability to. But she was going to complicate things. With her as a member of the party, it was essential to avoid a scrap, if it was humanly possible. And as he saw the thing a scrap would inevitably occur as soon as the other people landed on the island, when they would immediately discover that their map was wrong. Therefore it followed that if gun work was to be avoided they must be away before Dresler and his gang got there.

To Bill Blackett's fanciful monsters he attached no importance whatever. He knew sailors and their stories of old: moreover the Paquinetta mystery had taken place twenty-four years ago. And in a quarter of a century things grow in the imagination. What was worrying him, and what continued to worry him all the way across to Rio was how long it was going to take them to find the spot where, according to the map, the stuff was buried. It was easy to mark the spot on the map itself—he had already done so and marked it B. But the difficulty was going to be to find that place on the ground. According to Bill Blackett it was right in the middle of the forest, so how were they going to get their compass bearings? Had the place been open country the thing would have been easy. All that would have been necessary would have been to walk along the line from A to C till a point was reached where the hill lay north-east. But in dense forest the matter became much more difficult. And his fear was that it might take a considerable time before they marked it down, and even then they would have to allow for it being only approximately accurate. He felt that a week at least would be necessary to decide whether there was anything there or not. Could he rely on a week?

So far as he knew they had slipped out of England unnoticed. But he was far too old a campaigner to place any reliance on the fact. There had been questions of visas, and visits to consuls for Percy and the girl, and he was under no delusions as to the spying capabilities of the other side. He could only hope for the best, but he took no account of it in his plans. But of one thing he did feel tolerably certain; there was no one actually on board he had to worry about. The boat carried nothing but first-class passengers and was very empty. And with the help of the doctor and the purser he soon had the two or three possibilities satisfactorily accounted for.

His idea was simple, and had been arrived at after talking it over with Bill Blackett. It appeared from what the sailor told him that an eccentric Brazilian

had had built to his own design a fifty-ton motor-boat. Of amorous disposition he had used her in the past to accommodate a series of lady friends on week-end trips in the vicinity of Rio. Unfortunately, however, the husband of one of them, viewing this innocent pastime with displeasure, had shot the proud owner dead as he disembarked on the Monday morning. With the result that the boat was sold by the executors to a firm of local shipbuilders, who were always prepared to hire her out for any length of time. There was ample room on board for their party, and she was quite big enough for the trip.

On one point, however, Blackett was very insistent.

"Not a word, Mr. Maitland, as to our destination. Apart altogether from the fact that we don't want it talked about, you'll never get a man to work her if it is known where we're bound for. We'll fuel her right up—if necessary we can get some more at Santos—and merely say that we're going a trip along the coast."

The first hitch occurred the day they arrived in Rio—the motor-boat was in dry dock being repaired. And when Bill Blackett reported the fact to Jim, for a time he thought of cancelling his plan, and trying to get another craft. But after having inspected her, and realised how ideally suitable she was for the purpose, he adopted the only possible method in South America of getting things done quickly. They said it would take a week, so he offered a thousand milreis for every day less than seven that the work was completed in. It cost him four thousand milreis but he felt it was money well spent.

And during the three days they stayed at the Gloria they did the well-known trips to pass the time. Corcavado, with the gigantic half-completed Christ on the summit: Sugar Loaf Hill by the aerial rope-way: Capacabana with its daily toll of drowned bathers due to the terrific undertow. To Judy Draycott the time passed all too quickly, and had it not been for his anxiety to lose not a second more than was necessary Jim would have felt the same. For the girl, besides possessing an intense love of beauty, had in her the genuine explorer's spirit. It was always the case with her of wanting to know what was on the other side of the mountain. The great blue and green butterflies drifting lazily through the dappled sunshine of trees splashed with scarlet and mauve flowers entranced her: what spoilt it was that just behind them was a large motor-car on a first-class road.

"What a marvellous life you've led, Jim," she said. "Think of this—this breathless beauty—away from towns, away from humans. Your own—not shared by anybody: not spoilt by anybody. And then to go on and find it again and again till you come to the end."

"The end!" He began to quote:—

"'Have ever you stood where the silences brood,

And vast the horizons begin,

At the dawn of the day to behold far away

The goal you would strive for and win?'"

And then, to his delight she took him up:—

"'Yet, ah! in the night when you gain to the height,

With the vast pool of heaven star-spawned,

Afar and agleam, like a valley of dream

Still mocks you a Land of Beyond.'"

"So you like him too, do you?" he said. "I'm glad. He writes the stuff that rings true does Robert Service."

"If you would wish in time for lunch to be, sah, I would suggest ascension of automobile."

The driver's voice, ingratiating, conciliatory, cut in on them, and Jim laughed.

"Marching orders, Judy. His goal is a stomach filled with garlic."

But they were both strangely silent as they drove back.

It was during the afternoon of the last day that they discovered that their hopes of a clear week on the island were not likely to be realised. Bill Blackett, who had spent the morning urging on the work on the boat, arrived when they were half-way through lunch.

"We'll get off to-morrow," he announced, "and its just as well we should."

"Anything happened, Bill?" said the other.

"It may be nothing. Have you ever heard of Bully McIntyre?"

"Can't say I have," said Jim.

"Well, he's heard of you. And he knows you're here. Bully McIntyre has been busy all his life on this coast, and his name is about right. He holds a master's ticket, and there is no denying he's a good seaman. But he's a swine. He doesn't know me, but I once had him pointed out to me, and he's not a man you'll forget in a hurry. Anyway he was down there near the docks this morning having a drink with a couple of dagos. And I suddenly heard your name mentioned. So I shifted along a bit and listened as well as I could. I couldn't

hear much, but I distinctly caught the word 'Delay.' It may mean nothing, but I thought I'd better mention it."

"Quite right, Bill," said Jim thoughtfully. "When is the next boat in from England?"

"Day after to-morrow," answered the other. "If they come by her, it only gives us one day's start."

"Is this fellow McIntyre the sort of man they might get hold of to run the show for them?"

"Just the sort," said the sailor. "He fears nothing on earth, and he knows this coast backwards. I'll make a few enquiries this afternoon, and find out if he's chartered anything."

"Do," said Jim. "And another thing, too. Put the men, who are working on the boat, wise to the possibility that she may be tampered with, and let them know that whatever the cause may be there's no money unless she's fit to put to sea."

"What are you doing for the rest of the day?"

"I'm going to finish up the grub side. Ordering enough for a fortnight."

"Well, I needn't tell you to keep your eyes skinned," grunted the sailor. "But I'll feel easier when we're away."

"But what could they do?" asked Judy Draycott.

"This ain't London, Miss," said Blackett. "A powerful lot of funny things can happen in these parts. Well, I'll go and find out what I can."

He stumped out of the dining-room, and Jim frowned thoughtfully.

"I always thought Dresler must have someone at this end," he said. "But I wonder how they've got on to me. However there's nothing for it but to keep one's eyes skinned, as Bill said. No trotting round by yourself, young Percy. If they know me, they probably know you. So you stick close to uncle this afternoon."

It was on the way back from the store where they had laid in provisions, that the incident occurred which made Jim realise that there were brains in the opposition. A crude attempt with a knife would not have surprised him, and it was for something of that sort that he was prepared. But the actual ruse when it came was so much more artistic that even he was very nearly caught.

Percy was on the outside of the pavement, with Judy in the middle. And they were just turning into the main boulevard when a girl brushed past them. As

she came abreast she seemed to lurch against Percy, and, promptly, with a cry of pain, she collapsed into the gutter. He instinctively turned to help her, and the next moment he found himself almost flung into a passing taxi by Jim.

"Damn it all, old lad," he expostulated feebly as the car drove off, "the wretched filly has hurt herself."

"Sorry, Judy," said Jim as she stared at him in amazement. "They very nearly had me that time. Of course, the whole thing was done on purpose. The girl wasn't hurt at all."

"Even so," remarked Percy, "I don't see why I shouldn't have helped the little darling out of the gutter. She was rather a peach."

"Because then she would have pretended to be hurt. She would have sworn you banged into her and knocked her down. Within two minutes in this town an ambulance would have been on the spot. And if you'd been with her then, you'd have been involved in all sorts of complications. Never touch anybody who has had an accident here: leave them alone, and wait for an ambulance."

"You think the whole thing was done on purpose?" cried Judy.

"I do," said Jim. "Just to cause delay. Percy might have found himself tied up in formalities for days."

They found Blackett waiting for them at the hotel, with a serious look on his face.

"I've found out a good deal," he said gravely. "And we've got to get a move on. You remember that white yacht we noticed as we came in, lying at anchor not far from the old cruiser? Well—that's what we're up against. She belongs to a millionaire here called Miguel, and Bully is getting her ready for sea by the day after to-morrow."

"That means they are coming by the next mail boat," remarked Jim. "A pity: I'd hoped for a bit longer. How's our work going?"

"Practically finished. Get off early to-morrow if the food is all fixed up."

"That's done. Who is this man Miguel, Bill?"

"He rolls in money, and nobody seems to know how he made it. Of course, the whole thing may be a coincidence, but I don't think so."

"No more do I," said Jim grimly, staring at a card a page had just handed him.

DON SILVESTRE MIGUEL

"Here is the gentleman himself."

A swarthy-looking individual, who might have stepped straight off the operatic stage had followed hard on the boy's heels. He bowed magnificently to Judy: then, turning to Jim, he enquired: "Mr. Maitland?"

"My name is Maitland," said Jim curtly.

"It is an honour, Mr. Maitland, to have you again in our country," he declared. "May I be permitted to crave an introduction to your friends?"

Jim complied, even more curtly. Then——

"May I ask to what I owe the pleasure of this visit, Don Miguel?"

"A desire for a little private conversation with you, Mr. Maitland. Could we, perhaps..."

He glanced at the others significantly, and Jim turned to the girl.

"I shan't be long, Judy. Do you mind waiting here with Percy? Don't leave the hotel. Come this way, Don Miguel."

He led him to two chairs in the corner of the lounge.

"It would be waste of time, Mr. Maitland," began the Brazilian, "to pretend that I do not know the object of your visit here. And it is on that subject that I would like a few words with you."

"May I ask how you discovered the supposed object of my visit?"

"Certainly: I propose to put all my cards on the table. Some few months ago it came to my knowledge from a source which I considered reliable, that there was a more reasonable likelihood of the story of the buried treasure in Lone Tree Island being correct. Since you, of course, must know the story I need say no more. I was sufficiently interested to make further enquiries, and what I learned confirmed my opinion. A map was in existence, which was in the possession of a sailor who was rapidly drinking himself to death, and I determined to obtain that map. Then an unexpected thing happened, with the details of which I will not bore you. But to cut a long story short the sailor disappeared. He was in Bahia: then suddenly he vanished.

"I made enquiries, and after a great deal of trouble I traced him to Buenos Aires. There again I lost the trail for a while, though the man was an easy one to get information about. He was a gentleman, I may say, who had come down in the world through drink, and therefore was rather a marked figure in the

company he frequented. At last I got on to him again: he was in Monte Video. And he was dying. Moreover I discovered by methods into which we—ah!—need not enter that he was speaking the truth when he told me that he had given the map away, and did not know the name of the man he had given it to."

Don Miguel drew an immense handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead.

"Annoying, Mr. Maitland, as you will agree. To have run the man at last to earth and then find all one's trouble wasted was a bore. But I have sources of information at my disposal, which caused me not to give up hope, even though I left for Uruguay and returned here. And sure enough, some weeks after the man's death I received word that a certain young Englishman had been dining in the Jockey Club in Buenos Aires one evening, and drunk a little freely. Also he had talked a little freely. And again to cut a long story short it was obvious that this young Englishman was the man to whom the sailor had given the map. I, at once, left for the Argentine, only to find that I had again missed my man: he had left a week previously for England. I trust I am not boring you: you possibly know all this already."

"No: I don't," said Jim. "You are filling in one or two gaps very nicely."

"As I said, I am putting all my cards on the table," said the Brazilian. "To continue, I immediately got into communication with some friends of mine in England, giving them the name of the young man, and the boat he was travelling in."

"Thank you," said Jim shortly. "I know what happened then. They killed him."

The Brazilian waved a deprecating hand.

"Deplorable, Mr. Maitland, deplorable. I received a cable in code informing me of the fact. And—er—of other facts too."

"You interest me profoundly," murmured Jim. "What other facts do you allude to?"

Don Miguel lit a cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke before replying.

"I do not wish to flatter you unduly, Mr. Maitland," he remarked, "but your name is one that is fairly widely known. And when I heard from my friends in London that you had come into the picture it caused me a certain shock. True, they seemed to think that it was purely accidental, and at that I had to leave it. But when I discovered you were actually here, and in addition were with the sister of the young man who was so unfortunately shot, I realised at once that it was not accidental."

"Your reasoning is most profound," Jim assured him.

"And so, Mr. Maitland, we come to the point. What are we going to do about it?"

"Do about what?"

"I will be brief, as one busy man to another. Are we going into this thing together, or against one another?"

Jim, in his turn, lit a cigarette.

"May I ask by what right you come into it at all?" he asked. "The map belonged to young Draycott, and was stolen from him. In addition to that he was killed."

"My dear Mr. Maitland," said the other contemptuously, "are we members of some religious order that we talk about right? And if it comes to that, it was originally stolen by the sailor."

"With that I am not concerned in the slightest," said Jim. "It was given to Arthur Draycott, and further back than that I do not propose to go."

"Am I to take it then that you refuse my offer?"

"I wasn't aware you had made one."

"I suggest to you that you should cancel your proposed trip in the motor-boat and come in with us. My friends arrive the day after to-morrow: we leave in the evening. What do you say?"

"Why such altruism, Don Miguel?" asked Jim quietly.

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"If my information is correct there will be plenty for all of us," he remarked. "And since I am quite prepared to admit that Miss Draycott has a right to her share why should we not join forces?"

For a while Jim stared at him as if pondering whether to accept the proposal. Not that he had the slightest intention of doing so—he trusted Don Silvestre Miguel as far as the length of his foot—but he had to decide what line to take with him. The man was wealthy and unscrupulous, and the combination was a formidable one anywhere. In South America, where money means everything, it was doubly so.

"Suppose I fall in with your suggestion," he remarked at length, "what guarantee have I, Don Miguel, that your friends will be agreeable?"

The other leaned forward in his chair.

"I have been in wireless communication with them, Mr. Maitland," he said. "And I may say that it is their idea as much as mine. Come, come: we are men of the world. What is the use of your going in comparative discomfort when I can offer you the luxury of my yacht? We are bound to meet at the island in any case, so why not let us go there together?"

"The only objection to your idea," said Jim, "is the question of Miss Draycott. She knows that your friends were responsible for her brother's death, and somewhat naturally she would not relish being forced to meet them daily."

"Then leave her here, Mr. Maitland. You can look after her interests."

"You don't know the young lady, I'm afraid." remarked Jim, with a smile. "She has a very determined character. See here, Don Miguel,"—he seemed to have arrived at a sudden decision—"I will talk to her about the matter. I have, between ourselves, been trying to find an excuse to prevent her going. From what I hear, the place is most unhealthy, and not at all suitable for a woman. I can say that a hitch has occurred over our own boat, and tell her your alternative."

The Brazilian looked at him searchingly, but Jim Maitland had not played poker in most corners of the globe for nothing.

"Will you do so at once?" he demanded.

"My dear sir, how can I possibly get up straight from a conversation with you, and tell her that our boat has failed?"

Jim gazed at him blandly, and the other nodded his head.

"True," he acknowledged, "true."

"It must be done this evening," continued Jim. "After dinner perhaps."

"And when shall I know your answer?"

"As soon as that incalculable time has elapsed in which it takes a woman to make up her mind," answered Jim, and Don Miguel rose.

"Very good, Mr. Maitland: we will leave it at that."

He picked up the card which Jim had laid on the table and scribbled on it.

"My telephone number," he remarked. "I shall hope to hear from you as soon as possible."

Jim watched him cross the lounge, and leave the hotel, bowing ceremoniously to Judy as he passed. Then he joined his cousin and the girl.

"Where's Bill?" he asked.

"Gone down to the boat again," said Percy. "What did that bandit want?"

He told them briefly.

"But you aren't dreaming of doing it, are you, Jim?" cried the girl.

"I am not," said Jim. "But I had to fob him off with something. If I'd given him a flat refusal we'd never have got off to-morrow. As it is it's not going to be plain sailing, though I think I've fooled him all right."

"Are you afraid he may tinker with the boat?" asked Percy.

"My dear lad, a man with his length of purse in this country can do anything. I wish to heaven we could get away to-night. And here's Bill returning with a face like a boot."

"They're getting at us, Mr. Maitland," cried the sailor as he sat down. "That old rascal Antonio, who is one of the part owners of the boat has just broken it to me. Somebody has spread it around that we're going to Lone Tree Island, and not a man will sail with us. Say they'd rather be sacked than go to such a place."

"Hell!" said Jim. "That just about puts the lid on, Bill. What the devil are we going to do? Can't you find anybody who will volunteer?"

The sailor shrugged his shoulders.

"You know what these dagos are," he said. "I can offer double wages, but I'm doubtful of it being much use."

"What do you want a man for?" demanded Percy.

"To run the motor, you ass," said Jim.

"Less of your natural history references, James," remarked his cousin. "I was about to say that I, in consideration of receiving several blood-red rubies as my share of the swag, will undertake that side of the performance."

"But can you, Percy dear?" cried the girl.

"Can I run that darned motor?" snorted Percy. "Great heavens, woman, what do you take me for? I could run it in my sleep."

"By Jove! old boy," said Jim quietly, "one up to you. I'd forgotten you were a motor fan. That's settled that, Bill. Now they're still carrying on with the work, aren't they?"

The sailor nodded.

"Yes. I told them to finish it."

"And now the point that arises is how to slip away. That blighter Miguel is bound to be keeping the boat under observation."

"We've got to chance that," said Blackett. "And my suggestion is this. Instead of waiting till dawn to-morrow, we'll get away as soon after midnight as possible. There is a night watchman on the yard who's a pal of mine, and there will be no trouble about getting in. I'll let Antonio think that we're giving up the trip as we can't get a mechanic, and we'll just have to trust to luck."

Jim shook his head.

"Not good enough, Bill. I agree over getting her away under cover of darkness, but we've got to plant 'em on a false trail. Otherwise there's going to be knife work. You and young Percy will have to get her ready, while Miss Draycott and I draw them off. Let's all go down there now, and we'll start the good work. You perceive, don't you, one of our friends—that sallow-looking swab in the corner. He's been watching us like a lynx."

He ordered the concierge in a loud tone to obtain a taxi, and with no effort at concealment told the driver to go to the boat yard.

"That," he remarked as he got in, "will save our friend following too close on our heels. Though I don't suppose he's the only one."

Having arrived he sent for Antonio and, in fluent Brazilian, he told him exactly what he thought of his firm, himself, and his workmen. And during the telling a couple of men drew closer and closer.

"However," he wound up, "since your hands are too cowardly to come with us there is nothing more to be said. I shall not require your boat, having found another method of getting to my destination—Don Miguel's yacht. Bill," he ordered, "get on board. And you too, Percy. And stay there," he added in an undertone.

"All the kit and stores," he relapsed into angry Brazilian, "have to be packed up, just because there isn't a man with guts in the place."

"I shall chance it about eleven o'clock, Bill," he muttered. "Be ready for us. You can leave the boat for a bit, if they seem to be getting suspicious, but get everything fixed by then. I'm going back to the hotel to continue the good work."

Still fuming he helped Judy into the taxi, and gave the address.

"Your rôle, Judy," he said, as they drove off, "is a flat refusal to go by the yacht. You're going to remain here in Rio until our return. Don't forget your part for an instant: anyone may be a spy. But with a little bit of luck we may bluff 'em."

"Do you think he really intended to take us in his yacht?" said the girl.

"Not a hope," laughed Jim. "We should have been left high and dry here. You can bet they haven't taken all this trouble in order to share anything that may be there with a single unnecessary person."

"Won't it be marvellous if we do find something."

"Don't build on it, Judy," he warned. "Though I honestly am quite hopeful. Neither Miguel nor Dresler strike me as gentlemen who waste time or money. Here's the hotel: play up for all you're worth."

And play up she did to the vast edification of the sallow-faced gentleman who reappeared mysteriously from nowhere. No power on earth would induce her to go on Don Miguel's yacht, and if Jim was unable to get anyone to man the boat she would remain in Rio. And finally with a shrug of his shoulders he strolled away to the bar, calling high heaven to witness on the unreasonableness of woman. Then he instructed the hall porter to get Don Miguel on the telephone for him, and to him he spoke at length. He wondered who could have given his destination away: so did Don Miguel. Anyway it settled things, and he would accompany Don Miguel in his yacht, at which the Brazilian professed himself overjoyed. And finally he left the box with the comforting reflection that if the bluff had failed it was not for want of lying.

They had dinner, after which there was nothing to do but sit and wait. The sallow-faced man had gone, but there were several men in the lounge any one of whom might have been his successor. They had decided on their plan, and time seemed to drag interminably. At ten o'clock Judy rose from her chair.

"Jim," she said irritably, "it's insufferably hot. Can't we take a car and go somewhere before going to bed?"

He stifled a yawn.

"Bit late, Judy, isn't it?" he remarked doubtfully.

"I can't help it: I'll never sleep. Let's drive out to that place where they bathe."

"Capacabana!" His expression was resigned. "All right."

He beckoned to a page.

"Tell the hall porter to get me a taxi. I want to go for a run to Capacabana."

The boy gave the message, and returned shortly after to say the car was waiting.

And it was not until they were half-way to their destination that Jim turned to the girl.

"A little bit too clever, Judy," he said in a low voice, "or rather, not quite clever enough. But it's going to complicate things. This driver is one of them."

"How do you know?"

"At about a quarter to ten I had a look at the taxi rank opposite the hotel. This car was in front. Two taxis were ordered between then and ten o'clock when we got this one. Why did he let two other men take the jobs?"

"What are you going to do?"

"You'll see in a moment," he said. "But it's a lucky thing all taxis here are open cars."

He gave an order in Brazilian to the driver.

"I've told him to drive right out to the end beyond the hotel," he told the girl. "And when we get there I will show you a little trick of my own."

The lights grew fewer and farther between, and at length ceased altogether. And suddenly Jim told the man to stop. In his hand he held a short bar which he was balancing carefully. She watched him fascinated, as, all in a single movement, he rose and hit the driver one blow on the nape of the neck. And the driver collapsed like a log on the floor of the car.

"Not everybody's weapon," said Jim calmly, as he rummaged under the seat for some rope. "It's very easy to kill a man with it unless you're careful. Now this sportsman will sleep peacefully for about four hours, but in case he wakes sooner we may just as well truss him up."

He pulled out a length of cord evidently used for baggage, and tied the unconscious driver up deftly. Then he placed him gently in the ditch, and put a hundred milreis note in his pocket. After which he jumped into the driving-seat.

"It's neck or nothing, Judy," he said, as he turned the car round. "We'd never have got away with that lad at the wheel. And now I think we may, if luck is with us."

They swung back towards Rio, with Jim crouching over the wheel to conceal his height. To reach the docks they had to go through the main street, and it was there that the danger lay, for the police in the Avenida Rio Branco are an extremely capable body of men. But fortune was with them: nobody held up the car, and at a few minutes to eleven he pulled up outside Antonio's boat yard.

The place looked dark and deserted, but not until he had taken a careful look round did Jim allow the girl to get out of the car. Piles of wood and barrels afforded admirable hiding-places for would-be watchers, and he dared take no risks with Judy. At last he was satisfied, and taking her by the arm he rushed her across to the entrance.

Bill Blackett had been as good as his word: it was open. And still holding her arm he piloted her inside. The boat lay some twenty yards ahead of them and he was making straight for it when his eye caught a movement near a big coil of rope on his right. Instantly he thrust Judy behind him, and, in a low voice called out something in Brazilian.

It was the only chance, and he took it. If the mover was Bill or Percy it did not matter: if he was one of the opposition he might, in the darkness, think Jim was one of his friends. And the ruse succeeded: a figure rose and came towards him. He waited tensely: on the look-out at any moment for a knife to be thrown.

He spoke again, and the man answered.

"Is that you, Pedro?"

And a fraction of a second too late he realised it was not. He opened his mouth to shout, but no sound came. Jim's vice-like grip closed on his throat, and he felt himself picked up like a child.

"Run, Judy, run for the boat," Jim muttered. "There are others about."

He dragged the man with him, and hauled him on board gurgling and spluttering. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a light in an adjoining shed, and heard the sound of voices: the rest of the bunch were playing cards. And then from in front of him he heard the girl give a little cry. She was in the saloon which was lit by a solitary candle. And trussed up in two chairs like a pair of gagged mummies were Percy and Bill Blackett.

"Not a sound," whispered Jim imperatively. "It's our only hope. Get a knife out of the drawer and cut 'em loose. Bill first."

He dared not relax his grip for an instant on his own man for fear he would shout, and in a fever of impatience he watched the girl slashing at the rope until Bill Blackett was free.

"Cast her off, Bill," he ordered, "from the boat. It doesn't matter if we lose the ropes. Then fend her off from the side."

"I get you," grunted the sailor, sprinting on deck.

"Percy—stand by the motor. But for the love of Allah don't start it until I tell you."

His cousin nodded and he turned to the girl.

"Quick, Judy—I must go and help Bill. Take my handkerchief from my pocket and cram it into this swab's mouth with the handle of the knife. Mind your fingers, for he'll bite. Good. Now some of that rope. Can you make a running noose? Splendid girl. Slip it round that elbow. That's right: I can manage now."

He hauled the rope tight, lashing the man's arms behind his back: then he attended to his knees. And finally he wound the table-cloth round his head, and threw him into one of the off shore cabins.

"Stay here, Judy. On no account come on deck."

He vanished silently, almost colliding with Bill Blackett.

"She's cast off," said the sailor, "and if you can take one boat hook aft I'll go forrard with the other."

"We want to get her out just far enough for them not to be able to jump, Bill," he said, and the other nodded.

The card game was apparently still in progress, as they got on deck, and an angry altercation was taking place, which was all to the good. But the motor was bound to make too much noise for any quarrel to drown, and Jim realised, only too clearly, that it was touch and go. At length they got her out about six feet, so that she had a clear run for the open water. It was then or never, and he beckoned to Bill.

"Tell Percy to start up," he ordered, "and slip her into half-speed at once, without waiting for any signal. I'll steer."

He waited tensely at the wheel, and suddenly, with a snort, the motor hummed into life. Came instant silence from the shed: then a rush of cursing men to the side of the wharf. Ten yards: twenty, and a knife quivered in the deck at his feet. Thirty: forty—they'd done it, and he grinned happily.

"How did they get you, Bill?" he sung out to Blackett, who was fixing the lights.

"About a dozen of 'em swarmed on board, and caught us napping," answered the other.

And it was at that moment that Percy popped his head up.

"I say, dear old lad," he remarked, "everything is fearfully jolly and all that, but I suppose you know it's my cabin you have bunged little bright eyes into."

"Good Lord!" cried Jim, "I'd forgotten all about him. Unlash the blighter, and send him up on deck."

"Now, you swab," he said, as the man appeared shaking with fright. "Can you swim?"

Not a yard, he protested, with chattering teeth. Since childhood he had had a horror of water.

"What the devil are we to do with him, Bill?" said Jim.

"Let him do the washing up," answered the sailor. "There's a cubby-hole aft he can doss down in."

"Take him with us? Yes: I suppose we must. If the man can't swim, we can hardly throw him overboard."

He turned to him and spoke in Brazilian.

"You're coming with us, do you understand. And you'll have to make yourself generally useful. For if I have the smallest trouble with you I'll trail you astern at the end of a rope as bait for sharks."

CHAPTER IX

THEY sighted Lone Tree Island at dawn on the second day, and as they drew nearer Blackett searched the shore anxiously with his glasses. It was the northern end they were approaching, and his memory of the place was a little rusty. The beach which lay at the foot of the hill was guarded by a reef of rocks, and the line of surf looked unbroken. But somewhere there was a gap, and it was for that he was making. They had decided that it would be fatal to use the southern anchorage: they would see quite enough of the opposition without lying alongside them. And from what he remembered the gap was wide enough to let their boat through but would prove impossible for the yacht.

At last they saw it, and Jim looked at him doubtfully. It was about ten yards across, and at each edge the swell broke lazily on vicious black rocks. Beyond it, some two hundred yards away, was the shore, and the intervening water was as calm as a lake. An ideal harbour; anything but an ideal entrance.

They nosed in closer going dead slow, and the nearer they got the nastier it looked. Blackett was at the wheel: Jim was up in the bows peering into the water ahead.

"If we bump, go all out, Percy," he said. "We'll have to beach her."

And to this day Bill Blackett swears the boat must have had an indiarubber bottom.

"She bounced twice and then skidded," he affirms, "but she got through."

After which the crew had breakfast, and discussed the plan of campaign.

"We can presumably rely on having to-day undisturbed," said Jim. "And there is a possibility of to-morrow also. They can't arrive until to-night, and they won't know until it's light that they've got a useless map. Then they've got to find us. So that if we're away from here by dawn to-morrow we may get an extra twelve hours. But that is the absolute maximum. Wherefore, chaps, we've got to get a move on."

And so, a quarter of an hour later they rowed ashore in the dinghy leaving the Brazilian to amuse himself on board. Each of them carried a revolver and a heavy stick, and Jim had a rucksack strapped on his shoulders, in which was the food for lunch. And having beached the dinghy they started the climb.

The northern side of the hill was practically bare of any vegetation. For the first two or three hundred feet a few stunted shrubs grew sparsely: above that a thin brown weed, which might by courtesy have been called grass, stretched up

to the summit. The slope was steep, but easy, and since the sun as yet had but little heat they made the top without difficulty.

"Seems rum to be back here after all these years," said the sailor. "If anyone had offered me a hundred pounds to sixpence against it I wouldn't have taken it."

Below them lay the swampy half of the island. A thick mist covered it eddying sluggishly into the giant trees which came down to the edge of the marsh land and there stopped abruptly. A faint southerly breeze was blowing, and it carried to their nostrils that strange unmistakable scent of rotting vegetation which sends the man who knows to his medicine-chest for quinine twice daily. Fever—the place stank of it, as Bill Blackett had said in London.

Surrounding the swamp on three sides was higher ground: on the fourth lay the sea. Their own vantage point was the highest in the island, rising from the low foothills that formed the northern end. And due west, some two miles away there stood the Lone Tree. It seemed to have escaped from the forest which comprised the western half, and to be standing like a solitary sentinel in front of an army that had halted a few hundred yards away. And Jim, as he looked at that dense jungle, felt his heart sink. He alone of the party knew from past experience the difficulties of cutting a path through undergrowth of that sort, and keeping any sort of direction. However he said nothing and produced his compass.

"We'll take a bearing due south-west from here," he explained, "and see if it passes through any conspicuous spot which we can remember when we get to the Lone Tree. Then when we get the line between C and A from there, we may get an approximate position."

He let the compass settle, and then prolonged the line by laying his stick on the ground.

"It's pointing straight at that huge mass of scarlet flowers," cried Judy.

"Come on," he said abruptly. "Let's get to the Lone Tree."

The mist was slowly clearing from the swamp, showing glimpses of vivid green interspersed with dull brown ground.

"Lord! what a death trap," he exclaimed involuntarily, and at that moment Bill Blackett clutched his arm.

"Look," he muttered, "at that bit of green half-left of you."

He was staring through his glasses, and Jim focussed his own. The mist was still swirling in thin wisps over the marsh, but it suddenly lifted for a few

seconds from the spot which the sailor had pointed to. And, quite distinctly, he saw something heaving and struggling in the green slime. Then all was still: whatever it was had gone under. But still he kept his glasses fixed. What was that moving on the brown ground which flanked the green? There were two, three, half a dozen.... And then the mist came down again, blotting out everything.

"Is that what happened to the crew of the Paquinetta?" said Blackett sombrely. "Anyway, what was it, Mr. Maitland?"

Jim glanced at him quickly: evidently he had not seen the others.

"Some animal caught in the bog," he said shortly. "It often happens, even on Dartmoor, or in the New Forest. Let's get a move on."

But half-way to the Lone Tree he paused and adjusted his glasses once again. The mist had completely gone: the swamp lay open below them. But though he scanned it from end to end no living thing stirred. Only the faint reek of it rose poisonous to heaven.

It was getting hot when they reached the Lone Tree, and a haze was already shimmering over the forest. But it was not enough to prevent them picking up the cairn of stones on the high ground at the south of the island. And having done so for a moment or two they all stood silent staring at one another. For the line to the cairn passed directly through the centre of the great patch of scarlet flowers they had picked up from the hill.

"Why we've only got to walk till we find it," cried Judy, "and we've got the spot."

"Not quite so easy as it sounds, Judy," said Jim. "In the first place we've got to keep our direction going through the undergrowth, when we shan't be able to see the flowers; and in the second place the flowers look very different when looked at from where we are now, to what they will when we're standing underneath them. What's up, Bill?"

The sailor drew him on one side.

"For God's sake, Mr. Maitland," he said in a low voice, "chuck it. It's not worth it. Those flowers never grew there naturally: why, there's not another patch that you can see. They have been planted, I tell you—planted as an ornament, as a decoration."

"Decoration! For what?"

"For what is underneath them. There, in the forest."

"You're talking rot, Bill," said Jim curtly, though the strangeness of that one flaming splash of colour had not escaped him. And yet the thing was absurd: the sailor was a superstitious ass. The flower looked like the ordinary scarlet hibiscus, as common in the tropics as the daisy is at home. It was just coincidence, and lucky coincidence that this great square of them should mark the spot they wanted. So he argued to himself, cursing Bill mentally for having made such an argument necessary.

He took the compass bearing on the cairn of stones, and found it was south-south-west: then he gave the order to march.

"I'll lead," he said. "Then Judy after me. Bill—you bring up the rear. And watch for snakes every step you take."

He calculated that the distance was about three miles, and it soon became obvious that they would never do it that day. The heat once they left the open became well-nigh unbearable: the undergrowth in places seemed like a solid wall. Huge lianas—the size of a ship's cable—hung in great festoons from the trees; rank weeds and tropical ferns with tendrils the size of a man's arm blocked the way, and had to be slashed at with knives to afford a passage. In places they were almost in darkness, so thick was the foliage above: then they would stumble into a patch of sunlight where gorgeous humming birds flitted like exquisite coloured jewels above their heads.

The sweat poured off them, and at the end of an hour Jim made out that they had blazed a trail for about half a mile. But the exertion had been terrific, and the girl, though she made no complaint, was obviously exhausted. Moreover the going was becoming worse as they got deeper in, and reluctantly he called a halt.

"We must take a breather," he said, "or we'll all be cooked. Anyway, Bill," he added with a laugh, "your boy friends you told us about in London haven't used this route."

But there was no answering smile on the sailor's face.

"Maybe not, Mr. Maitland, but that isn't to say they're not here."

"You're a darned old optimist, aren't you?" said Jim, lighting a cigarette. "But if they are, I wish we could rope 'em in to do a job of work."

For half an hour they sat there in the steamy heat. Save for the hum of a myriad insects the silence was complete. Once in the distance they heard the raucous screech of a parrot, but, save for that, everything was still. And then

quite suddenly there came a sound which brought them all to their feet listening intently.

It seemed to come from a long way off, and yet, though faint, it was quite distinct. Clang: clang: clang: it went on monotonously for more than a minute. Then it ceased, and silence settled on them once again.

"It sounded like a bell," said Jim.

"Like a ship's bell," agreed Blackett gravely. "I forget if I told you that the Paquinetta's bell was missing."

"Look here, old sailor," put in Percy, "you're enough to give one the woodle-ums, you know. This darned wood ain't my idea of fun and laughter at the best of times, without having the ghost of a bell chucked in."

Jim was staring thoughtfully in front of him. There was no possibility of a mistake: they had all heard it. Whether it was the Paquinetta's bell or not was immaterial: the vital fact remained that some bell had sounded. Who had rung it? It had pealed methodically, at fixed intervals of time. What agency had been at work?

He began to pace up and down the little clearing. What were those things he had seen in the swamp that morning? Could it be possible that there was something in Blackett's fantastic theory? And if so—what about Judy? He and the two men could take their chance, but the bare idea of the girl falling into the hands of some primitive race of savages made him shudder to contemplate.

There was another point too, which had to be taken into consideration. In this dense forest they were at a terrible disadvantage. The value of a revolver was reduced to nothing, if the target was invisible. At any moment they might be surrounded by things that knew their way about the undergrowth, and though they might account for a few of them the risk was too great while Judy was with them. There was nothing else for it: they must go back. And the fact that, in any event, at their present rate of progress they could not hope to reach their objective that day, afforded Jim an admirable excuse without mentioning his fears.

"We've got to think of some other way of doing this job," he remarked at length. "This is impracticable, especially in this heat. Let's go back to the boat and have a pow-wow."

"But what other way can there be, Jim?" cried the girl.

"That's what we've got to talk over," he said. "But this is no go, Judy. About turn, Bill: you lead the way."

They halted for a time at the top of the hill to get the benefit of the faint breeze that was blowing, and to search the island more thoroughly with glasses. But nothing moved, save the shimmering heat haze which lay like a blanket over the whole place. At last they descended to the beach and pulled out in the dinghy to the boat.

"Think of an iced Pilsener," said Percy, "pouring gently down your throat with two more on the table to follow."

"I hope that ass Lopez has remembered to keep the drinking water in the sea," remarked Jim. "And where is the blighter, anyway."

They tied up the dinghy and climbed on board: the deck was deserted.

"Lopez!" he called: there was no answer.

"Probably asleep," said Percy. "Iced Pilsener," he repeated dreamily: "in long, long glasses. Lovely light yellow beer. And instead of that—tepid water in enamel mugs. Who would be an explorer? James, you would appear to be perturbed. What ails your manly spirit?"

"Lopez is not in the boat," said Jim quietly.

"He's probably gone a little ta-ta ashore," said his cousin. "Got tired of playing alone here, and thought he'd be an explorer too."

"How did he get ashore?" remarked Jim even more quietly.

"In the dinghy," said his cousin, and then paused abruptly. "By Jove! old lad, your meaning penetrates the grey matter. We left the dinghy ashore."

"Exactly," said Jim.

"Are you perfectly certain he's not on board?" cried the girl.

"Perfectly. Bill and I have looked everywhere."

"He must have swum," said Percy.

"He can't swim," answered Jim.

"He said he couldn't, Mr. Maitland," said the sailor. "Maybe he lied. Maybe he didn't relish the thought of meeting his pals at Rio just after he'd let 'em down."

"That's true, Bill," said Jim thoughtfully. "But what about his clothes?"

"In the absence of all our lady passengers he probably dispensed with them," answered Percy.

"I can't say I saw many signs of a naked man rushing wildly about the hillside," said Jim, "but perhaps you're right."

"Well, dash it all, old boy," remarked his cousin, "the blighter can't have jumped two hundred yards, and since, so far as I know, he didn't possess wings he bally well must have swum if he's not here. And personally I'm going to get into my little paddling drawers and do the same. Come on, Judy: let us brave the octopi together."

"You're worried, Jim," said the girl quietly.

"Not a bit, bless you," he cried. "Probably Percy is right. You go and hit the water and I'll join you in a few minutes. Then we'll decide on a plan of campaign."

He watched them go below: then he lit a cigarette thoughtfully. And he had barely taken a puff when Bill Blackett who had gone aft called him.

"What is it, Bill?" he said, joining him.

In silence the sailor pointed to the little sink where the washing up was done. In it lay the fragments of half a dozen broken plates which had been dropped in a pile.

"Well!" said Jim. "What about it?"

"What made him drop them, Mr. Maitland?" remarked the sailor gravely.

"Ask me another, Bill," answered Jim. "Such things have been known to happen before."

"Aye! that's true, and I'm not saying it may not have been an accident." He was stuffing his pipe from a weather-beaten pouch, and Jim waited. "Mr. Maitland," went on the sailor, "clothes or no clothes, the dago was not on shore or we should have seen him from the top of the hill."

"He may have been in the forest, like us," said Jim.

"In the forest," snorted the other. "Not he! I can sling enough of his lingo to have talked with him once or twice. And the Hounds of Hell would not have even got him ashore here, much less into the forest. He was scared stiff of the place."

"Then where the devil is he?" demanded Jim, and Blackett pointed downwards with his thumb.

"Drowned," he said tersely. "That was no accident—the smashing of those plates. He dropped them because he was frightened to death. Something came round the corner of the cuddy, Mr. Maitland, that drove him mad with terror—so mad that it didn't matter whether he could swim or whether he couldn't. He sprang overboard sooner than face it."

Jim stared at the sailor thoughtfully: was it possible he had hit on the right solution? He agreed with him—though he had appeared to differ—that the Brazilian would not have gone ashore of his own free will. And if he had remained in the boat something of the sort must have happened. But what manner of thing could it have been that drove a non-swimmer so crazy with fear that he jumped overboard to certain death by drowning?

The dinghy had not been moved: they had found it in exactly the same spot as they had left it. Therefore this thing must have swum to the boat. And suddenly he noticed a damp patch on the deck just in front of him, which might have been caused by wet feet. Outside the sun would have removed all traces, but this was in the shade. And he pictured to himself the wretched Lopez turning round as a shadow fell on him: the plates falling from his nerveless hands, his scream of fear as he dashed away from the thing that had entered. And then the splash as he hurled himself overboard. Or maybe he had been thrown.

"Well, my dear Watson, I trust you have solved the trifling problem of the Missing Brazilian," remarked Holmes, injecting cocaine into his left ankle.

Percy had joined them in his bathing kit.

"He seems to have been a bit prodigal with the crockery," he went on as he saw the broken plates.

"Look here, Percy," said Jim, "Bill has got a theory. And, 'pon my soul, I'm not certain he isn't right."

"We are prepared to listen," remarked Holmes courteously, injecting cocaine into the right ankle. "But I pray you—be brief. I would fain bathe."

He seated himself on the table and lit a cigarette, while Jim told him the sailor's idea.

"And as I said before," he concluded, "I'm not certain he isn't right."

"Well," said his cousin, who had become serious as he listened, "granted for the moment that he is, what do we do next?"

"If you take my advice, gentlemen," remarked the sailor gravely, "you'll up anchor and leave at once. You know the other name for the island, don't you? I forget the native words, but translated it means the island of no return."

"Seems a bit fatuous to come all this way, and then go all the way back again just because a dago disappears," said Percy.

"It's not because he disappeared," said the sailor stubbornly, "it's because of what made him disappear."

"Steady on, Bill," put in Jim. "We mustn't fall into the error of taking your theory as a proven fact, you know. There are at least two others which would account for things. He might have lied when he said he couldn't swim, and in spite of our not seeing him, he may be on shore now. Or he might suddenly have been taken ill, dropped the plates, rushed to the side and fallen overboard."

"Come on, you lazy blighters: it's glorious in the water."

Judy's voice hailed them from outside.

"Avaunt, child," answered Percy. "A council of state is in session."

"Not a word to her, Percy," muttered Jim, "of this idea of Bill's," and his cousin nodded.

"Naturally not," he said, as the girl poked her head round the corner.

"What are you sitting in this frowsty hole for?" she demanded.

"We'll be along in a minute," said Jim. "We're just having a bit of a pow-wow. Now look here, you fellows," he continued as she disappeared, "I figure it out this way. Let us assume for the moment that you're correct, Bill. Let us assume that something made its way on board that was so terrifying to Lopez that he shot overboard. Now he was unarmed: moreover he was down here. So he was taken by surprise. But we know this something that we are assuming came on board, must have swum. Even if it had come in the dinghy it had to cover two hundred yards of open water. What chance then would it have had if there had been a look-out on deck with a rifle?"

"Not an earthly," agreed Percy, and Bill grunted assent.

"Now two facts stick out a yard," continued Jim. "The first is that under no conceivable circumstances must we run the slightest risk of Judy being put in the same position as Lopez."

He paused and a faint smile came to his lips.

"And the second?" demanded the sailor.

"The second, Bill, is that I am of an inordinately curious disposition. I just wouldn't sleep o' nights for the rest of my life if I didn't find out who rang that bell and why: what lies under the patch of scarlet hibiscus: and a lot of other things."

"You're mad and foolhardy, Mr. Maitland," said the sailor. "How do you propose to do it?"

"Go and have a look," answered Jim with a grin, "leaving you, Bill, armed with the express rifle on guard over Miss Draycott here. Percy can please himself. He can either stop here with you, or he can come with me."

"It's madness," said the sailor once again. "Utter madness."

"Can't help it, old lad: I've always been mad. Well, Percy, what about you? For the shore after lunch, or not?"

"You bet your life I'm for the shore," said his cousin. "But what exactly are you intending to do? Carry on from where we left off this morning?"

Jim shook his head.

"No," he answered. "We started off on a false trail there. I propose that we wander along the edge of the swamp, and see if we can't find some track that will lead us into the forest without the necessity of hacking our way through the undergrowth. We may fail: if so we can only return."

"And you'll be back before dark," said the sailor.

"That's the idea, Bill," agreed Jim.

"And supposing you're not," continued the other.

"Why then, Bill, we'll be back after dark," laughed Jim. "Cheer up, you old croaker: Percy will be there to look after me."

The sailor shrugged his shoulders.

"All right, Mr. Maitland. You're the captain of this outfit, and what you say goes. But I still think you're a damned fool who is asking for trouble. And if you get it don't blame me."

With which Parthian shot he stumped off to his cabin.

"I say, Jim, do you really think there is anything in his idea?" said Percy.

"That, old lad, is what we propose to find out," answered his cousin. "And in the meantime let's join Judy in the water."

Jim had chosen the edge of the swamp as the line of advance for two reasons. Firstly, it struck him that by sticking to the brown tracks which flanked the green patches they would get good going in the open: and secondly he hoped that if there were any paths leading into the forest they would find some of them there. He had not forgotten the things he had seen through the mist that morning, and he argued that they would probably have had some line of

approach, since the only place they could have disappeared into was the forest itself.

At the same time he fully realised that if there were tracks, and Percy and he used them, their chances of an encounter would be much greater than if they tried to again force a way through the undergrowth. And he was under no delusions as to the possibility of danger. They would be tackling them on their own ground, and under the most unfavourable conditions, especially as Percy, though he had practised assiduously on the way out was still a positive menace with a revolver.

What he wanted to do if it proved feasible was to see one of them without being seen himself. Then they could arrive at a decision as to whether they would carry on or not.

"You see, old lad," he remarked to Percy, as they beached the dinghy and proceeded once more to climb the hill, "we know the forest is inhabited, possibly by the most harmless creatures in the world, possibly not. And in the latter event, treasure or no treasure, we hop it. There aren't enough of us for Judy to be safe. But if they're harmless it's a different matter altogether."

Away to the north a smudge of smoke lay low on the horizon, but the island itself seemed lifeless in the intense heat. They scanned the open ground, searching for Lopez: there was no sign of him. Nothing moved, nothing stirred: the only sound was the lazy beat of the surf. And with a final glance backwards at the motor-boat, and Bill sitting grimly in a deck chair with his rifle across his knees they began the descent to the swamp.

It was two o'clock which gave them a good four hours in which to explore and be clear of the forest before it was dark. What Jim had surmised proved correct: there was a fringe of firm soil skirting the edge of the undergrowth which gave them easy walking. In places it was several yards wide, in others only a few inches, and lapping it on the other side, save where branches of it forked out and meandered across the marsh, lay the deadly green slime.

They pushed on steadily but cautiously, and it soon became obvious to Jim that the track was often used. There were places where the vegetation had been deliberately forced back to give greater width. And it was in one such place that they came on their first clue. Up till then the ground had been as hard as a rock: here they suddenly came on a stretch of some ten yards where a stream oozed sluggishly over the path. It had practically dried up, leaving the soil soft and muddy, and for a while Jim stared at it, with his face growing more and more grave.

"Look at the footprints, Percy," he said at length. "Poor devil."

His cousin looked at him sharply.

"What do you mean by 'poor devil'?" he asked.

But Jim did not reply: he was down on his knees studying the ground more closely. The marks were perfectly clear cut, and had obviously been made very recently. They were of two distinct sorts, and he examined them both in turn.

The first were those of a naked human foot. The imprints of the five toes were deep, and very wide apart: the mark of the heel was even deeper showing the great weight of its owner. But it was the size and the length of stride that staggered him. His own feet were not small, but he could comfortably have got both of them inside one of these. And the distance between them was over five feet.

The second were very different. They had been made by the toe of a pointed shoe, and the distance between them was four feet.

"So Bill was on the right track after all," he said straightening up. "Poor devil!"

"Look here," remarked Percy, "you might remember that I am not as well versed in reading mud as you. I assume you are alluding to Lopez, but you might explain your sympathy."

"You spot, don't you," said Jim, "that that is made by the toe of a shoe." He pointed to a second trail. "You can see the alternate feet—right and left. You remember also the very pointed shoes he used to wear. So the betting is a hundred to one that that trail was made by him. Now how did he make it? How would you make a mark like that with your shoe?"

"By standing on tip-toe," said his cousin.

"And then hopping four feet like a ballet dancer!" Jim laughed shortly. "No, my lad, you can take it from me that those marks were not made by him trying to imitate Pavlova. He was a short man, and look at the length of his stride. He was running for his life, pursued by the thing that made those other marks."

"How do you know he was being pursued?"

"Because in two places the thing has obliterated his footprint. Therefore it was pursuing him. And it was not running: you can see the mark of its heel every time. Though in all conscience with a stride like that it would have no need to."

"Good Lord! it's a bit grim," said Percy shakily. "What do you think happened, Jim?"

"My dear man, I know no more than you do. Perhaps the thing went on board, as Bill said, and forcibly seized Lopez. Perhaps Lopez swam ashore, and came walking down here. All that I can tell you for certain is what is written there in the soft ground. And that is that at this actual spot the Brazilian was fleeing for his life pursued by something, the like of which I have never come across before."

"And which must certainly have caught him," said his cousin.

"Unless a miracle occurred."

"And then?"

Jim pointed to the bog.

"That would seem at any rate one solution," he remarked quietly. "Though they may, of course, be keeping him as a prisoner. And now to get down to the present situation, young feller. You may remember I mentioned the possibility of these things being harmless. Well, you can wash that out."

"Carry on," said Percy.

"It's up to you to decide. Do you want to go on, or do you want to go back? I tell you candidly that I think we may at any moment bump into a position of very grave danger."

"What are you going to do yourself?" demanded his cousin.

"In view of the fact that that poor devil may still be alive, I'm going on," said Jim.

"Then I'm darned well coming too," cried Percy. "In fact your question, my dear James, seems to be of the fatuous order that I have so often noted with pain over the rest of your conversation."

"Stout fellow," grinned Jim. "Let's push."

They skirted round the sodden patch, and twenty yards beyond it came to what Jim had been searching for. Stretching into the forest till it disappeared in the gloom ran a path: they had found at any rate one of the tracks that might lead them to the solution of the mystery.

They stood for a time getting their eyes accustomed to the semi-darkness after the blinding sunshine: then Jim took his revolver from its holster.

"Take yours out too, Percy," he said, "but for the love of Allah don't point it anywhere near me. And keep your eyes skinned over the back of your shoulder. You don't want to be surprised from behind."

The going was good: evidently the path was one in frequent use. To start with it ran quite straight: then it began to twist and jink though the general direction remained the same. And after a while even the sound of the surf died away: the silence seemed to press on them like a blanket.

At length they reached a small clearing from which four other tracks led out like the spokes of a wheel, and Jim paused. None of them seemed to be a direct continuation of the one they had come along, and it was a toss-up which to take. The compass was well-nigh useless, as they had only the vaguest idea of their present position, but Jim finally selected one that ran a little south of west. Then having placed a conspicuous fern to mark the path they had come by they started along the new one.

The pace Jim set was as fast as he dared, consistent with safety. He had not exaggerated when he spoke of very grave danger, and he realised that it would be graver still if darkness overtook them while they were still in the forest. And so, whilst he scouted with the utmost caution whenever he came to a bend, he almost ran along the straight stretches. The reassuring thing was the continued silence, which seemed to indicate that the other occupants of the forest were asleep. And he was sufficiently confident of his powers of stalking to hope that, if that were so, he would be able, if they had the luck to find them, to get near enough to see what manner of thing it was they were up against, and then get away again in safety. There might even be a bare possibility of rescuing the Brazilian if he was still alive, but that could only be decided later.

Such was the general plan he decided on as they pressed forward, when there came a sudden startling interruption. From away to the left a ship's siren blared three times. They halted abruptly, and Jim stared at his cousin.

"I wonder who that is," he said thoughtfully.

"Probably that ship we saw from the top of the hill," answered Percy.

The siren wailed again, and Jim frowned.

"What are they making that infernal din for?" he cried. "Sounds to me as if they were signalling. Percy, I wonder if that is Miguel's yacht come earlier than we expected. If so..."

He did not complete the sentence, for a further interruption occurred, this time much nearer at hand. The bell they had heard that morning began to toll, and with it the sleeping forest awakened to life. From all around them came the sounds of movement, and Jim seized his cousin by the arm.

"In here, for your life," he muttered, forcing his way off the track into the undergrowth. "We're right in the middle of them."

The bell went on tolling, though its sound was almost drowned by the noises around them. And once or twice a hoarse bellow, that was half roar, half grunt, rang out.

They cowered down behind some giant ferns: some of the things were close to them. But so dense was the vegetation that they could see nothing. And after a while the sounds grew fainter and fainter until they died away in the distance. The bell ceased tolling: silence settled once again.

At length Jim straightened up and stepped out into the path.

"That was rather nearer than I liked," he remarked. "It is a damned lucky thing for us, old lad, that they were asleep when we arrived."

"What do you make of it, Jim?" said his cousin.

"The bell was obviously a warning signal," he answered, "which was rung when the siren was heard. And now they have gone off to investigate."

"But what are they?" cried Percy.

"You can take it from me," said Jim gravely, "that whatever they are, it is a question of running no risks. But since we are here, and the owners of the place appear to have gone, we may as well explore a little further."

They moved on cautiously: it was more than likely that all of them had not gone, and that a guard had been left. And then, quite unexpectedly the track opened out into a big clearing.

"Good God!" muttered Jim, "look at that."

The space was some thirty yards square, with several openings similar to the one they stood in. Above them the trees met, seemingly a solid ceiling of scarlet, splashed here and there with the vivid blues and yellows of gaudily coloured parrots. Shafts of sunlight shone through, dappling the sides with every shade of green: it was a riot of colour that would have made an artist rave. But the two men who stood motionless at the entrance hardly noticed it: they had eyes only for what stood in the centre of the ground.

Hanging from a frame was a brass bell, which was still swinging gently though no sound came from it. And chased on the bell in black lettering they could read the words—S.S. Paquinetta. Underneath it, between the two uprights a man was sitting, a man who did not stir. His knees, lashed together with some fibrous stuff, were drawn up: his hands were stretched out in front of him. His

head lolled sideways: his face, so distorted with agony and terror, that the features were almost unrecognizable, stared at them. It was Lopez, the Brazilian, and he was dead.

"Poor devil," muttered Percy shakily. "How did they do it?"

"Ask me another," said Jim grimly, as he bent over the dead man. "They've murdered him somehow, and yet there's not a sign of any violence nor a trace of any blood."

"Perhaps he died of fright."

"Fright may send a man mad, but I've never yet heard of it killing anybody."

He again bent over the Brazilian, and suddenly he gave an exclamation.

"Look at his right hand," he said. "Do you see how terribly swollen it is? He's been poisoned, Percy. That's how they killed the poor blighter."

He straightened up thoughtfully.

"And if they used poison," he continued, "and lashed his legs, it proves they have a certain measure of human brain. No mere animal would do such a thing."

He stared round doubtfully: what was the best thing to do? Never again would they have such an opportunity for exploration. A number of paths similar to the one they had come by led out of the clearing: it seemed too good a chance to miss. And selecting one at random he started along it.

It led to another clearing, and they had barely gone ten yards along it when he stopped short with a sudden gasp.

"Great Heavens!" he muttered. "It can't be true."

In the centre of the second space there stood a mysterious object. It was about four feet high and fashioned into the representation of a grotesque little man. The thing was a monstrosity with a huge paunch and tiny legs. In colour it was dull yellow, and in the centre of the forehead there glittered a blood-red pool of light. And after a while the usually imperturbable Jim began to shake with uncontrollable excitement: he had seen that dull yellow before in smaller images, and knew what it meant.

"Gold, Percy: gold or I'll eat my hat," he cried. "And if that's a ruby in its forehead it is worth a king's ransom."

The thing stood on a little island with a circular strip of water some five feet wide all round it. Between its base and the water there was undergrowth also to a width of about five feet.

"It's the temple of their image," went on Jim. "Gosh! old lad, what about having a dart for that ruby. If it's gold, as I'm sure it is, there will be no difficulty in working it loose."

"I'm with you," cried Percy, "but we'd better get a move on."

They went towards it, and suddenly with a cry of warning Jim tried to spring back. For the ground in front seemed to rise towards them, and they felt themselves falling through space. So intent had they been on the idol that they had paid no attention to the path. And they had trodden on one end of some baulks of wood roughly joined together which pivoted seesaw fashion on a central hinge.

It was not a long fall, and they picked themselves up shaken but otherwise unhurt, as the thing creaked back into position again leaving them in darkness.

"One of the oldest native animal traps there is," cried Jim bitterly. "My God! Percy, we've let ourselves in for it now. Thank heavens! there were no spikes at the bottom. What a foul stench," he added.

And then he paused abruptly and gripped his cousin's arm.

"There's something here," he muttered. "I can hear it moving."

They crouched motionless staring into the darkness, and quite distinctly they could hear its heavy breathing. Then came a slow movement, as if some big body was gradually changing its position. The smell seemed to increase, and they waited tensely, conscious only of the loud beating of their own hearts.

Came a grunt and a shuffling noise: the thing was coming towards them. And suddenly they saw two gleaming eyes not a yard away. The thing was on them, and at that moment Jim's revolver roared out, sounding deafening in the shut in space.

The eyes disappeared: he had fired straight between them. There was a thud which shook the ground, one or two convulsive movements, then silence. The thing was dead.

"That's going to bring them about our heels," muttered Jim, "if they're anywhere in the neighbourhood."

And then he gave a sudden exclamation.

"By Jove!" he cried, "I believe this is a passage, and not merely a trap. It's lighter along there."

"Are you going to have a look and see what you've killed?" said his cousin.

"I'm going to beat it while the going is good," answered Jim grimly. "If we're found here, my lad, we shan't be needing our return tickets from Rio."

He led the way, and his surmise was correct. They were in an underground tunnel, and on coming to the bend where it had seemed to Jim to be less dark they could see the entrance ahead of them. They raced towards it, up the rising ground; and found that it opened into a corner of the original clearing. And for a while they stood there listening. Had the sound of the shot brought the others back? But nothing stirred: save for the motionless figure of the dead Brazilian the place was deserted.

Suddenly Percy gripped his cousin's arm again.

"Look down that track," he muttered. "I saw something move. Something dark. It swung itself across. Man, it was the size of an elephant."

"I don't see anything," said Jim. "Are you sure?"

"It was gone in a flash," cried Percy. "But I know I saw it."

"Then let's go," remarked the other. "Probably our hosts are returning. You lead the way this time."

And with a final glance at the dead man, and the bell from the ill-fated Paquinetta he followed his cousin out of the clearing.

CHAPTER X

"I SAY, Jim, oughtn't we to have come to that junction of the paths by now?"

They had been walking rapidly for over a quarter of an hour, and so far there had been no sign of anything following them. Whatever it was that Percy had seen, apparently it had not seen them. And as the significance of the question sank into his mind Jim cursed himself for a fool. He had followed his cousin blindly out of the clearing, his mind preoccupied with other things, and he realised now that Percy had taken the wrong path. They should have reached the junction long since.

"You're right, Percy," he said. "We're on a different track."

"I'm damned sorry, old boy," said his cousin apologetically. "I was so flustered by that thing I saw that I forgot what I was doing."

"My fault as much as yours," cried Jim. "However we can't go back, so we must go on. It will probably lead us into the open somewhere. The devil of it is that we haven't got much more daylight."

They pushed on faster, and after a while Jim began to grow uneasy. For the track kept turning right handed, and the ground was becoming appreciably softer.

"We're getting near the river, Percy," he said. "And that's about the last spot we want. Unless we find a path going away to the left we're in the soup."

Suddenly the track forked, and Percy paused.

"Which one, Jim?"

"Left, of course, but where on earth is this foul stench of musk coming from?"

They went on a few yards and soon discovered. The track had forked in order to pass on each side of a large, stagnant pool. Rotting vegetation hung in festoons round the banks, but by craning forward carefully they could see the water. And floating motionless in it, their evil-looking snouts just above the surface, were scores of crocodiles. Others were lying on the slimy ooze round the banks, and one huge one occupied the post of honour on a half-submerged tree trunk.

"Repulsive looking brutes," said Jim. "We must be nearer the river than I thought."

And a further few paces brought them to it. Their path turned abruptly left-handed following the bank, and they were just turning along it when from the distance there came a steady creaking noise and they paused listening.

"The rowlocks of a boat," remarked Jim. "Now we may find out something."

Only a thin screen of undergrowth separated them from the water, and with infinite caution they peered through. In front of them was the river; to their right the stinking crocodile pool. And by leaning forward a little they could see down stream for about fifty yards.

Suddenly a boat hove in sight, and in the stern sat Don Miguel. By his side was a bloated looking red-faced man who held the tiller ropes, and Jim put his lips to his cousin's ear.

"Bully McIntyre," he whispered. "So it was the yacht."

He was evidently having some argument with Don Miguel and at length the latter shrugged his shoulders. The sailor gave an order, the men ceased rowing, and McIntyre ran the nose of the boat into the bank.

"Get ashore, Mr. Murdoch," he ordered, "and see what it's like."

An officer who had been sitting in the bows seized some overhanging branches and hoisted himself out. He was on the opposite side of the pool to Jim and Percy, but they could see the glint of his white ducks through the undergrowth.

"There's a regular path here," he sang out, "which seems to lead into the forest. Shall I go along and explore it a bit?"

"Yes—but don't get lost."

And even as McIntyre spoke a scream of fear rang out. They had a fleeting glimpse of a white-clad figure falling through the air, followed by a splash. And the motionless logs were motionless no longer. The water in the pool swirled angrily, and before their eyes the wretched man was torn to pieces.

"What's the matter?" shouted McIntyre, as the boat moved away from the bank, and came upstream a few strokes till it was abreast of the pool.

"Good God!" he went on, "he fell in that damned pool and the crocs have got him. You filthy brutes," he roared picking up a rifle and taking aim at the big one on the tree. He shot it through the eye, and with its tail lashing furiously the great reptile rolled over and sank in the water.

"I guess we'll come back to-morrow morning," said Don Miguel, "when we've got the day in front of us." And the other nodded assent.

The boat went about, and after a while the noise of the oars died away in the distance.

"Why did that poor devil scream, Percy?" said Jim with a queer look in his eyes.

"Dash it all, old lad, most people would give tongue if they found themselves in a crocodile pool."

"Yes—but not until they found themselves there. He yelled before he knew there were any crocodiles."

Percy stared at Jim.

"You mean..."

"I mean that he never fell in: he was thrown or pushed in. And it was what he saw in that fleeting second that terrified him, and nothing to do with the crocodiles. Didn't you see the undergrowth moving on the other side of the river as something went through it, keeping pace with the boat? Well, there was something this side as well."

"Following Miguel's party."

"Exactly. And for that reason, at any rate, we can be thankful the yacht has arrived earlier than we expected. It's distracted the attention of these brutes away from us. Otherwise, I don't mind telling you that I think our chances of getting through alive were pretty minute."

"I'd like to have seen that thing you shot."

"So would I. And in due course you shall—or one like it. But not this trip, Percy."

"You are coming back?"

"Of course. Once Judy is safely on her way back to England I return here."

"And what about the other bunch?"

"They haven't got the map, and if we can get away to-night we've got 'em stung. Moreover, seeing that almost all the crew are dagos, one or two more regrettable incidents such as we've just witnessed are going to shake 'em badly. Let's get a move on."

They turned along the track going up stream, and found that it soon left the bank and turned back into the forest. And now time was vital: at the most half an hour of daylight remained to them. The track jinked, then jinked again, and Jim gave a sigh of relief as he glanced at his compass: they were heading for the open. But there was still at least two miles to cover, and the going was

getting worse. Evidently the track they were on was not much used: tendrils of vegetation met across the clearing through which they had to force their way. And dusk was beginning to fall when the first faint reek of the swamp came to their nostrils.

At last they saw it in front of them, and Jim's face was grave. A thin white vapour was already rising, and only too well did he realise the danger that that portended. In the walk that lay before them a single false step might mean death in the green bog, and to have mist as well as darkness to contend against would double their difficulty. And he was just debating in his mind whether it would not be better to spend the night where they were and wait for the dawn, when they saw stealing out from behind the hill that stood outlined against the darkening sky, the lights of a ship.

"Don Miguel's yacht," he muttered. "What the deuce has she been doing there? I don't like it, Percy. When we heard her siren she was away south of us. What has taken her round to the north of the island?"

"Probably looking for us," said his cousin.

"Exactly," remarked Jim. "And they couldn't avoid finding us."

"I don't see that they can do any harm," said Percy. "They are probably peeved over the map, but as you've got that in your pocket it doesn't matter much."

"Damn the map: they can have that for shaving paper. It's Judy I'm thinking of."

"Surely they wouldn't touch her."

"That swine of a dwarf would murder his mother for sixpence," grunted Jim. "Still, Bill was there. Anyway, that settles it: we must push on. I suppose one party went away to explore the river, while Dresler went round in the yacht to find us. Hullo! what's that?"

Clear and distinct through the still air had come the sharp crack of a rifle. They paused instinctively, and the next moment even Jim felt the hair on his head begin to rise. Yell after yell of frenzied terror rang out: then sudden, abrupt silence.

They peered ahead, but could see nothing in the fading light.

"Heaven send it wasn't Bill coming to find us," cried Jim.

"What was it, Jim?" muttered his cousin.

"It was a man," he answered grimly. "I wouldn't like to say what it is now."

"Somebody fallen into the bog perhaps."

"Possibly. But you don't let off your gun at a bog. And as I say, Heaven send it wasn't Bill."

"He'd never have left Judy."

"I agree. But supposing Judy left him."

He pointed at the yacht which was now abreast of them.

"That's what I'm afraid of, Percy."

"You mean they may have kidnapped her."

"Exactly. As a lever to make us give up the map. And then Bill came along to meet us."

"He'd never have let them take her."

"How could he prevent them? He would have shot anything he saw coming off from the shore, but he couldn't shoot a boat-load of men coming from a yacht. Damn it! if it isn't Bill who can it be?"

"And you think one of the things got him?"

"I do," said Jim gravely. "The poor old lad fired and missed. And what we've got to watch out for is that we don't do the same. It may have been a chance encounter, or they may post sentinels out at night."

They pressed on as fast as they dared. Luckily the mist was getting no denser, but the light had almost gone. And it was about five minutes after they had heard the shot that Jim rounded a projecting bush and stopped abruptly with his hand held up in warning to his cousin.

"Look at that," he muttered as Percy joined him. "It was here that it happened."

The undergrowth was trampled and beaten down, showing every sign of a desperate struggle. But of the combatants there was no trace. They listened intently: nothing stirred in the forest. And at length Jim crept cautiously forward.

Suddenly his foot met something hard, and he stooped and picked it up. And the next moment he cursed savagely.

"My gun, Percy," he said. "The one I gave Bill."

A spasm of rage shook him.

"By God!" he cried, "these things—whatever they are—will regret this. Once I've got Judy safely away, I'll come back here with a proper expedition and exterminate the lot. What's the matter?"

His cousin had bent forward excitedly, and was staring at something on the ground.

"It's a hat, Jim," he cried. "And it's not Bill's."

"What's that? Let me see it."

He picked up the hat: it was wet and sticky. And glancing at his fingers he saw they were red. He looked inside the hat, and then with a feeling of uncontrollable repulsion he flung it far out into the swamp. For its late owner's head had been literally battered to pieces.

"Poor devil," he muttered. "You're sure it's not Bill's, Percy?"

"Absolutely certain."

"Then how did my gun get here?"

But his cousin did not answer: he was standing by a big tree that grew on one side of the beaten-down patch.

"Jim," he cried shakily, "this tree is all wet."

It was true, and for a moment Jim stared at it incredulously. At first he had assumed that the deed had been done with a club or even possibly the butt of the gun. But the blood on the tree told a different tale, and one that was well-nigh inconceivable. For it proved that the man had been killed by having his head bashed against the trunk, and the strength necessary to do such a thing was unbelievable. And in his imagination he visualised the scene. The shot, fired in a panic at the monstrous thing that had suddenly appeared out of the dusk: the brief hopeless struggle when the bullet missed, and then the ghastly ending with the lifeless body flung into the bog.

But who was it? Surely Bill would not have handed over the only long range weapon they had with them to somebody else, unless he had been compelled to. At the best of times he was a very bad shot with a revolver, so it was hard to believe that he would have lent the rifle to anyone willingly. And if that was so what had happened on board the motor-boat?

The forest was silent as they started off again. Twice during the next hour they heard from far off that strange grunting roar answered from three or four different places which showed that the denizens were on the prowl. But their luck held good: the track along the edge of the swamp was deserted. And at

last they were clear of it, and able to increase their pace as they began to climb the hill.

They reached the top: the lagoon below them was in darkness. No light came from the place where the boat had been anchored. And sick with anxiety they half ran, half slid down towards the beach. The dinghy was still where they had left her, and it was while they were getting her afloat that a large stone came bounding down the hill and crashed into the water a few yards away.

For a moment Jim paused, staring up at the sky line behind them. Was it they who had loosened it as they came down, or had something else started it? But he could see nothing, and jumping into the dinghy they pulled feverishly for the boat.

"Bill," he shouted. "Ahoy! there, Bill."

There was no answer, and leaving Percy to make the dinghy fast, he scrambled on board.

"Bill," he cried again. "Judy. Where are you?"

He dashed into the little saloon, and this time there was an answer.

"Good evening, my dear Mr. Maitland," came a well-known voice. "You are, if I may say so, a little later than I expected."

He lit the lamp: seated at the table was the dwarf with a malignant smile on his lips.

"You little devil," roared Jim. "What have you done with Miss Draycott?"

The blind man held up a deprecating hand.

"Really, Mr. Maitland," he protested, "the space here is very confined. Would it be too much if I asked you to moderate your voice?"

"Where is Miss Draycott, Dresler?" said Jim controlling himself with an immense effort. "Because I warn you quite quietly that I am not in a mood to be trifled with to-night, and if anything has happened to her I shall blow out your brains without the smallest compunction."

"It is extraordinary," remarked the other, "with what unerring accuracy I have read your character. I actually said to Monty—you remember Sir Montague Barnet, of course—when he went ashore that I was sure you would say something bright and original like that."

Jim glanced at Percy who had come into the saloon.

"So Barnet went ashore, did he? From here?"

"Yes. I thought perhaps you might meet him, but in the darkness you must have missed one another. However he is sure to be back soon."

"May I ask if he was wearing a Homburg hat?"

"My dear sir, you know my affliction. I'm afraid I didn't ask him. But if you saw a man with a Homburg hat it must have been Monty."

"I didn't," said Jim tersely. "I only saw the hat."

"You speak in riddles," murmured the dwarf.

"You'll get the solution soon," remarked Jim. "To return to Miss Draycott. I assume she is on board the yacht."

"Correct. And with her is the admirable guardian you left whose name I fear I do not know. He was most abusive, and had to be hit over the head with a belaying-pin, but I don't think his condition is dangerous."

"And your object in this abduction?"

"My dear fellow, you pain me. You know as well as I do. Now where is the correct map?"

"In my pocket," said Jim.

"Excellent. By the way I congratulate you on the idea, Mr. Maitland. It appealed to me immensely when I gathered from Monty's blasphemy what had happened."

"Cut it out," remarked Jim curtly. "I assume that you want it."

"That is the notion. And fearing you might prove difficult about it, I took the precaution of removing the lady. She is quite safe at present, and her quarters are far more comfortable. But I do not need to remind you, do I, that my friend Don Miguel has a keen eye for a pretty girl, and that his reputation is not perhaps all that it should be. And so I earnestly advise you not to play any more tricks this time, either over the map, or with me. Because if you do I cannot guarantee Miss Draycott's continued safety."

"And what is your proposal?" said Jim.

"A simple one. As soon as Monty returns, you will start up the motor and take your boat round to the other side of the island where the yacht is now anchored. We will all go on board her, and then when you have satisfied us that the map is what we want—well, my dear Maitland, as far as I am concerned you can go to the devil."

"Very interesting," said Jim with a laugh. "Extraordinary what bloomers you always seem to make in your schemes Dresler, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?" remarked the blind man softly.

"I mean that if we wait here till Barnet returns we shall wait a considerable time. It was very unwise of him to go ashore alone."

"Have you killed him?" said the dwarf even more softly.

"No: but he's dead. This island is a funny place, my friend, and if you take my advice you'll do what I'm going to do—leave it."

"How did Barnet die?"

"His brains were bashed out against a tree, if you want to know."

"Who by?"

"I think what by would be a better way of putting it."

"I don't believe you," snarled the other. "You murdered him because he'd found the treasure. He told me he thought he might be able to."

"With the map he'd got?"

"Yes. You may be clever, Mr. Maitland, but other people aren't fools. You'd altered the position of the hill and the tree, but the writing at the bottom remained."

"Except for the little bit that was missing in the left-hand corner," said Jim.

"That either had to be east or west," sneered the dwarf.

"It was west to be exact. I found it that night we had our little chat in your house at Hampstead. I fear Barnet may have thought it was east: that might account for us finding his hat where we did."

"His hat! Where was Barnet himself?"

"His body had evidently been flung into the bog. There was no trace of it."

"A likely story, Mr. Maitland. You tell me that a man of Barnet's size and weight had his brains bashed out against a tree and expect me to believe it!"

"It's a matter of complete indifference to me whether you believe it or whether you don't," drawled Jim. "I'm sorry the poor devil met the end he did, but he wasn't a gentleman whose habits I liked, and I'm not going into mourning for him."

"Don't be too sure about that," said the other thickly. "I would point out that there are some forty of us against you two. And justice can be summary."

"Do you suggest making Percy and me walk the plank," laughed Jim. "Come, come, Dresler—I don't think the old brain is working very well. Do you seriously imagine that I am going to barge straight into the lion's den, and deliver myself bound hand and foot to a bunch of damned stiffs like you?"

"And if you don't what about Miss Draycott?"

"Go a little further, my friend: what about you? You seem to forget that it is fifty-fifty. Until Miss Draycott and Bill Blackett are delivered over to me safe and sound, you stay on board here. You can't catch me in a row boat, and if your pal Don Miguel tries any monkey tricks like ramming me with the yacht I'll hang you over the side to act as a fender."

For a while the dwarf was silent: then he shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no reason why we should lose our tempers, Mr. Maitland, is there? I feel sure that matters can be settled amicably."

"Then go on feeling sure," remarked Jim. "It may help. But all I'm sure about is that if a hair of Miss Draycott's head has been injured you'll pray for death before I'm through with you. And you'd better make them understand the fact on board the yacht, when we get there to-morrow morning."

"Why to-morrow morning? Why not to-night?"

"Your second error, Dresler. The passage through the reef here is bad enough even when it's light. To do it in the darkness would be literally impossible."

"You know best," said the dwarf uneasily. "I would have preferred to reach the yacht to-night."

Jim stared at him grimly.

"You don't suppose that I want to remain here, do you, you rotten little sweep? But when I say it is impossible, I mean it's impossible. There would not be one chance in a thousand of our getting through without stoving in our bottom. And though I have not the slightest objection to your drowning, I have the very gravest to losing the boat and being compelled to leave Miss Draycott on board the yacht."

Once again the dwarf shrugged his shoulders.

"Very good, Mr. Maitland. As I said before, you know best. Might I ask what the time is now?"

"Ten o'clock," said Jim curtly. "Eight hours before we can start."

He began pacing up and down the tiny saloon, his mind on the rack with anxiety. The thought of Judy alone in the yacht, with Bill possibly still unconscious, drove him almost insane. But there was nothing to be done: to attempt to navigate the entrance would be the act of a madman. For a while he even thought of the possibility of trying to make his way on foot over the island, but even if he succeeded there would be no way of getting on board the yacht save by swimming. And the chances of a swimmer in those shark infested waters were negligible. As far as he himself was concerned he would have been prepared to risk it, but the vital consideration was Judy. And if anything happened to him what was going to become of her?

"Well since there is all that time before us," remarked the dwarf cutting into his thoughts, "it might be interesting to exchange views on the matter that has brought us both here. Have you had any luck in locating this hypothetical treasure, Mr. Maitland?"

"I have not," said Jim tersely. "The only luck that my cousin and I have had to-day is getting off the island alive!"

"Are you really serious?" said the other with an incredulous smile.

"I have already told you what happened to Barnet," answered Jim. "And as you yourself remarked he was a big heavy man."

The smile became more incredulous.

"I quite appreciate, of course, your natural wish to keep the pitch for yourself," said the dwarf gently. "But I fear you will have to get a rather better one than that, Mr. Maitland."

"Look here, Dresler," remarked Jim wearily, "I'm getting a little tired of you. What do you imagine can be my object in telling a lie over a thing that can easily be proved or disproved? Anyway you can now go along to Blackett's cabin, and I'll pull you out in the morning. I want a respite from your face. Show him the way, Percy."

The dwarf got down off his chair, and stood for a moment or two in the centre of the saloon. Jim was rummaging in a cupboard for the whisky: Percy was lighting a cigarette. And so there was no one to notice a head that suddenly appeared in the fan-light, with a pair of bestial eyes fixed on the short misshapen figure of the blind man. Amazement followed incredulity in their expression: gloating anticipation followed amazement. Then as Jim straightened up the head was abruptly withdrawn.

"Good night," said the dwarf as Percy took him by the arm.

"Between half-past five and six," grunted Jim.

"I shall be ready," remarked the other.

"It's the devil, Percy," said Jim when his cousin returned. "I tried to bluff it out in front of that little swine, but they've got six to four the better of us. And anyone who is not bughouse can see they have."

"You don't think they'll hurt Judy, do you?"

"No," said Jim thoughtfully. "At any rate not to-night. Their only idea is to get the correct map. And they're not going to do anything which would jeopardise their chances of obtaining it. But the fact remains that we shall have to give it to them. We must get Judy off that yacht, and they won't let her come without it. It's a pity, but it can't be helped."

"You meant to come back here?"

"Of course I did. Once we'd got Judy safe in Rio, we could have fitted out a properly armed expedition. And even if we'd found no treasure we should have had a lot of fun. But now that swab Miguel will know as much as we do. He may or may not decide to carry on now, when he finds the island is not uninhabited. And if he doesn't the same idea will strike him—go back and refit. Which is where he will score. He's got a yacht ready to hand: we haven't."

He rose and stretched himself.

"Ah! well. Absolutely nothing matters beyond getting Judy safely out of it. Hullo! what the devil do you want?"

He swung round and stared at the dwarf who was standing in the entrance white faced and shaking.

"Was it either of you," he quavered, "who passed his hand over my face?"

"It was not. What happened?"

"A hand—a huge hairy hand—touched me. I could feel the fingers pressing on me gently."

"Stay here," snapped Jim. "Percy, get your gun, and come with me."

He picked up his own revolver, and started along the corridor out of which the cabins led.

"Is there a light inside?" he muttered.

"No," said Percy. "I didn't bother as he's blind."

"Go back and get my electric torch. It's in the small locker." And suddenly his voice rose to a shout. "God! look at that."

They had left the dwarf standing in the centre of the saloon. He was still there, but just above his head were two great brown hands, that, even as they watched, shot down and clutched him by the throat. Then, before their eyes, he was drawn up, screaming like a pig, and disappeared.

For a moment or two they stood motionless, rooted to the spot: then simultaneously they dashed back into the saloon. The fan-light was wide open: he had been lifted through it. They could still hear him screaming, but as they darted up on deck there came a heavy splash, and silence.

"The dinghy," roared Jim. "Pull it alongside, while I get the rifle."

They jumped into the little boat, and rowed feverishly for the shore. And having beached her they stood listening. Not a sound could they hear, save the monotonous roar of the breakers on the reef. And then from some way off the piteous shrieks of the dwarf began again. They raced along the beach, but the cries grew fainter and fainter. Some stones came rattling down beside them: the thing was climbing the hill. And after a while silence settled once again.

They made their way slowly back to the dinghy: any idea of pursuit was impossible. By day Jim would not have hesitated to fire, trusting to his marvellous eye not to hit Dresler. But in the darkness he was helpless.

"This is getting beyond a joke," he said quietly, as they rowed back. "Not that I care a damn what happens to that little brute, but it's going to make it the devil for us."

"In what way?" cried his cousin.

"He was our guarantee for Judy. And now to-morrow morning we've got to tackle the yacht with neither him nor Barnet. Of course they won't believe us. Damn it! Percy, I wouldn't believe it myself if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

They tied up the boat, and went on board. And at that moment the moon rose from behind the hill. Silhouetted on the sky line was an enormous figure, and instinctively Jim threw up his rifle. Then he lowered it again.

"Too long a range," he said regretfully. "But look at the size of the thing."

A bellowing roar of defiance, twice repeated, came across the water: then the sky line was clear once more.

"I hold no brief for Dresler," he went on gravely, "but he's going to pay for his sins this night. Look at the marks of the brute on the deck."

In the brilliant light of the tropical moon the wet footprints showed up clearly: marks just like those they had seen in the mud that afternoon.

"Probably the same one that took the wretched Lopez," muttered Jim. "Gad! Percy, I'll be glad to get Judy out of this."

"Why don't we push off now?" said his cousin. "This light is almost as bright as day."

"You're right, old lad. We will. I'd forgotten about the moon when I said to-morrow morning. Go and get the engines started."

Percy went below, and Jim sat down on a coil of rope thinking. How to get Judy off the yacht—that was the problem. He had no idea which her cabin would be, and even if he could find out it would be impossible to approach the yacht unseen in the moonlight. There was certain to be some form of watch kept, however slack discipline might be. And then there was Bill too: it was out of the question to leave him behind. Still it was a good idea to go now: anything was better than this enforced idleness. And he would feel easier in his mind if he was on board the yacht himself.

He glanced at the opening in the rocks with anxious eyes. If only Bill had been still with them it would have made it so much easier. They wanted someone in the bows badly, to help con the boat.

"All ready when you are," shouted Percy, and he rose to his feet. The sooner they were through the better, and if they were going to pile up there was no good putting it off. But their luck was in. Twice did a wet jagged pinnacle of rock show out of the swell within a foot of them: once quite distinctly they felt her graze. And then came Jim's cheerful shout of "Full speed ahead"; they were through, and steering for the open sea.

"What did you make of that thing, Jim?" said his cousin, joining him at the wheel. "Have you ever seen anything like it before?"

"No, I haven't," answered the other thoughtfully. "But we've seen what happened to Lopez. And there is no doubt at all in my mind that he never went ashore of his own free will. They got him just as they got Dresler. Which shows pretty conclusively that they do not remain merely on the defensive, but are prepared to be the aggressors. Incredible though it may seem, Percy, my own belief is that very few people have ever got away from this island—that what

Bill told us was true. And it's that, far more than any harm Judy may come to from Don Miguel, that is making me so desperately uneasy."

"You think they may attack the yacht?"

"I think it is a certainty. But my hope is that they may wait till a party goes ashore, as they did in the case of the Paquinetta. They evidently possess a certain low cunning, and then they may hesitate to board the yacht when she is fully manned. In which case it will be to-morrow night, because they won't land anyone till they've got the map. That's what I'm banking on."

He paused abruptly, staring ahead. They were steering parallel with the edge of the swamp, over which the mist now lay like a blanket of cotton wool.

"Listen," he cried. "My God! there's another. Race her, Percy: take the bottom out of her. There is firing going on in front of us."

His cousin sprang below, and the next moment the boat was quivering from bow to stern like a mad thing. But even above the sound of the engine came the ominous crack, crack, of firearms, followed after a time by an even more ominous silence. And sick with anxiety Jim stood at the wheel staring over the glittering silver water ahead. Did that abrupt cessation of firing mean that the things had been repulsed, or did it mean...? Not even to himself could he complete the alternative.

They rounded the point, and saw the yacht lying at anchor a mile away. Lights were shining through some of the portholes, but they could see no sign of any movement, though in the moonlight the deck and bridge were clearly visible. She was about a quarter of a mile from the shore, and the first thing they noticed as they drew alongside was that the steps of the gangway were sopping wet.

They made fast, and dashed up on deck. And the sight that confronted them was so incredible that for a moment or two they stood there unable to move. The yacht was a shambles. Just in front of them lay Bully McIntyre, a blood-spattered crowbar still gripped in his hands. His head was bent back, and round his throat were great red weals. His neck had been broken from behind. Others of the crew lay about with their heads battered in: the sickly smell of blood was everywhere. It was a ghastly scene in the cold white light at any time, but one that was calculated to make them numb with horror when they thought of Judy.

They rushed below; all the cabins were open. And inside the first one they entered they came on what was left of Don Miguel. But it was not on the

crushed remnants that Jim's eyes were fixed, but on the chair that stood by the bed. On it lay a little revolver, and he picked it up.

"Judy's," he muttered hoarsely. "The one I gave her. Oh! my God."

"Jim: come here."

A hoarse shaking voice which he dimly recognised as Percy's came from outside, and like a man walking in his sleep he joined him in the corridor.

"Look at that."

The door of the next cabin had been splintered to match wood, and on the bed lay Judy's hat. For a while they stood looking at it, not daring to meet one another's eyes. The situation was beyond speech: beyond thought. Judy was in the hands of these monstrous horrors, without even a revolver to protect herself with.

"What are we going to do, Jim: what can we do?"

"Do," answered the other tensely, "do. Go after her, of course. And if there's no other way out—shoot her. But there's going to be another way out, Percy."

His voice rose to a savage shout. "We'll beat the brutes yet."

CHAPTER XI

JUDY DRAYCOTT bolted the door of her cabin in Don Miguel's yacht, and tried to think coherently. Her brain was whirling: the events of the last few hours seemed like some hideous nightmare. She had been asleep when Jim and Percy went ashore, and had only awakened two hours afterwards to find Bill Blackett mounting guard and looking worried.

"Where are the others?" she asked and he told her.

"Madness, miss," he remarked gloomily, "but there's no use arguing with Mr. Maitland. And what makes it worse is that the dago's yacht has arrived. She passed some way out, and she hasn't seen us yet, but if she comes to look for us there's no way of hiding. And then we're between the devil and the deep sea."

He scanned the side of the hill through his telescope, but nothing stirred.

The afternoon dragged slowly on, and at four-thirty she went below to make some tea. To while away the time the sailor had been telling her some of Jim's exploits, but she noticed that he never let five minutes elapse without searching the hill with his glass. And when she returned with the cups he was pacing up and down the deck looking anxiously at the sun.

"Another hour and a half, two hours at the most, and it'll be dark," he said. "Blast! here's the yacht."

She turned round: steaming slowly round the headland came the boat whose graceful lines she had last seen in Rio harbour.

"They've spotted us," said Bill, shutting up his telescope. "Now what are they going to do?"

They were not left long in doubt: having arrived opposite the opening in the rocks the yacht's engines stopped, and she remained there rolling lazily in the swell while a boat was lowered.

"Eight of 'em," muttered Bill. "That dwarf I've heard you talk about is one of them, and a great red-faced fellow who looks English."

The boat was being rowed towards them rapidly.

"Don't let them come on board, Bill," cried Judy.

"How can I stop 'em, Miss?" he said gravely. "I can't shoot the lot. Maybe they've only come to ask questions, and mean us no harm."

"Is Maitland there?" sung out the red-faced man whom Judy at once recognised as Barnet, as the boat came alongside.

"He is not," said Bill. "He's ashore. What are you wanting?"

"You'll see soon enough," grunted the other. "Up you get, Emil."

He helped the dwarf on board, and came up after him followed by four of the boat's crew.

"We don't want the whole Brazilian navy on deck," cried Bill angrily.

"It doesn't matter what you want. You'll damned well take what you get. Now then where's that map?"

"Mr. Maitland has got it on him."

Barnet stared at him suspiciously, and whispered something to the dwarf who shrugged his shoulders.

"When will he be back?"

"I know no more than you do," answered Bill. "He went ashore three or four hours ago."

And once again the two of them whispered together, evidently deciding to adopt a different line.

"My dear Miss Draycott," began the dwarf ingratiatingly, "I feel sure we shall be able to arrange matters amicably. I must say that I have the greatest admiration for the way you have scored off us up to date, but I feel certain that you will be the first to admit that matters cannot go on as they are any longer."

"I prefer to have no discussion at all with men who were responsible for my brother's murder," said Judy passionately.

"Come, come," said Dresler, "I can assure you that was an accident. No one regretted it more than Sir Montague Barnet and myself. Anyway it is over and done with: it belongs to the past, and we are concerned with the present. Now then, are we going to work together or not?"

"Nothing would induce me to have anything to do with you," cried the girl.

"But I fear you will have to," said the dwarf suavely. "I don't want to waste time pointing out obvious facts but we outnumber you by more than ten to one. And only my abhorrence of violence makes me discuss the matter at all. The position is this, Miss Draycott. Mr. Maitland has the map: we want the map. Moreover we intend to have the map. Now if you will give me your solemn promise that you will persuade Mr. Maitland to hand it over to us, then I, in my

turn, will give you my promise that a fair share of the treasure, should we discover any, will be handed over to you."

"And if I won't promise," said Judy.

Once again the dwarf shrugged his shoulders.

"Need we go into such an eventuality," he said softly. "I will leave it to your imagination."

"Then I will give you my answer, Mr. Dresler. Rather than see that map in your hands, I shall ask Mr. Maitland to tear it up and throw it in the sea. Oh! you brutes!"

She gave a sudden cry, as the four men, obeying a quick gesture from Barnet, hurled themselves on Bill Blackett. For a few moments he fought like a demon, and one of his assailants went overboard with a broken jaw. But it could only end one way when Barnet, with a loaded stick in his hand joined in as well. There came a dull thud, and Bill crashed forward on the deck unconscious.

"There's no good wasting time, Emil," grunted the baronet. "That fellow Maitland may be back at any moment. Put him in the boat."

They lowered the motionless sailor into the boat alongside, and Barnet picked up his rifle.

"Now, Miss Draycott," he said curtly, "will you kindly follow your friend or have we got to lift you in too."

"What are you going to do with us?" said Judy.

"Exchange your quarters for more comfortable ones on board the yacht. Emil, I'm going ashore: I will return with Maitland."

And so having landed him she found herself being rowed to the yacht, with Bill still lying unconscious in the bottom of the boat. And though she tried not to notice it, a feeling of sick fear began to come over her as she saw the way the sailors looked at her. They were talking to one another in Brazilian and every now and then they laughed evilly, as if enjoying some secret joke. What a fool she had been to speak so precipitately: why hadn't she temporised till Jim got back? But when she stared at the hill, the only moving thing she could see was the figure of Barnet slowly climbing.

An officer received her as she mounted the gangway, and she hated him even more than the sailors.

"In ze regretted absence of Don Miguel," he leered in broken English, "it is to me much pleasure to receive you. Will you please to come: I show you ze saloon."

She watched Bill being hoisted on board; then sick at heart she followed the officer.

"It is pretty, is it not?" remarked her guide, and as she glanced indifferently round the room, he suddenly seized her in his arms and kissed her.

It was just what Judy wanted to rouse her from her despondency. With a smack like the shot of a pistol she got him with her open hand on the cheek, and he staggered back snarling. Then muttering something in Brazilian he came towards her again, only to find himself looking down the wrong end of a small business-like automatic.

"Another step, you little swine," said Judy, "and I'll kill you."

For a moment they stared at one another: then with an ugly laugh he turned away.

"You wait, you English mees," he remarked, "till Don Miguel come on board again. You have lovely time then."

"Get out," cried Judy, and with another glance at the automatic, he went.

After a time she relaxed, and going to one of the portholes looked out. The throb of the engine had already told her they were under way, and she saw they were going back to the south of the island. In the distance she could still see the motor-boat, with a squat figure of the dwarf on the deck: then the hill hid it from sight.

No one else came to disturb her, and she remained at the porthole watching the island listlessly. Where were Jim and Percy? It was getting almost dark: even if they were in the open it would have been impossible to see them. And at last with a feeling of utter despair in her heart she sat down at the table in the centre of the saloon.

After a while a steward came in and turned on the light, and at the same time the engine ceased. She rose and peered out again, as the rattle of the chain told her they had anchored, but it was too dark to see more than the bare outline of the land. They were lying close in, but beyond seeing that it was wooded she could make out nothing.

The door opened, and she turned round. Two men were standing there: one she had never seen before, the other was Don Miguel.

"Welcome, my dear young lady, to my yacht," said the millionaire. "And allow me to introduce Captain McIntyre."

"How is Captain Blackett?" she cried.

"As well as can be expected under the circumstances," he remarked. "I can assure you his life is in no danger. Did he prove intractable or what?"

"He was the victim of an unprovoked assault," she said angrily.

"Dear me!" he laughed. "It's lucky for him that his head is hard. So I hear Mr. Maitland is carrying out a little private exploration. I wonder if he was more fortunate than we were. We rowed all the way up the river, and all the way back again and found nothing at all, except a pool containing crocodiles."

He pressed the bell, and ordered a bottle of wine and some whisky.

"Sit down, McIntyre," he said, "and help yourself. You will join us, Miss Draycott?"

"No, thank you," she answered coldly.

"A pity. This is an excellent vintage."

His eyes were fixed on her gloatingly, and involuntarily she shivered.

"Not cold, I trust. Or perhaps a touch of fever. May I get you some quinine?"

"How long are we to be kept prisoners?" she burst out.

"What an ugly word," said the Brazilian. "Let us put it that I hope you will enjoy my hospitality for a considerable period. Let us also hope that Mr. Maitland does nothing foolish with the map. It will prolong matters if he should, and this island is not a spot that I would select as a health resort."

"It's a stinking fever-soaked hole," grunted McIntyre.

"But doubtless our lady guest will enliven the tedium of it," murmured the other.

"Will you kindly show me where my cabin is?" she said icily, and Don Miguel again rang the bell.

"Show Miss Draycott to her cabin," he ordered as the steward entered. "The large one—next to mine."

The man grinned and led the way. And in the last glimpse she had of the two men, they were shaking with silent laughter.

She bolted the door, and sat down on the bed to try and get things straight in her mind. She was afraid, desperately afraid. And the more she thought about

it, the more hopeless did it seem. Even if Jim gave them the map, what guarantee was there that they would be allowed to go? And he and Percy could do nothing with the numbers they had against them. Anyway as a last resource she had her revolver, and even as she comforted herself with that reflection she remembered that she had left her bag with it inside in the saloon.

She went back at once: the two men were sitting where she had left them. Her bag was still on the table, but the instant she picked it up she realised by the weight that the revolver was no longer inside. She looked at the Brazilian: he was balancing it in his hand.

"Give my revolver back to me," she cried furiously. "How dare you touch my bag."

"Just to see that no dangerous lethal weapons were being carried, my dear young lady," he grinned. "You've no idea what a lot of damage one of these little toys can do. Captain McIntyre was terribly nervous when he saw it."

"Sure," said the sailor with mock gravity. "I told the boss I wouldn't be able to sleep a wink if I knew anyone on board had a gun."

"You cowardly brutes."

She faced them defiantly, though in truth she felt very near tears.

"You wouldn't dare do a thing like that if Mr. Maitland was here."

"But since he isn't here the point does not arise, does it," said Don Miguel softly. "And since it is more than doubtful if he ever will be here the point will never arise either."

"What do you mean?" She stared at him with dilated eyes.

"I have my own methods of dealing with people who try to double cross me," remarked the Brazilian. "I warned Mr. Maitland in Rio, and he decided not to heed my warning. I fear he may regret it."

His eyes narrowed as he looked at her.

"Whereas you, my pretty one, will I trust have no cause to regret your visit to South America."

She fought down the sick fear that was gripping her.

"If you do anything to Mr. Maitland," she said, "you won't get the map."

"In which case our stay here is likely to be much more prolonged," he remarked. "But with you on board to comfort me I shall view the prospect with equanimity."

He rose suddenly and came towards her, and she cowered back. There was something so utterly repulsive about this swarthy looking brute that she felt almost hypnotised with loathing. And the next moment he had caught her in his arms.

"Jewels shall be yours, my pretty," he whispered thickly, "and money. You shall have all your desires granted."

His face was coming closer to hers, until, making a desperate effort, she broke away from him and fled like a wild thing to her cabin. And not till the door was bolted once more did she feel safe.

She sat down panting for breath. What was she going to do? It was only a temporary respite: sooner or later she would have to eat and drink. And that would mean meeting Miguel again. What, too, about Jim? They intended treachery: the Brazilian had admitted it himself. They would get the map by means of specious promises, and then knife him or something from behind.

A knock came on the door, and the steward enquired what she would like for dinner.

"Nothing," she cried, "nothing at all," and the man went away. Eating was a physical impossibility, but after a while she rose and gulped down some water from the carafe. It was luke warm but she felt better for it. And for a time she stood staring out of the porthole.

Nine o'clock: surely Jim should be there by now. But no sound broke the stillness of the night except a gramophone which was being played by some member of the crew. And as the hours went on her anxiety increased. Why didn't he come? Had some accident happened to him on the island which had prevented him?

The gramophone ceased: the yacht grew silent. Once her door handle was softly tried, and Don Miguel's voice came from the other side. But she did not answer him, and after a while he went away and she heard the door of the next cabin shut. And at length, still sitting in the chair she fell into an uneasy doze.

A sudden sound awakened her, and she sat up with a start. The moonlight was flooding her cabin, and for a moment or two she sat trembling in her chair. And then to her horror she saw a slowly widening crack in the partition wall of the cabin. A panel was sliding back, and it had been the click as it started that had aroused her.

She watched it with dilated eyes: on the other side of it was Don Miguel's cabin. And at length his head was poked cautiously through. He looked round until

he saw her, and for a while they stared at one another in silence. Then with a leer he pushed the panel right back, and stood in the opening.

"Have you changed your mind, my pretty," he whispered.

"Get out, you unspeakable cur," she said tensely.

"But I've only just come," he remarked. "Wasn't it thoughtful of me to give you the cabin next mine? All specially prepared as you see. Now are we going to be wise, or are we going to give trouble?"

The leer grew more pronounced, and he took a step forward. And at that moment she heard him give a strange gurgling noise: saw something brown round his throat, and watched him being dragged back through the opening. He disappeared, and with no thought in her mind save the incredible fact that he'd gone, she sprang to the sliding panel and slammed it to. And as she did so there came from the other side of the wall a blood-curdling scream, followed by a series of bumps as if a heavy sack was being thrown about.

She cowered back terrified: the noise was like nothing she had ever heard. And even as she listened to it pandemonium broke loose in the ship. Shots, oaths, yells of terror came from every direction, and every now and then a loud splash indicated that somebody had fallen overboard. She forced herself to go to the porthole, but there was nothing to be seen though the din had now become indescribable. And mingled with it came a succession of strange snarling grunts.

She crossed to the little window that opened into the corridor, and drew back the curtains. Pressed against the glass was a face, and as she stared at it every drop of blood seemed to freeze in her veins. It was human, and yet it was animal. Its teeth were bared like those of an angry dog: its flattened nostrils were distended. And in its eyes was a look of bestial savagery.

Suddenly it put its hand straight through the glass, and tried to clutch her, but she fell back half fainting on the bed. For a while the great hairy arm continued groping: then it was withdrawn, and she could hear it snarling angrily, evidently furious at having cut itself. And then to her unspeakable horror the door handle rattled violently. The thing was trying to get in.

The door creaked and groaned: she could see the panels bulging inwards. And in those few moments Judy experienced the supreme acme of human terror. For she knew the door handle would not hold. Already the wood was beginning to splinter, and in one last desperate throw for safety she tried to clamber through the porthole. But it was too small, and with a pitiful little moan she cowered back on the bed just as the door, with a final crash, was burst open,

and the thing came in. And it was then that something snapped in her brain, and Judy fainted.

When she opened her eyes again she found herself in darkness. She was lying on the ground, and for a while her mind refused to act. Then little by little it came back to her, and she bit her lip to prevent herself screaming. It wasn't some hideous nightmare: it was the truth. Something had come into her cabin, something that she dimly remembered as being of vast size, and unspeakably horrible. And it must have carried her off the yacht.

Where was she? She felt the ground with her hand and found it was hard earth. And suddenly the full horror of her position dawned on her: she was in the power of these awful creatures. From close beside her there came a movement, and involuntarily she gave a little cry. And then with a feeling of unutterable relief she heard a well-known voice.

"How are you feeling, miss?"

"Bill," she cried, "where are we? What's happened?"

"The same as happened in the Paquinetta," he answered grimly. "They've slaughtered or taken prisoner every soul in the yacht, and now we're in their power."

Some voices started jabbering Brazilian near by, and she asked Bill who they were.

"Some of the crew, miss. There are about ten of us altogether. The rest are dead."

"Thank God, they didn't kill you, Bill."

"It was that crack on the head in the motor-boat saved me, miss. I'd come to, and was lying dazed and sick in the bunk where they'd thrown me, when I heard the fight start. So I staggered up on deck unarmed as I was and ran right into two of them. It was so unexpected I didn't show any fight, and they just carted me off."

She forced herself to ask the question, though she dreaded the answer.

"Have they got Mr. Maitland too?"

"I haven't seen him, miss, or his cousin either."

"He may be able to do something," she said, hope springing up in her mind.

The sailor said nothing. In the first place he doubted if Jim could ever find them, and if he did what could he possibly do? There were scores of these

hideous monsters, and even if he succeeded in shooting a few of them, it would only make the others more savage.

"By the way, miss," he said at length, "have you got your revolver with you?"

"I haven't, Bill," she answered. "That brute Don Miguel took it from me."

And the sailor almost groaned aloud. No good now alarming her more than she was already, by telling her to blow out her brains in certain eventualities: they could only wait in agonising suspense.

"What will they do to us, Bill?" she asked tremulously.

"God knows, miss," he said gravely. "We've just got to keep our spirits up and hope for the best."

"But, Bill, are they human?"

"Half man, half beast, miss. You remember I told you. They've got a sort of language for I heard them talking, but to look at they're more like gorillas."

"I suppose," she said quietly, "they'll kill us."

And he dared make no reply. All that he could pray for was that they would kill her and that nothing worse should happen. He was unarmed himself: he was powerless to help her in any way. And the realisation of the girl's peril made him well-nigh sick with fear. He had tried to take note of the direction in which he had been brought, but it had proved hopeless. It had seemed a veritable maze of paths, and since for long stretches of the journey the moonlight had not penetrated into the forest, most of it had been done in darkness. All that he knew was that they were in some form of underground cave.

Two of the sailors near by were talking, and he understood sufficient Brazilian to get the gist of their remarks.

"Do you hear what those blokes are saying, miss," he said, when they had finished. "According to them some of the words these things use are a sort of Brazilian patois. And from what they heard the reason for the attack on the yacht was that their chief or king or something like that was killed this afternoon."

"Doesn't seem to help us much, does it?" she said with a pitiful little laugh. "Bill, wouldn't it be possible to escape? There must be a way out."

"First thing I thought of, miss. But the brutes have blocked the entrance of the tunnel we came in by."

"So that our only hope is Jim," she whispered under her breath.

They fell silent: and Judy's thoughts went back to that night in Hampstead when she had first met Jim and asked his advice about the treasure. Who, by the wildest stretch of imagination could have dreamed that it would have ended as it had? It was all so inconceivable that even now she had a feeling that she would wake up soon and find it was some fantastic nightmare. And suddenly she cried out almost hysterically.

"It can't be true, Bill. It is just like Alice in Alice in Wonderland. We'll find it's all a dream and these things are just a pack of cards."

And the sailor who had come on deck just in time to see Bully McIntyre's neck broken with a flick of the wrists could think of nothing to say. In fact he found himself praying that her reason might give: then at any rate she would be spared the mental horror that lay in front of her.

For the twentieth time he asked himself what was going to happen. How long were they going to be kept in this underground hole, and what was their fate going to be when they were taken out? Presumably the brutes were asleep resting after the fight: in which case it might be many hours before they knew.

Suddenly the silence was broken by the most extraordinary uproar from above them. The bell began clanging furiously: a chorus of bellowing grunts that increased in intensity as more and more of the brutes joined in almost drowned it. The ground over their heads shook violently: they could hear the lumbering footsteps passing backwards and forwards.

Gradually the clamour died away and the bell ceased, though a kind of deep chattering which still continued showed that their captors were very wide awake. It sounded as if something had excited them greatly, something which they were now discussing at length. And then clear above everything came an anguished cry.

"Help! For God's sake—help!"

Bill Blackett sat up with a jerk.

"That's not Mr. Maitland," he said positively, "though I know the voice."

"It was the dwarf," cried the girl. "I'd know his voice anywhere."

"The dwarf," said the sailor slowly. "And he was blind. That means they've been on board our motor-boat."

"And it means," said the girl excitedly, "that they haven't got Jim or Percy. He was left there alone."

Bill Blackett said nothing. Did it mean that of necessity? Or did it mean that Jim and his cousin had put up a fight and been killed, and that the dwarf being helpless had merely been captured?

The excitement above continued, though it was more controlled. One of the monsters seemed to be holding forth to the others, and when he'd finished his audience emitted a series of bellows that seemed to betoken approval. And almost immediately after there came, from the entrance to their prison, the sound of the barrier being removed, and the soft padding of bare feet on the ground. One of the brutes was with them.

They could hear its heavy breathing as it stumbled about, and suddenly there came a yell from one of the sailors—an Englishman.

"It's got me," he screamed. "Save me, boys."

His voice died away: the barrier crashed back, and Bill Blackett wiped the sweat from his forehead. One of them had been taken: whose turn was it going to be next? Impossible to help the poor devil: impossible to do anything except sit in the darkness and wait.

Above them the noise had again increased, and mingled with it came the shouts of the dwarf and the sailor. And then once again the bell began tolling, whilst the rest of the uproar ceased abruptly.

There was something almost solemn in the monotonous clanging: it sounded as if it might have been the accompaniment of some religious ceremony. It continued for about five minutes: then in the silence that followed one deep grunting voice could be heard. And suddenly one of the Brazilians near them cried out in horror and said something to one of his companions, something which once again Bill Blackett could understand roughly, and which caused him to stare into the darkness with haggard eyes. Sacrifice: human sacrifice to some god: that was what was going on above their heads.

"Help me, you little swine. Don't sit there doing nothing."

The voice of the sailor who had been taken came to them faintly, and Bill cursed under his breath. The poor devil was English anyhow, and it was intolerable to have to sit there helpless while he was being killed, perhaps tortured.

"Help me. For God's sake, say something to these brutes."

A frenzy of fear rang in the man's voice: evidently the end, whatever it was, was drawing near. And then it came.

"One of them has got me. One of them has got me."

The scream was almost inarticulate, and subsided into a meaningless babble of words which was drowned in the triumphant outburst of noise from the spectators. And after a while that too, subsided, and all was silent once more.

"What does it mean, Bill," said Judy in a trembling voice.

"It means, miss, that now we're one hand short," he answered quietly.

"You mean he's dead."

"That's it, miss, I'm afraid. They've killed him."

"And that's what is going to happen to us," she went on steadily.

"It looks like it, miss," he said.

"How do you think they did it?"

"I haven't an idea," he answered. "From what he called out he seemed to be appealing to that dwarf to help him."

"He said, 'One of them has got me.' Oh! my God, Bill," her voice rose to a scream, "can't you strangle me now?"

"Steady on, miss," said the sailor gently, though his heart was sick within him. "Don't let's give up hope yet. Maybe Mr. Maitland will find some way of escape for us."

But his voice lacked conviction and he knew it.

"Don't try and deceive me, Bill." With an effort she pulled herself together. "Things have gone too far for that. Do you think we've got a chance?"

"Yes," he cried stoutly. "I do. Provided Mr. Maitland is still free."

"And if he isn't?"

"Then our number is up, miss."

There was no good beating about the bush, he reflected: the girl was thoroughbred and had better know the truth.

"That's what I wanted to find out," she said. "Now, Bill, we've neither of us got a revolver, so I want you to do something for me. These sailors have all got knives. Will you please borrow one?"

"I have a knife myself, miss," he said quietly.

"Good. Then if the end comes, Bill: if we have to give up hope will you give me your solemn word of honour that you will kill me."

The sailor swallowed hard for a few moments, and then he answered her in a husky voice.

"If there's no hope left, miss, I give you my word of honour that I will kill you."

And with a little sigh of relief Judy Draycott stretched out her hand to him in the darkness. She knew he would not fail her.

"Will it be long, Bill, do you think?"

"Heaven knows, miss," he said, and even as he spoke there came the sound of the barrier being removed from the end of the tunnel, and a flickering light danced on the walls of their prison. One of the monsters carrying a torch which threw out great volumes of black smoke was coming towards them. Others were following, and the girl crept closer to him.

"Now, Bill—now. Quick—you promised."

He drew his clasp knife, and opened the big blade. The sweat was pouring off his forehead: his hand was shaking like that of a man with the ague. And he was just nerving himself for the supreme effort, when suddenly, clear and distinct there came a sound that made him pause. It was faint but unmistakable: it was the siren of the yacht. And who could be blowing it?

The monsters paused: the prisoners dimly outlined in the smoky light sat up listening. Steadily it went on blaring: long, long, long: long, short, long. Over and over again, until the meaning dawned on Bill. The morse code: O.K. Someone was sending those two letters into the night; who could it be but Jim Maitland? And with almost a sob of relief he replaced his knife in his pocket. In view of that message there was still hope.

CHAPTER XII

ALL around them the sailors were muttering excitedly. Even though they knew nothing of the existence of Jim Maitland, they realised that some human agency must be at work, and that therefore there was at any rate somebody who was not a prisoner.

And the monsters themselves seemed to realize it too. The one in front who appeared to be the leader was conferring with two others, stopping every now and then to listen to the siren which still went on monotonously, whilst the smoke from the torches made Judy's eyes smart and caught her in the throat.

At last they came to a decision, and the leader gave a gruff roar which was evidently an order. It was answered from the other side of the smoke, and the prisoners heard the sounds of hurried movements which quickly died away in the distance.

"Some of the brutes have gone to investigate," muttered Bill to the girl. "I wonder what is going to happen now?"

But what he wondered far more, though he did not say so, was how Jim, assuming it was him, was going to get from the yacht in time to be of any help. The sacrifice that had already taken place had not been a long affair.

"Bill, they're coming nearer."

The girl clutched his hand terrified, as the three torch bearers advanced into the centre of the circle of prisoners, their faces looking, if possible, more incredibly evil in the flickering yellow light. And then they knelt down in a row and remained motionless, their gleaming eyes fixed on the entrance of the tunnel. Something was coming along the passage towards them.

Fascinated in spite of their terror the captives stared into the darkness. What new horror was going to reveal itself? At last they saw it, dimly outlined in the smoke, moving slowly forward a step at a time. It was another of the monsters and it was carrying something in its arms. Foot by foot it advanced, and then bending forward it deposited its burden on the floor, so that the light of the torches shone on it clearly. And even Bill Blackett gasped in amazement: the burden was nothing less than the blind dwarf.

"Merciful Heavens! miss," he whispered, "they're worshipping him. They think he's some sort of god."

Over and over again the three torch bearers prostrated themselves so that their foreheads touched the ground, whilst from the darkness behind there

commenced a deep chanting noise which grew in volume till they were almost deafened. Then, abruptly, it ceased: the three torch bearers straightened up: silence reigned. The only sign of movement came from the dwarf whose head was turning from side to side in a frenzy of fear.

Suddenly one of the monsters began what seemed to be an address. Sounds which were clearly meant to be words were strung together in sentences; and, whenever he paused, his companions, unseen in the smoke, answered with grunts of approval.

To Bill the whole thing was complete gibberish: he could make neither head nor tail of what the brute was saying. Once or twice he caught a word that seemed to have a Spanish ring about it, but except for that it was merely a jumble of meaningless sounds, which, coupled with the stifling fumes from the torches tended to make him half conscious. He still held Judy's hand in his, and he knew by the pressure of her head on his shoulder and her heavy breathing that it was affecting her in the same way. All the better, he reflected stupidly: pray heaven she remained in that condition till Jim Maitland came—if he ever did.

And then suddenly one of the sailors opposite burst into a wild torrent of Brazilian, to which Bill forced himself to listen. He only got the bare gist of it, but that was sufficient to make his mouth go dry, and tighten the grip of his arm round the girl's waist. Sacrifice—he'd guessed that already, but he had hoped for time. Now from what this man was screaming out, it was to be at once, unless... He listened intently: then he too began to shout.

"Shut up, you lily-livered swine," he roared furiously. "By God! if I could get at you I'd cut your throat."

The monsters had ceased as if surprised at this unexpected interruption, and Bill scrambled to his feet.

"Hi! you blind man," he cried, "I don't know your name, but you listen to me."

The dwarf turned his agonised face in Bill's direction.

"These things that have got us think you're a god. Do you get me? What you say goes. It's up to you to decide what is going to happen. Now there's a lady here—just a young slip of a girl. And somebody has got to be sacrificed to you. At once. Now we've got to gain time, do you see. There's a chance of our being rescued. And according to that spawn of Satan opposite what these monsters have been saying is that it's either got to be Miss Draycott or six of us. Now I'll be one of the six, but as there's a God above unless you say that you wish her spared, I'll get at you and kill you."

"How can I say anything," quavered the dwarf, "I don't know how to speak to them."

"Leave it to me," howled the Brazilian sailor in broken English. "I tell all right. I make understand. Why six of us—for one girl—you damned Englishman."

And then breaking into Brazilian, a torrent of words came pouring from his mouth to which Bill could only listen impotently. The three torch bearers had turned their heads and were looking at him: the one that had carried in the dwarf seemed to be listening also.

Suddenly Judy clutched Bill's arm.

"Listen," she whispered tensely. "Didn't you hear something?"

"Nothing except that damned dago," he answered. "What was it, miss?"

"There: there: again." She was shaking with excitement. "Bill: it was a voice: it was Jim's voice."

"Steady on, miss. Mr. Maitland can't have got here from the yacht yet."

"I don't care: it was his voice. Oh! Listen, Bill: listen."

The sailor craned his ears, and at that moment there came a momentary pause from the sailor opposite. And in that pause, quite distinctly from somewhere above their heads, there came a low voice:

"Worship the dwarf."

And the voice was the voice of Jim Maitland. Apparently the others had not heard it, and Bill turned to the girl, by this time as excited as she was.

"You're right, miss," he muttered. "It's Mr. Maitland. Come on: let's do what he says."

The Brazilian was off again, as Bill, taking Judy by the hand advanced into the circle of light. And then with the utmost solemnity they prostrated themselves on the ground in front of Dresler. The sailor, surprised by this new development ceased talking: the monsters watched in silence. And the dwarf, sensing that something strange was happening called out in a terrified voice.

"What is it!" he cried. "Tell me for God's sake. I'm going mad."

"Keep it going, miss," muttered Bill. "It's our only hope. Good Lord! what's happening now."

There had come a sudden stir amongst the ape-men, and out of the corner of his eye Bill saw that a beam of light was flickering round the walls. They jibbered and chattered to themselves as they watched it: then with one accord

they threw themselves on their faces. It was a message from their god. At times it shone on the clouds of smoke: then finding an opening it would pierce through them and light up one of the beast faces. But always it moved on until at length it rested on the sailor who had begun speaking again. And there it remained motionless, till his voice died away and he stood there staring upwards stupidly.

There came a triumphant shout from one of the monsters, and the three torch bearers sprang on the Brazilian who screamed like a wounded hare. The one who had carried Dresler in seized the dwarf and pulled him up, and a few seconds later all the ape-men had gone. So had the Brazilian sailor. The prisoners were alone again in the darkness, with only the reeking fumes left by the torches to remind them of the incredible scene they had just witnessed.

But to Judy everything was different: Jim was there. How he had reached them: what he was going to do next: how he had done what he had done she did not stop to ask. The mere fact that he was on the spot was good enough for her: somehow or other he was going to save them.

Suddenly she realised Bill was speaking.

"I can't make it out, miss," he was saying. "There must be a hole in the roof somewhere through which he shone an electric torch. And then he worked on the superstitions of these things. But how did he get here: how did he know where we were? And how is he going to escape them now?"

From above was coming a repetition of the sounds of the former sacrifice: the Brazilian sailor was following in the steps of the Englishman. And Judy covered her ears with her hands in her endeavour not to hear the poor wretch's screams of terror. At last they ceased: the second victim had paid the penalty, and for a while there was silence.

She had kept casting feverish glances in the direction of the passage, hoping against hope that the flicker of Jim's torch might suddenly appear, or that she might hear his voice close to her. But the darkness had remained unbroken, and the only voice she had heard had been that of the poor brute yelling above them.

And now as the silence continued she began to try and get some order into the chaos of her mind. Bill was right of course: for some reason or other these horrible creatures regarded the blind dwarf as a god. And in him it seemed to her lay their best chance of safety. The trouble was that, not unnaturally he was more terrified than any of them. They, at any rate, could see what they were up against: whereas to him the situation must appear doubly awful. To be

utterly helpless in their hands: to be picked up and carried by them would be enough to send him off his head. And if that happened—what then? He would be useless as far as helping any of them to escape was concerned.

Time dragged on; still no sign of Jim. And after a while she began to lose heart. What could one man do, even a man like him, against a horde of these foul monsters. Strong though he was she realised that he would be like a child in the hands of one of them: what then could he hope to do against fifty? Had he just postponed the inevitable for a short time? Would it have been better if Bill had not shut up his knife?

And then another ghastly thought struck her: supposing they had already got him. And killed him. Some of those yells might have come from Jim. And if that was so she realised that she didn't mind what happened to her.

At length nature asserted herself and she began to doze. Around her all the others were fast asleep, except Bill who forced himself to keep awake on the chance of getting another message from Jim. And it was his sudden grip on her arm that awoke her, as much as the noise of a dull boom accompanied by a distinct earth tremor.

"What is it, Bill?" she cried.

"Sounded to me like an explosion, miss," he answered. "And it came from a long way off. Seems to have woken the brutes again, too."

Above them they could hear the ape-men moving about and talking to one another excitedly. And then from a great distance there came faintly a roar. It was caught up and repeated from closer at hand: then again from quite near by. A signal of warning was being communicated through the forest, and the effect on the monsters above was instantaneous. Pandemonium broke loose: the ground over their heads shook so much that lumps of earth were dislodged and fell on them.

"Can't have been a big gun," said Bill thoughtfully. "There couldn't be a warship here, and if there was she wouldn't fire. Besides we'd have heard the shell burst."

He struck a match and looked at his watch: two hours now before daylight. And he was just blowing it out when his eyes fell on a twisted piece of paper lying at his feet. He snatched it up, and opened it out: it was a note from Jim.

"It's from Mr. Maitland, miss," he cried excitedly. "He must have dropped it through when he spoke to us that time. You read it while I light some more matches."

With their heads together they pored over it.

"Do not be alarmed whatever happens," it ran. "Obey me implicitly, and we'll do it yet. As a last resource I have a revolver. The crucial time will be after the explosion. Then keep your heads close together."

"That's now, miss," muttered Bill. "And here come the brutes back again."

The torch bearers were returning along the passage: the others came crowding behind them. And it was clear that they were in a furious passion. Angry, snarling grunts came from all sides and the prisoners cowered back against the walls. The dwarf instead of being placed reverently on the ground was thrown down with such force that he lay there half stunned: evidently his period of godhead was over. And the leader of the monsters, its face convulsed with bestial rage shambled round the circle peering at each victim in turn.

Suddenly it paused, and a hush fell on them. Once again that mysterious circle of light was playing round on their upturned faces, and Judy clutched Bill's hand. Jim was there once more. The light danced here and there, until it finally centred on the dwarf where it remained steady. And with a bellow of rage one of the ape-men picked him up.

Instantly the light began to move again, and the great brutes paused. What further victim did their god desire save this false imposter? Round the waiting circle the beam moved, lighting up each face in turn and then on to the next. And suddenly Bill remembered the letter.

"Then keep your heads close together."

He leaned over till his cheek touched Judy's.

"Orders, miss," he whispered. "It's us this time, or I'm a Dutchman."

He could feel her body quivering against his; the light was only two away. Once more it moved: and then again. Their two faces showed up clear in the beam, and the beam remained steady.

An ape-man dashed at them: the light went out, and the monster paused. Once more it shone out, and from above them came the order "Get up." Bill helped her up, the light shining on their faces as they moved. And once more two of the monsters came at them. Instantly the light went out again, and the brutes halted, evidently puzzled. Their god clearly did not wish these two victims to be touched.

"Move."

Another laconic order, and with the light again illuminating their heads they walked towards the entrance tunnel. The ape-men thronged round them till Judy thought she was going to faint with horror. But they did not touch her, and with Bill's arm supporting her she stumbled along the narrow passage.

The beam from above had ceased: only the flickering yellow light from the three torches showed the way. In front of her she could see the agonised face of the dwarf, as he was carried along by one of the monsters, and in spite of all he had done, she could not help feeling sorry for him. He could be no help to them now: he was just a fellow victim more helpless far than they were.

At length they reached the open air, and she drew great gulps of it into her lungs until she felt steadier on her feet. Then still clinging to Bill's arm she peered round half hoping to see Jim. It was dark, but not with the overpowering blackness of the underground prison they had left. And as her eyes grew accustomed to it she realised they were standing in a big clearing. The shadowy forms of the ape-men were moving about: close by them stood two of the hideous monsters. And one of them suddenly put out its hand and touched her on the shoulder.

She gave a little scream, and shrank closer to Bill. But the pressure continued and she found herself being forced forward, while the sailor kept close by her side. The clearing narrowed into a track, then widened out again into another open space. And the ape-man's grip tightened so that she stood still.

The monsters were curiously silent: there was a feeling of tension in the air. By the light of the torches she could see their eyes shining as they crouched in a semi-circle round her. In front of her stood the one carrying the dwarf, and at its feet there gleamed a streak of something on the ground. Water: the smoky flames were reflected in it as by a mirror. And beyond the water—nothing.

Suddenly a sound that was half a gasp ran round the motionless watchers, and Bill clutched her arm. The darkness beyond the water was becoming faintly luminous. The monster holding the dwarf put his burden on the ground and fell flat on its face: the others prostrated themselves likewise, as the luminosity increased. And with curiosity overcoming her terror Judy stared at this extraordinary phenomenon.

The centre of the light seemed to be about six feet from the ground, and as it grew stronger and stronger the ape-men began to manifest signs of increasing terror. The torch bearers had dropped their burdens, which lay smoking on the ground, and had thrown themselves on their faces also. Only Judy and Bill still

stood up, with the misshapen figure of Dresler just in front of them moving restlessly about on his stunted legs.

At last the light focussed itself into a definite nucleus: a circle some three inches in diameter that shone steadily. Around the circle it grew fainter till it faded into the general darkness. Gradually the nucleus increased in size, and as it did so the agitation of the monsters became extreme. A low wailing noise came from them, and the leader began to beat its great chest with its hands. And then with startling suddenness the nucleus of light expanded and grew until it took the form of a luminous face hanging in mid air.

"It's a trick, miss," muttered Bill, though his voice was shaking a little. "It must be a trick of Mr. Maitland's."

She stared at it fascinated, and though she knew Bill was right her mouth felt a little dry, and her knees were inclined to shake. There was something inconceivably ghostly about the dismembered head floating in the air in front of her, with its reflection glinting in the water. Its features were Mongolian and evil, and in its forehead was a black patch from which no light shone.

The monsters were beside themselves with fright, though none of them seemed to be able to pluck up enough courage to go. And she was just wondering what was going to happen next when there came a scream from the dwarf. The leading ape-man had risen to his feet and was holding Dresler high above his head. It gave a heave with its mighty shoulders, and flung the dwarf clean over the water towards the shining head. Then once again it threw itself on its face.

They heard the dwarf land with a crash in some undergrowth: then silence, broken only by a faint rustling noise. A further sacrifice had been offered—but how? The fall could not have killed him. Motionless the monsters waited, their eyes fixed on the spot. And then came a shout from the dwarf.

"Help me! They're all round me. Ah-h——"

The shriek died away in his throat, and Judy gave a little moan. There was something too horrible in this unknown terror of the darkness. What were all round him? They could hear him stumbling about on the other side of the water moaning pitifully. And then again he shrieked.

"I can't stand this," muttered Bill. "The poor brute is blind."

He took a step forward, and then occurred a thing so unexpected that he stopped, rooted to the spot. There came a hissing noise, and leaving a trail of sparks behind it, a rocket soared up from behind the luminous face. It burst above them, and for a space the clearing was lit up as brightly as if it was day.

With yells of terror the ape-men scattered in every direction, until Bill and Judy were left standing alone in the centre. And as if turned to stone they stared fascinated at the sight in front of them. The head was the head of an idol, its luminosity no longer showing in the brilliant light that flooded the place. But it was not at the idol they were looking.

Standing below it, in some low undergrowth was the dwarf. And even as they watched him a deadly yellow-brown head raised itself to a level with his face, and struck twice. They looked at the edge of the water: the coarse grass was moving. Another swaying head raised itself and hissed angrily: another and yet another. They watched them writhing in every direction as the dwarf blundered about: they saw him bitten twice more before the light died out. The place was a heaving mass of snakes.

Then as the head once more grew luminous, and the smoking torches still guttered on the floor, there came a sudden splash. The dwarf by chance had found the water and came blundering through it. His face was distorted with agony: twelve times had he been bitten. And he barely reached the edge before he gave one final moan, fell on his face and with a last dreadful convulsion lay still. Emil Dresler, blackmailer, white slave trafficker and arch-scoundrel was dead.

All round them the ape-men moved restlessly in the dense growth that formed the sides of the clearing. Occasionally they saw two gleaming eyes staring at them, but the brutes themselves did not dare to venture into the open. And then the movement ceased: eyes were watching from everywhere, as if waiting for something.

Judy turned round: what was happening now? The leading ape-man was just behind her: its hands were coming out to seize her. And with a pitiful scream—"Bill save me," she felt herself picked up as if she was a child above the brute's head, and carried towards the edge of the water. She was the next sacrifice.

Bill had sprung forward fumbling madly with his knife, when suddenly she found herself deposited once more on the ground. And forcing herself to look at the monstrous thing towering above her she saw that it was staring at the idol with a puzzled expression in its eyes. She looked herself, and to her amazement saw that the luminous head had disappeared. And yet there was still a diffused light which came from the direction of the idol.

Two of the torches had died out: the third gave but a feeble flicker, so that the darkness was almost complete. And gradually there rose from behind the idol two shining hands followed once more by the face. The idol itself was moving,

and with a bellow of fear the ape-man flung himself down. Upwards rose the hands, but Judy with every nerve tingling had her eyes riveted on the face. For now the features were not evil and Mongolian: the features were the features of Jim Maitland. What he had done, what trick he was playing she neither knew nor cared: Jim was there and nothing else mattered.

Fascinated she watched him: what was he going to do next? Very steadily the face rose till it seemed an incredible height in the air. Then it came rushing through the air towards her, and she realised Jim had jumped. From all around her came roars of terror, and the sounds of heavy bodies stampeding through the undergrowth. Their god had come to life.

Jim landed in the water, and then with measured step he approached the one prostrate ape-man who remained. It rose to its feet and backed away whimpering, followed by those terrible shining hands, and face. And as Jim passed Judy he muttered "Follow me."

It forced the monster to the entrance of the clearing; then with a sudden bound he sprang at it, and placed both his hands on its chest. And there marked in fire on the brute's body were the imprints of his fingers. They remained there glowing in the darkness, and as the ape-man looked down and saw the marks of its god gleaming on its own chest its nerve broke completely. It gave one gigantic bound, and disappeared into the forest: the three of them were alone.

"Come," said Jim quietly, "We've got no time to lose. The effect of my ju-ju may not last long."

"But how did you do it, Jim?" cried the girl breathlessly.

"That will keep, Judy," he answered. "What we've got to do now is to make tracks for the motor-boat and Percy."

"What about the others, Mr. Maitland?" said Bill.

"We'll open the barrier for them," said Jim, "but after that they must fend for themselves. There will be no room for them on board the boat."

"What about the yacht?"

"Unless I'm very much mistaken there is no longer a yacht," answered the other gravely. "Percy has done his work passing well. Now then—heave on this, Bill: again so—and again."

The heavy barrier slid back: the way to the tunnel was open.

"You are free," shouted Jim down it. "Make your way to the north end of the island, and we'll try and rescue you later. Quick now, you two: we can't have them following us."

He darted across the main clearing the other two at his heels. A luminous patch glowed faintly on a tree, which marked the entrance to one of the paths, and a moment later they were running down the track. They came to a fork: another luminous spot showed them the direction. And at every point where there might be any doubt the same sign was found.

"I marked the places where we might go wrong on my way," explained Jim. "Lord! but it's been touch and go."

He slowed up to a walk: then stopped to listen. From behind them still came the sounds of the ape-men calling to one another, and once they heard a shrill human scream.

"I don't give much for the chances of those other poor devils," said Jim gravely. "But it would have had to be all or none, and we couldn't have taken more than two at the utmost."

He pushed on again, with the luminosity gradually fading from his face and hands, until at length he came to the alligator pool where he forked right down stream. And after about a quarter of a mile he let out a hail which was answered from in front of them. Percy was there in the motor-boat.

"Yes, dear," he said quietly as he lifted her on board, "it was touch and go."

For a second they were alone, and she put her arms round his neck.

"I don't know how you did it, Jim," she whispered, "but I think you're the most wonderful man on earth."

Which was the moment that Percy would choose to appear.

"Welcome, wench," he remarked. "Dear me! how very strange. I'd no idea that phosphorus travelled aerially so to speak."

"What are you blathering about, you unspeakable mess," demanded Jim, and then happening to glance at Judy's face he made a dive for his cousin. For her lips were luminous, and the method by which they had become so was not hard to guess.

"I just can't believe I'm back here," said the girl a few minutes later. "Can you, Bill?"

The boat was nosing down the river towards the open sea.

"I can't, miss," he said solemnly. "How did you manage it, Mr. Maitland?"

"Well, Bill, one thing stood out a mile."

The first streaks of dawn were beginning to show in the east, and the three of them were sprawling on the deck with Percy at the wheel.

"The only possible hope was to frighten those brutes by something which they would regard as supernatural. Gun work was useless: there were far too many of them. And it was then that I remembered that I'd stowed a pot of luminous paint amongst our kit for the very purpose I used it for in the forest—marking a trail by night.

"Now Percy and I had been to the spot where we found you yesterday afternoon, and while there we had fallen through an ancient type of trap into the very place where you were imprisoned. And there we killed one of the monsters. But the barrier was open at the end of the tunnel so we escaped all right. The point however is that I knew where you would be taken to, which was a very great advantage.

"Then came the second discovery—made by Percy. For what purpose they brought it I don't know—probably in case blasting was necessary—but there was a large quantity of dynamite on board the yacht. So we concocted a plan. By the way—what happened to her, Percy?"

"All in good time, Jim: you carry on."

"Percy was to land me complete with phosphorus paint, and then return to the yacht. Three quarters of an hour later, so as to give me time to get to you he was to let drive on the siren. I told him to send O.K. to cheer you up, but the real object was to draw as many of the monsters away from you and back to the yacht as possible. It succeeded admirably: at least thirty of them went crashing past me in the forest."

"And thirty of them came on board the yacht," put in Percy. "When I heard 'em down there by the water's edge, I laid a ten minute fuse to the dynamite, and hooked it in the motor-boat. She split open like a rotten apple, Jim, and sank at once, and I think the little pretties were all in her at the time."

They had reached the open sea, and all around them the water was strewn with wreckage.

"Pity," said Jim. "She was a nice boat. However so much for that. To go back to you and Judy. I had no idea, of course, what was going to happen, or how those brutes proposed to deal with you. I'd heard the screams of a man as I went through the forest."

"That was the Englishman they sacrificed first," said Bill.

"Also shouts from someone else whose voice seemed familiar. And you can guess my amazement when I realised as I got nearer that that someone else was none other than Dresler, who had been abducted from the motor-boat earlier. Moreover they were obviously making a god of him, and the reason suddenly dawned on me. The golden idol which they worship is made in the form of a misshapen dwarf, and they probably thought that Dresler was this idol come to life.

"However all those who hadn't gone to the yacht were below with you, and by peering through a chink in the booby trap, which apparently is not set when they are there I could see you quite distinctly. And I could also hear that unpleasant Brazilian sailor. So since it was essential to find out the way they went to work, I thought he would be an admirable person to start on.

"Well the trick with the electric torch succeeded, and they brought him up whilst I hid in the undergrowth. They lashed his feet and his hands—just as we found Lopez, Percy—and threw him over the water towards the idol. And there they left him to be bitten to death by fer de lance and poisonous adders—just about as deadly a combination as you could get. Moreover a complication on which I had not reckoned.

"You see I'd already made up my mind that the only hope lay in playing the fool with their idol. But the point that now arose was how the devil I was going to get to it. A fer de lance is no respecter of persons, and as you saw for yourselves that ground was alive with the brutes, which were imprisoned there by the water. However I knew it had got to be chanced, but I had to wait till the explosion took place. I guessed that would rouse them, and it was essential to get you and Bill up from below while it was still dark, or else my luminous paint fell flat.

"It all worked according to plan except that for some reason or other they turned on Dresler. However that didn't matter: he richly deserved all he got. I got through the snake belt by wrapping my coat round my legs; then I stood behind the idol on a sort of pedestal place. And the rest you know. First I rubbed its face with the paint: then I hoped that the rocket would finish them. But it didn't. So I covered the idol's head with my coat and decorated my own hands and face keeping hidden behind it while I did so. And that's that."

"Not bad for you either, James," remarked Percy kindly. "Sorry I wasn't in at the death but I quite enjoyed myself this end. Great fun seeing that yacht blow up. Hullo! do my eyes deceive me, or are those some of the little pets on the

edge of the swamp?"

Jim snatched up the field-glasses. The sun had risen: the mist had lifted from the bog which stretched away to their left. And as he watched a peculiar smile flickered round his lips. There were more than a dozen of the ape-men, and they were clustering round a small squat object that lay on the ground. Then with a great effort they lifted it, and flung it into the swamp. For a while they stood there: then they vanished into the forest.

"Half a million gone west," he remarked. "Assuredly I damaged that god's reputation. And I guess it's just as well that I spent some of my spare time removing this while I stood behind it."

From his pocket he drew a huge red stone the size of a hen's egg. It lay in his hand like a ball of crimson fire; then he held it out to Judy.

"That's for you, bless you," he said. "And you richly deserve it after all you've gone through."

She looked at it quietly for a moment or two: then she glanced up at Jim.

"It's a ruby, isn't it?" she asked.

"It certainly is," he answered. "Moreover I should say that it literally is priceless."

"And you give it to me?"

"That," he remarked, "is the idea."

She stared at him steadily, a strange look in her eyes. Then with a quick movement she flung it overboard, and with that streak of glittering red light there vanished for ever the last of the treasure.

"I couldn't bear it, Jim," she cried. "It's haunted. We would never have a moment's peace while we had it."

"We?" he said, taking both her hands in his.

The others had gone below: they were alone.

"That," she repeated softly, "is the idea."

THUS ended the strange adventure of Lone Tree Island. No trace was ever found of the members of the yacht's crew, who perforce had been left behind: in fact the island was reported to be uninhabited. But sometimes o' nights an expression comes over Jim's face which makes Judy look at him suspiciously. Is there still treasure hidden somewhere in that forest guarded by the survivors

of the ape-men? Is there perchance another god of solid gold in some undiscovered clearing? Who knows? And as far as Judy is concerned there is one person who certainly never will—her husband.

THE END