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Title: Dead Men Tell No Tales

Author: E. W. Hornung

Posting Date: October 1, 2008 [EBook #1703]

Release Date: April, 1999

Last Updated: March 15, 2018

Language: English

Character set encoding: UTF-8

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DEAD MEN TELL NO TALES

By E. W. Hornung

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CHAPTER I. LOVE ON THE OCEAN

Nothing is so easy as falling in love on a long sea voyage, except

falling out of love. Especially was this the case in the days when the

wooden clippers did finely to land you in Sydney or in Melbourne under

the four full months. We all saw far too much of each other, unless,

indeed, we were to see still more. Our superficial attractions mutually

exhausted, we lost heart and patience in the disappointing strata

which lie between the surface and the bed-rock of most natures. My own

experience was confined to the round voyage of the Lady Jermyn, in the

year 1853. It was no common experience, as was only too well known

at the time. And I may add that I for my part had not the faintest

intention of falling in love on board; nay, after all these years,

let me confess that I had good cause to hold myself proof against such

weakness. Yet we carried a young lady, coming home, who, God knows,

might have made short work of many a better man!

Eva Denison was her name, and she cannot have been more than nineteen

years of age. I remember her telling me that she had not yet come out,

the very first time I assisted her to promenade the poop. My own name

was still unknown to her, and yet I recollect being quite fascinated by

her frankness and self-possession. She was exquisitely young, and yet

ludicrously old for her years; had been admirably educated, chiefly

abroad, and, as we were soon to discover, possessed accomplishments

which would have made the plainest old maid a popular personage on board

ship. Miss Denison, however, was as beautiful as she was young, with the

bloom of ideal health upon her perfect skin. She had a wealth of lovely

hair, with strange elusive strands of gold among the brown, that drowned

her ears (I thought we were to have that mode again?) in sunny ripples;

and a soul greater than the mind, and a heart greater than either, lay

sleeping somewhere in the depths of her grave, gray eyes.

We were at sea together so many weeks. I cannot think what I was made of

then!

It was in the brave old days of Ballarat and Bendigo, when ship after

ship went out black with passengers and deep with stores, to bounce home

with a bale or two of wool, and hardly hands enough to reef topsails

in a gale. Nor was this the worst; for not the crew only, but, in many

cases, captain and officers as well, would join in the stampede to the

diggings; and we found Hobson's Bay the congested asylum of all manner

of masterless and deserted vessels. I have a lively recollection of our

skipper's indignation when the pilot informed him of this disgraceful

fact. Within a fortnight, however, I met the good man face to face upon

the diggings. It is but fair to add that the Lady Jermyn lost every

officer and man in the same way, and that the captain did obey tradition

to the extent of being the last to quit his ship. Nevertheless, of

all who sailed by her in January, I alone was ready to return at the

beginning of the following July.

I had been to Ballarat. I had given the thing a trial. For the most

odious weeks I had been a licensed digger on Black Hill Flats; and I had

actually failed to make running expenses. That, however, will surprise

you the less when I pause to declare that I have paid as much as four

shillings and sixpence for half a loaf of execrable bread; that my mate

and I, between us, seldom took more than a few pennyweights of gold-dust

in any one day; and never once struck pick into nugget, big or little,

though we had the mortification of inspecting the “mammoth masses” of

which we found the papers full on landing, and which had brought the

gold-fever to its height during our very voyage. With me, however, as

with many a young fellow who had turned his back on better things, the

malady was short-lived. We expected to make our fortunes out of hand,

and we had reckoned without the vermin and the villainy which rendered

us more than ever impatient of delay. In my fly-blown blankets I dreamt

of London until I hankered after my chambers and my club more than after

much fine gold. Never shall I forget my first hot bath on getting back

to Melbourne; it cost five shillings, but it was worth five pounds, and

is altogether my pleasantest reminiscence of Australia.

There was, however, one slice of luck in store for me. I found the dear

old Lady Jermyn on the very eve of sailing, with a new captain, a new

crew, a handful of passengers (chiefly steerage), and nominally no cargo

at all. I felt none the less at home when I stepped over her familiar

side.

In the cuddy we were only five, but a more uneven quintette I defy you

to convene. There was a young fellow named Ready, packed out for

his health, and hurrying home to die among friends. There was an

outrageously lucky digger, another invalid, for he would drink nothing

but champagne with every meal and at any minute of the day, and I have

seen him pitch raw gold at the sea-birds by the hour together. Miss

Denison was our only lady, and her step-father, with whom she was

travelling, was the one man of distinction on board. He was a Portuguese

of sixty or thereabouts, Senhor Joaquin Santos by name; at first it was

incredible to me that he had no title, so noble was his bearing; but

very soon I realized that he was one of those to whom adventitious

honors can add no lustre. He treated Miss Denison as no parent ever

treated a child, with a gallantry and a courtliness quite beautiful to

watch, and not a little touching in the light of the circumstances under

which they were travelling together. The girl had gone straight from

school to her step-father's estate on the Zambesi, where, a few months

later, her mother had died of the malaria. Unable to endure the place

after his wife's death, Senhor Santos had taken ship to Victoria, there

to seek fresh fortune with results as indifferent as my own. He was

now taking Miss Denison back to England, to make her home with other

relatives, before he himself returned to Africa (as he once told me) to

lay his bones beside those of his wife. I hardly know which of the pair

I see more plainly as I write--the young girl with her soft eyes and her

sunny hair, or the old gentleman with the erect though wasted figure,

the noble forehead, the steady eye, the parchment skin, the white

imperial, and the eternal cigarette between his shrivelled lips.

No need to say that I came more in contact with the young girl. She was

not less charming in my eyes because she provoked me greatly as I came

to know her intimately. She had many irritating faults. Like most young

persons of intellect and inexperience, she was hasty and intolerant in

nearly all her judgments, and rather given to being critical in a crude

way. She was very musical, playing the guitar and singing in a style

that made our shipboard concerts vastly superior to the average of their

order; but I have seen her shudder at the efforts of less gifted folks

who were also doing their best; and it was the same in other directions

where her superiority was less specific. The faults which are most

exasperating in another are, of course, one's own faults; and I confess

that I was very critical of Eva Denison's criticisms. Then she had

a little weakness for exaggeration, for unconscious egotism in

conversation, and I itched to tell her so. I felt so certain that the

girl had a fine character underneath, which would rise to noble heights

in stress or storm: all the more would I long now to take her in hand

and mould her in little things, and anon to take her in my arms just as

she was. The latter feeling was resolutely crushed. To be plain, I had

endured what is euphemistically called “disappointment” already; and,

not being a complete coxcomb, I had no intention of courting a second.

Yet, when I write of Eva Denison, I am like to let my pen outrun my

tale. I lay the pen down, and a hundred of her sayings ring in my

ears, with my own contradictious comments, that I was doomed so soon

to repent; a hundred visions of her start to my eyes; and there is the

trade-wind singing in the rigging, and loosening a tress of my darling's

hair, till it flies like a tiny golden streamer in the tropic sun.

There, it is out! I have called her what she was to be in my heart ever

after. Yet at the time I must argue with her--with her! When all my

courage should have gone to love-making, I was plucking it up to sail as

near as I might to plain remonstrance! I little dreamt how the ghost of

every petty word was presently to return and torture me.

So it is that I can see her and hear her now on a hundred separate

occasions beneath the awning beneath the stars on deck below at noon

or night but plainest of all in the evening of the day we signalled

the Island of Ascension, at the close of that last concert on the

quarter-deck. The watch are taking down the extra awning; they are

removing the bunting and the foot-lights. The lanterns are trailed

forward before they are put out; from the break of the poop we watch the

vivid shifting patch of deck that each lights up on its way. The stars

are very sharp in the vast violet dome above our masts; they shimmer on

the sea; and our trucks describe minute orbits among the stars, for the

trades have yet to fail us, and every inch of canvas has its fill of the

gentle steady wind. It is a heavenly night. The peace of God broods upon

His waters. No jarring note offends the ear. In the forecastle a voice

is humming a song of Eva Denison's that has caught the fancy of the men;

the young girl who sang it so sweetly not twenty minutes since who

sang it again and again to please the crew she alone is at war with our

little world she alone would head a mutiny if she could.

“I hate the captain!” she says again.

“My dear Miss Denison!” I begin; for she has always been severe upon our

bluff old man, and it is not the spirit of contrariety alone which makes

me invariably take his part. Coarse he may be, and not one whom the

owners would have chosen to command the Lady Jermyn; a good seaman none

the less, who brought us round the Horn in foul weather without losing

stitch or stick. I think of the ruddy ruffian in his dripping oilskins,

on deck day and night for our sakes, and once more I must needs take his

part; but Miss Denison stops me before I can get out another word.

“I am not dear, and I'm not yours,” she cries. “I'm only a

school-girl--you have all but told me so before to-day! If I were a

man--if I were you--I should tell Captain Harris what I thought of him!”

“Why? What has he done now?”

“Now? You know how rude he was to poor Mr. Ready this very afternoon!”

It was true. He had been very rude indeed. But Ready also had been at

fault. It may be that I was always inclined to take an opposite view,

but I felt bound to point this out, and at any cost.

“You mean when Ready asked him if we were out of our course? I must

say I thought it was a silly question to put. It was the same the other

evening about the cargo. If the skipper says we're in ballast why not

believe him? Why repeat steerage gossip, about mysterious cargoes, at

the cuddy table? Captains are always touchy about that sort of thing. I

wasn't surprised at his letting out.”

My poor love stares at me in the starlight. Her great eyes flash their

scorn. Then she gives a little smile--and then a little nod--more

scornful than all the rest.

“You never are surprised, are you, Mr. Cole?” says she. “You were not

surprised when the wretch used horrible language in front of me! You

were not surprised when it was a--dying man--whom he abused!”

I try to soothe her. I agree heartily with her disgust at the epithets

employed in her hearing, and towards an invalid, by the irate skipper.

But I ask her to make allowances for a rough, uneducated man, rather

clumsily touched upon his tender spot. I shall conciliate her presently;

the divine pout (so childish it was!) is fading from her lips; the

starlight is on the tulle and lace and roses of her pretty evening

dress, with its festooned skirts and obsolete flounces; and I am

watching her, ay, and worshipping her, though I do not know it yet. And

as we stand there comes another snatch from the forecastle:--

“What will you do, love, when I am going.

With white sail flowing,

The seas beyond?

What will you do, love--”

“They may make the most of that song,” says Miss Denison grimly; “it's

the last they'll have from me. Get up as many more concerts as you like.

I won't sing at another unless it's in the fo'c'sle. I'll sing to the

men, but not to Captain Harris. He didn't put in an appearance tonight.

He shall not have another chance of insulting me.”

Was it her vanity that was wounded after all? “You forget,” said I,

“that you would not answer when he addressed you at dinner.”

“I should think I wouldn't, after the way he spoke to Mr. Ready; and he

too agitated to come to table, poor fellow!”

“Still, the captain felt the open slight.”

“Then he shouldn't have used such language in front of me.”

“Your father felt it, too, Miss Denison.”

I hear nothing plainer than her low but quick reply:

“Mr. Cole, my father has been dead many; many years; he died before I

can remember. That man only married my poor mother. He sympathizes

with Captain Harris--against me; no father would do that. Look at them

together now! And you take his side, too; oh! I have no patience with

any of you--except poor Mr. Ready in his berth.”

“But you are not going.”

“Indeed I am. I am tired of you all.”

And she was gone with angry tears for which I blamed myself as I fell to

pacing the weather side of the poop--and so often afterwards! So often,

and with such unavailing bitterness!

Senhor Santos and the captain were in conversation by the weather rail.

I fancied poor old Harris eyed me with suspicion, and I wished he had

better cause. The Portuguese, however, saluted me with his customary

courtesy, and I thought there was a grave twinkle in his steady eye.

“Are you in deesgrace also, friend Cole?” he inquired in his all but

perfect English.

“More or less,” said I ruefully.

He gave the shrug of his country--that delicate gesture which is done

almost entirely with the back--a subtlety beyond the power of British

shoulders.

“The senhora is both weelful and pivish,” said he, mixing the two vowels

which (with the aspirate) were his only trouble with our tongue. “It is

great grif to me to see her growing so unlike her sainted mother!”

He sighed, and I saw his delicate fingers forsake the cigarette they

were rolling to make the sacred sign upon his breast. He was always

smoking one cigarette and making another; as he lit the new one the glow

fell upon a strange pin that he wore, a pin with a tiny crucifix inlaid

in mosaic. So the religious cast of Senhor Santos was brought twice home

to me in the same moment, though, to be sure, I had often been struck

by it before. And it depressed me to think that so sweet a child as Eva

Denison should have spoken harshly of so good a man as her step-father,

simply because he had breadth enough to sympathize with a coarse old

salt like Captain Harris.

I turned in, however, and I cannot say the matter kept me awake in the

separate state-room which was one luxury of our empty saloon. Alas? I

was a heavy sleeper then.

CHAPTER II. THE MYSTERIOUS CARGO

“Wake up, Cole! The ship's on fire!”

It was young Ready's hollow voice, as cool, however, as though he were

telling me I was late for breakfast. I started up and sought him wildly

in the darkness.

“You're joking,” was my first thought and utterance; for now he was

lighting my candle, and blowing out the match with a care that seemed in

itself a contradiction.

“I wish I were,” he answered. “Listen to that!”

He pointed to my cabin ceiling; it quivered and creaked; and all at once

I was as a deaf man healed.

One gets inured to noise at sea, but to this day it passes me how even I

could have slept an instant in the abnormal din which I now heard raging

above my head. Sea-boots stamped; bare feet pattered; men bawled; women

shrieked; shouts of terror drowned the roar of command.

“Have we long to last?” I asked, as I leaped for my clothes.

“Long enough for you to dress comfortably. Steady, old man! It's only

just been discovered; they may get it under. The panic's the worst part

at present, and we're out of that.”

But was Eva Denison? Breathlessly I put the question; his answer was

reassuring. Miss Denison was with her step-father on the poop. “And both

of 'em as cool as cucumbers,” added Ready.

They could not have been cooler than this young man, with death at the

bottom of his bright and sunken eyes. He was of the type which is all

muscle and no constitution; athletes one year, dead men the next; but

until this moment the athlete had been to me a mere and incredible

tradition. In the afternoon I had seen his lean knees totter under the

captain's fire. Now, at midnight--the exact time by my watch--it was as

if his shrunken limbs had expanded in his clothes; he seemed hardly to

know his own flushed face, as he caught sight of it in my mirror.

“By Jove!” said he, “this has put me in a fine old fever; but I don't

know when I felt in better fettle. If only they get it under! I've not

looked like this all the voyage.”

And he admired himself while I dressed in hot haste: a fine young

fellow; not at all the natural egotist, but cast for death by the

doctors, and keenly incredulous in his bag of skin. It revived one's

confidence to hear him talk. But he forgot himself in an instant, and

gave me a lead through the saloon with a boyish eagerness that made me

actually suspicious as I ran. We were nearing the Line. I recalled the

excesses of my last crossing, and I prepared for some vast hoax at the

last moment. It was only when we plunged upon the crowded quarter-deck,

and my own eyes read lust of life and dread of death in the starting

eyes of others, that such lust and such dread consumed me in my turn, so

that my veins seemed filled with fire and ice.

To be fair to those others, I think that the first wild panic was

subsiding even then; at least there was a lull, and even a reaction in

the right direction on the part of the males in the second class and

steerage. A huge Irishman at their head, they were passing buckets

towards the after-hold; the press of people hid the hatchway from

us until we gained the poop; but we heard the buckets spitting and a

hose-pipe hissing into the flames below; and we saw the column of white

vapor rising steadily from their midst.

At the break of the poop stood Captain Harris, his legs planted wide

apart, very vigorous, very decisive, very profane. And I must confess

that the shocking oaths which had brought us round the Horn inspired a

kind of confidence in me now. Besides, even from the poop I could see

no flames. But the night was as beautiful as it had been an hour or two

back; the stars as brilliant, the breeze even more balmy, the sea even

more calm; and we were hove-to already, against the worst.

In this hour of peril the poop was very properly invaded by all classes

of passengers, in all manner of incongruous apparel, in all stages of

fear, rage, grief and hysteria; as we made our way among this motley

nightmare throng, I took Ready by the arm.

“The skipper's a brute,” said I, “but he's the right brute in the right

place to-night, Ready!”

“I hope he may be,” was the reply. “But we were off our course this

afternoon; and we were off it again during the concert, as sure as we're

not on it now.”

His tone made me draw him to the rail.

“But how do you know? You didn't have another look, did you?”

“Lots of looks-at the stars. He couldn't keep me from consulting them;

and I'm just as certain of it as I'm certain that we've a cargo aboard

which we're none of us supposed to know anything about.”

The latter piece of gossip was, indeed, all over the ship; but this

allusion to it struck me as foolishly irrelevant and frivolous. As to

the other matter, I suggested that the officers would have had more to

say about it than Ready, if there had been anything in it.

“Officers be damned!” cried our consumptive, with a sound man's vigor.

“They're ordinary seamen dressed up; I don't believe they've a second

mate's certificate between them, and they're frightened out of their

souls.”

“Well, anyhow, the skipper isn't that.”

“No; he's drunk; he can shout straight, but you should hear him try to

speak.”

I made my way aft without rejoinder. “Invalid's pessimism,” was my

private comment. And yet the sick man was whole for the time being; the

virile spirit was once more master of the recreant members; and it

was with illogical relief that I found those I sought standing almost

unconcernedly beside the binnacle.

My little friend was, indeed, pale enough, and her eyes great with

dismay; but she stood splendidly calm, in her travelling cloak and

bonnet, and with all my soul I hailed the hardihood with which I had

rightly credited my love. Yes! I loved her then. It had come home to me

at last, and I no longer denied it in my heart. In my innocence and my

joy I rather blessed the fire for showing me her true self and my own;

and there I stood, loving her openly with my eyes (not to lose another

instant), and bursting to tell her so with my lips.

But there also stood Senhor Santos, almost precisely as I had seen him

last, cigarette, tie-pin, and all. He wore an overcoat, however, and

leaned upon a massive ebony cane, while he carried his daughter's guitar

in its case, exactly as though they were waiting for a train. Moreover,

I thought that for the first time he was regarding me with no very

favoring glance.

“You don't think it serious?” I asked him abruptly, my heart still

bounding with the most incongruous joy.

He gave me his ambiguous shrug; and then, “A fire at sea is surely

sirrious,” said he.

“Where did it break out?”

“No one knows; it may have come of your concert.”

“But they are getting the better of it?”

“They are working wonders so far, senhor.”

“You see, Miss Denison,” I continued ecstatically, “our rough old

diamond of a skipper is the right man in the right place after all. A

tight man in a tight place, eh?” and I laughed like an idiot in their

calm grave faces.

“Senhor Cole is right,” said Santos, “although his 'ilarity sims a

leetle out of place. But you must never spik against Captain 'Arrees

again, menma.”

“I never will,” the poor child said; yet I saw her wince whenever the

captain raised that hoarse voice of his in more and more blasphemous

exhortation; and I began to fear with Ready that the man was drunk.

My eyes were still upon my darling, devouring her, revelling in her,

when suddenly I saw her hand twitch within her step-father's arm. It was

an answering start to one on his part. The cigarette was snatched from

his lips. There was a commotion forward, and a cry came aft, from mouth

to mouth:

“The flames! The flames!”

I turned, and caught their reflection on the white column of smoke and

steam. I ran forward, and saw them curling and leaping in the hell-mouth

of the hold.

The quarter-deck now staged a lurid scene: that blazing trap-door in

its midst; and each man there a naked demon madly working to save his

roasting skin. Abaft the mainmast the deck-pump was being ceaselessly

worked by relays of the passengers; dry blankets were passed forward,

soaking blankets were passed aft, and flung flat into the furnace one

after another. These did more good than the pure water: the pillar of

smoke became blacker, denser: we were at a crisis; a sudden hush denoted

it; even our hoarse skipper stood dumb.

I had rushed down into the waist of the ship--blushing for my delay--and

already I was tossing blankets with the rest. Looking up in an enforced

pause, I saw Santos whispering in the skipper's ear, with the expression

of a sphinx but no lack of foreign gesticulation--behind them a fringe

of terror-stricken faces, parted at that instant by two more figures,

as wild and strange as any in that wild, strange scene. One was our

luckless lucky digger, the other a gigantic Zambesi nigger, who for

days had been told off to watch him; this was the servant (or rather the

slave) of Senhor Santos.

The digger planted himself before the captain. His face was reddened by

a fire as consuming as that within the bowels of our gallant ship. He

had a huge, unwieldy bundle under either arm.

“Plain question--plain answer,” we heard him stutter. “Is there any ----

chance of saving this ---- ship?”

His adjectives were too foul for print; they were given with such a

special effort at distinctness, however, that I was smiling one instant,

and giving thanks the next that Eva Denison had not come forward with

her guardian. Meanwhile the skipper had exchanged a glance with Senhor

Santos, and I think we all felt that he was going to tell us the truth.

He told it in two words--“Very little.”

Then the first individual tragedy was enacted before every eye. With

a yell the drunken maniac rushed to the rail. The nigger was at his

heels--he was too late. Uttering another and more piercing shriek, the

madman was overboard at a bound; one of his bundles preceded him; the

other dropped like a cannon-ball on the deck.

The nigger caught it up and carried it forward to the captain.

Harris held up his hand. We were still before we had fairly found our

tongues. His words did run together a little, but he was not drunk.

“Men and women,” said he, “what I told that poor devil is Gospel truth;

but I didn't tell him we'd no chance of saving our lives, did I? Not

me, because we have! Keep your heads and listen to me. There's two

good boats on the davits amidships; the chief will take one, the second

officer the other; and there ain't no reason why every blessed one of

you shouldn't sleep in Ascension to-morrow night. As for me, let me see

every soul off of my ship and perhaps I may follow; but by the God that

made you, look alive! Mr. Arnott--Mr. McClellan--man them boats and

lower away. You can't get quit o' the ship too soon, an' I don't mind

tellin' you why. I'll tell you the worst, an' then you'll know. There's

been a lot o' gossip goin', gossip about my cargo. I give out as I'd

none but ship's stores and ballast, an' I give out a lie. I don't mind

tellin' you now. I give out a cussed lie, but I give it out for the

good o' the ship! What was the use o' frightenin' folks? But where's the

sense in keepin' it back now? We have a bit of a cargo,” shouted Harris;

“and it's gunpowder--every damned ton of it!”

The effect of this announcement may be imagined; my hand has not the

cunning to reproduce it on paper; and if it had, it would shrink from

the task. Mild men became brutes, brutal men, devils, women--God help

them!--shrieking beldams for the most part. Never shall I forget them

with their streaming hair, their screaming open mouths, and the cruel

ascending fire glinting on their starting eyeballs!

Pell-mell they tumbled down the poop-ladders; pell-mell they raced

amidships past that yawning open furnace; the pitch was boiling through

the seams of the crackling deck; they slipped and fell upon it, one over

another, and the wonder is that none plunged headlong into the flames.

A handful remained on the poop, cowering and undone with terror. Upon

these turned Captain Harris, as Ready and I, stemming the torrent of

maddened humanity, regained the poop ourselves.

“For'ard with ye!” yelled the skipper. “The powder's underneath you in

the lazarette!”

They were gone like hunted sheep. And now abaft the flaming hatchway

there were only we four surviving saloon passengers, the captain, his

steward, the Zambesi negro, and the quarter-master at the wheel. The

steward and the black I observed putting stores aboard the captain's gig

as it overhung the water from the stern davits.

“Now, gentlemen,” said Harris to the two of us, “I must trouble you to

step forward with the rest. Senhor Santos insists on taking his chance

along with the young lady in my gig. I've told him the risk, but he

insists, and the gig'll hold no more.”

“But she must have a crew, and I can row. For God's sake take me,

captain!” cried I; for Eva Denison sat weeping in her deck chair, and my

heart bled faint at the thought of leaving her, I who loved her so, and

might die without ever telling her my love! Harris, however, stood firm.

“There's that quartermaster and my steward, and Jose the nigger,” said

he. “That's quite enough, Mr. Cole, for I ain't above an oar myself;

but, by God, I'm skipper o' this here ship, and I'll skip her as long as

I remain aboard!”

I saw his hand go to his belt; I saw the pistols stuck there for

mutineers. I looked at Santos. He answered me with his neutral shrug,

and, by my soul, he struck a match and lit a cigarette in that hour of

life and death! Then last I looked at Ready; and he leant invertebrate

over the rail, gasping pitiably from his exertions in regaining the

poop, a dying man once more. I pointed out his piteous state.

“At least,” I whispered, “you won't refuse to take him?”

“Will there be anything to take?” said the captain brutally.

Santos advanced leisurely, and puffed his cigarette over the poor wasted

and exhausted frame.

“It is for you to decide, captain,” said he cynically; “but this one

will make no deeference. Yes, I would take him. It will not be far,” he

added, in a tone that was not the less detestable for being lowered.

“Take them both!” moaned little Eva, putting in her first and last sweet

word.

“Then we all drown, Evasinha,” said her stepfather. “It is impossible.”

“We're too many for her as it is,” said the captain. “So for'ard with

ye, Mr. Cole, before it's too late.”

But my darling's brave word for me had fired my blood, and I turned

with equal resolution on Harris and on the Portuguese. “I will go like

a lamb,” said I, “if you will first give me five minutes' conversation

with Miss Denison. Otherwise I do not go; and as for the gig, you may

take me or leave me, as you choose.”

“What have you to say to her?” asked Santos, coming up to me, and again

lowering his voice.

I lowered mine still more. “That I love her!” I answered in a soft

ecstasy. “That she may remember how I loved her, if I die!”

His shoulders shrugged a cynical acquiescence.

“By all mins, senhor; there is no harm in that.”

I was at her side before another word could pass his withered lips.

“Miss Denison, will you grant me five minutes', conversation? It may be

the last that we shall ever have together!”

Uncovering her face, she looked at me with a strange terror in her great

eyes; then with a questioning light that was yet more strange, for in it

there was a wistfulness I could not comprehend. She suffered me to take

her hand, however, and to lead her unresisting to the weather rail.

“What is it you have to say?” she asked me in her turn. “What is it that

you--think?”

Her voice fell as though she must have the truth.

“That we have all a very good chance,” said I heartily.

“Is that all?” cried Eva, and my heart sank at her eager manner.

She seemed at once disappointed and relieved. Could it be possible she

dreaded a declaration which she had foreseen all along? My evil first

experience rose up to warn me. No, I would not speak now; it was no

time. If she loved me, it might make her love me less; better to trust

to God to spare us both.

“Yes, it is all,” I said doggedly.

She drew a little nearer, hesitating. It was as though her

disappointment had gained on her relief.

“Do you know what I thought you were going to say?”

“No, indeed.”

“Dare I tell you?”

“You can trust me.”

Her pale lips parted. Her great eyes shone. Another instant, and she had

told me that which I would have given all but life itself to know. But

in that tick of time a quick step came behind me, and the light went out

of the sweet face upturned to mine.

“I cannot! I must not! Here is--that man!”

Senhor Santos was all smiles and rings of pale-blue smoke.

“You will be cut off, friend Cole,” said he. “The fire is spreading.”

“Let it spread!” I cried, gazing my very soul into the young girl's

eyes. “We have not finished our conversation.

“We have!” said she, with sudden decision. “Go--go--for my sake--for

your own sake--go at once!”

She gave me her hand. I merely clasped it. And so I left her at the

rail-ah, heaven! how often we had argued on that very spot! So I left

her, with the greatest effort of all my life (but one); and yet in

passing, full as my heart was of love and self, I could not but lay a

hand on poor Ready's shoulders.

“God bless you, old boy!” I said to him.

He turned a white face that gave me half an instant's pause.

“It's all over with me this time,” he said. “But, I say, I was right

about the cargo?”

And I heard a chuckle as I reached the ladder; but Ready was no longer

in my mind; even Eva was driven out of it, as I stood aghast on the

top-most rung.

CHAPTER III. TO THE WATER'S EDGE

It was not the new panic amidships that froze my marrow; it was not that

the pinnace hung perpendicularly by the fore-tackle, and had shot out

those who had swarmed aboard her before she was lowered, as a cart

shoots a load of bricks. It was bad enough to see the whole boat-load

struggling, floundering, sinking in the sea; for selfish eyes (and which

of us is all unselfish at such a time?) there was a worse sight yet; for

I saw all this across an impassable gulf of fire.

The quarter-deck had caught: it was in flames to port and starboard of

the flaming hatch; only fore and aft of it was the deck sound to the

lips of that hideous mouth, with the hundred tongues shooting out and

up.

Could I jump it there? I sprang down and looked. It was only a few feet

across; but to leap through that living fire was to leap into eternity.

I drew back instantly, less because my heart failed me, I may truly say,

than because my common sense did not.

Some were watching me, it seemed, across this hell. “The bulwarks!” they

screamed. “Walk along the bulwarks!” I held up my hand in token that

I heard and understood and meant to act. And as I did their bidding I

noticed what indeed had long been apparent to idler eyes: the wind was

not; we had lost our southeast trades; the doomed ship was rolling in a

dead calm.

Rolling, rolling, rolling so that it seemed minutes before I dared to

move an inch. Then I tried it on my hands and knees, but the scorched

bulwarks burned me to the bone. And then I leapt up, desperate with the

pain; and, with my tortured hands spread wide to balance me, I walked

those few yards, between rising sea and falling fire, and falling sea

and rising fire, as an acrobat walks a rope, and by God's grace without

mishap.

There was no time to think twice about my feat, or, indeed, about

anything else that befell upon a night when each moment was more

pregnant than the last. And yet I did think that those who had

encouraged me to attempt so perilous a trick might have welcomed me

alive among them; they were looking at something else already; and this

was what it was.

One of the cabin stewards had presented himself on the poop; he had a

bottle in one hand, a glass in the other; in the red glare we saw

him dancing in front of the captain like an unruly marionette. Harris

appeared to threaten him. What he said we could not hear for the

deep-drawn blast and the high staccato crackle of the blazing hold. But

we saw the staggering steward offering him a drink; saw the glass flung

next instant in the captain's face, the blood running, a pistol drawn,

fired without effect, and snatched away by the drunken mutineer. Next

instant a smooth black cane was raining blow after blow on the man's

head. He dropped; the blows fell thick and heavy as before. He lay

wriggling; the Portuguese struck and struck until he lay quite still;

then we saw Joaquin Santos kneel, and rub his stick carefully on the

still thing's clothes, as a man might wipe his boots.

Curses burst from our throats; yet the fellow deserved to die. Nor, as I

say, had we time to waste two thoughts upon any one incident. This

last had begun and ended in the same minute; in another we were at the

starboard gangway, tumbling helter-skelter aboard the lowered long-boat.

She lay safely on the water: how we thanked our gods for that! Lower and

lower sank her gunwale as we dropped aboard her, with no more care than

the Gadarene swine whose fate we courted. Discipline, order, method,

common care, we brought none of these things with us from our floating

furnace; but we fought to be first over the bulwarks, and in the bottom

of the long-boat we fought again.

And yet she held us all! All, that is, but a terror-stricken few, who

lay along the jibboom like flies upon a stick: all but two or three more

whom we left fatally hesitating in the forechains: all but the selfish

savages who had been the first to perish in the pinnace, and one

distracted couple who had thrown their children into the kindly ocean,

and jumped in after them out of their torment, locked for ever in each

other's arms.

Yes! I saw more things on that starry night, by that blood-red glare,

than I have told you in their order, and more things than I shall tell

you now. Blind would I gladly be for my few remaining years, if that

night's horrors could be washed from these eyes for ever. I have said so

much, however, that in common candor I must say one thing more. I have

spoken of selfish savages. God help me and forgive me! For by this time

I was one myself.

In the long-boat we cannot have been less than thirty; the exact number

no man will ever know. But we shoved off without mischance; the chief

mate had the tiller; the third mate the boat-hook; and six or eight

oars were at work, in a fashion, as we plunged among the great smooth

sickening mounds and valleys of fathomless ink.

Scarcely were we clear when the foremast dropped down on the fastenings,

dashing the jib-boom into the water with its load of demented human

beings. The mainmast followed by the board before we had doubled our

distance from the wreck. Both trailed to port, where we could not see

them; and now the mizzen stood alone in sad and solitary grandeur, her

flapping idle sails lighted up by the spreading conflagration, so that

they were stamped very sharply upon the black add starry sky. But the

whole scene from the long-boat was one of startling brilliancy and

horror. The fire now filled the entire waist of the vessel, and the

noise of it was as the rumble and roar of a volcano. As for the light,

I declare that it put many a star clean out, and dimmed the radiance

of all the rest, as it flooded the sea for miles around, and a sea of

molten glass reflected it. My gorge rose at the long, low billows-sleek

as black satin--lifting and dipping in this ghastly glare. I preferred

to keep my eyes upon the little ship burning like a tar barrel as the

picture grew. But presently I thanked God aloud: there was the gig

swimming like a beetle over the bloodshot rollers in our wake.

In our unspeakable gladness at being quit of the ship, some minutes

passed before we discovered that the long-boat was slowly filling. The

water was at our ankles before a man of us cried out, so fast were our

eyes to the poor lost Lady Jermyn. Then all at once the ghastly fact

dawned upon us; and I think it was the mate himself who burst out crying

like a child. I never ascertained, however, for I had kicked off my

shoes and was busy baling with them. Others were hunting for the leak.

But the mischief was as subtle as it was mortal--as though a plank

had started from end to end. Within and without the waters rose

equally--then lay an instant level with our gunwales--then swamped us,

oh! so slowly, that I thought we were never going to sink. It was

like getting inch by inch into your tub; I can feel it now, creeping,

crawling up my back. “It's coming! O Christ!” muttered one as it came;

to me it was a downright relief to be carried under at last.

But then, thank God, I have always been a strong swimmer. The water was

warm and buoyant, and I came up like a cork, as I knew I should. I shook

the drops from my face, and there were the sweet stars once more; for

many an eye they had gone Out for ever; and there the burning wreck.

A man floundered near me, in a splutter of phosphorescence. I tried to

help him, and in an instant he had me wildly round the neck. In the end

I shook him off, poor devil, to his death. And he was the last I tried

to aid: have I not said already what I was become?

In a little an oar floated my way: I threw my arms across it and gripped

it with my chin as I swam. It relieved me greatly. Up and down I rode

among the oily black hillocks; I was down when there was a sudden flare

as though the sun had risen, and I saw still a few heads bobbing and a

few arms waving frantically around me. At the same instant a terrific

detonation split the ears; and when I rose on the next bald billow,

where the ship lay burning a few seconds before, there remained but a

red-hot spine that hissed and dwindled for another minute, and then left

a blackness through which every star shone with redoubled brilliance.

And now right and left splashed falling missiles; a new source of danger

or of temporary respite; to me, by a merciful Providence, it proved the

latter.

Some heavy thing fell with a mighty splash right in front of me. A few

more yards, and my brains had floated with the spume. As it was, the

oar was dashed from under my armpits; in another moment they had found a

more solid resting-place.

It was a hen-coop, and it floated bars upwards like a boat. In this

calm it might float for days. I climbed upon the bars-and the whole cage

rolled over on top of me.

Coming to the surface, I found to my joy that the hen-coop had righted

itself; so now I climbed up again, but this time very slowly and

gingerly; the balance was undisturbed, and I stretched myself cautiously

along the bars on my stomach. A good idea immediately occurred to me. I

had jumped as a matter of course into the flannels which one naturally

wears in the tropics. To their lightness I already owed my life, but the

common cricket-belt which was part of the costume was the thing to which

I owe it most of all. Loosening this belt a little, as I tucked my toes

tenaciously under the endmost bar, I undid and passed the two ends under

one of the middle bars, fastening the clasp upon the other side. If I

capsized now, well, we might go to the bottom together; otherwise the

hen-coop and I should not part company in a hurry; and I thought, I

felt, that she would float.

Worn out as I was, and comparatively secure for the moment, I will not

say that I slept; but my eyes closed, and every fibre rested, as I rose

and slid with the smooth, long swell. Whether I did indeed hear voices,

curses, cries, I cannot say positively to this day. I only know that I

raised my head and looked sharply all ways but the way I durst not look

for fear of an upset. And, again, I thought I saw first a tiny flame,

and then a tinier glow; and as my head drooped, and my eyes closed

again, I say I thought I smelt tobacco; but this, of course, was my

imagination supplying all the links from one.

CHAPTER IV. THE SILENT SEA

Remember (if indeed there be any need to remind you) that it is a

flagrant landsman who is telling you this tale. Nothing know I of

seamanship, save what one could not avoid picking up on the round voyage

of the Lady Jermyn, never to be completed on this globe. I may be told

that I have burned that devoted vessel as nothing ever burned on land or

sea. I answer that I write of what I saw, and that is not altered by a

miscalled spar or a misunderstood manouvre. But now I am aboard a craft

I handle for myself, and must make shift to handle a second time with

this frail pen.

The hen-coop was some six feet long, by eighteen or twenty inches in

breadth and depth. It was simply a long box with bars in lieu of a lid;

but it was very strongly built.

I recognized it as one of two which had stood lashed against either rail

of the Lady Jermyn's poop; there the bars had risen at right angles to

the deck; now they lay horizontal, a gridiron six feet long-and my bed.

And as each particular bar left its own stripe across my wearied body,

and yet its own comfort in my quivering heart, another day broke over

the face of the waters, and over me.

Discipline, what there was of it originally, had been the very first

thing to perish aboard our ill-starred ship; the officers, I am afraid,

were not much better than poor Ready made them out (thanks to Bendigo

and Ballarat), and little had been done in true ship-shape style all

night. All hands had taken their spell at everything as the fancy seized

them; not a bell had been struck from first to last; and I can only

conjecture that the fire raged four or five hours, from the fact that

it was midnight by my watch when I left it on my cabin drawers, and that

the final extinction of the smouldering keel was so soon followed by the

first deep hint of dawn. The rest took place with the trite rapidity of

the equatorial latitudes. It had been my foolish way to pooh-pooh the

old saying that there is no twilight in the tropics. I saw more truth in

it as I lay lonely on this heaving waste.

The stars were out; the sea was silver; the sun was up.

And oh! the awful glory of that sunrise! It was terrific; it was

sickening; my senses swam. Sunlit billows smooth and sinister, without a

crest, without a sound; miles and miles of them as I rose; an oily grave

among them as I fell. Hill after hill of horror, valley after valley of

despair! The face of the waters in petty but eternal unrest; and now

the sun must shine to set it smiling, to show me its cruel ceaseless

mouthings, to reveal all but the ghastlier horrors underneath.

How deep was it? I fell to wondering! Not that it makes any difference

whether you drown in one fathom or in ten thousand, whether you fall

from a balloon or from the attic window. But the greater depth or

distance is the worse to contemplate; and I was as a man hanging by his

hands so high above the world, that his dangling feet cover countries,

continents; a man who must fall very soon, and wonders how long he will

be falling, falling; and how far his soul will bear his body company.

In time I became more accustomed to the sun upon this heaving void; less

frightened, as a child is frightened, by the mere picture. And I have

still the impression that, as hour followed hour since the falling of

the wind, the nauseous swell in part subsided. I seemed less often on

an eminence or in a pit; my glassy azure dales had gentler slopes, or a

distemper was melting from my eyes.

At least I know that I had now less work to keep my frail ship trim,

though this also may have come by use and practice. In the beginning one

or other of my legs had been for ever trailing in the sea, to keep the

hen-coop from rolling over the other way; in fact, as I understand they

steer the toboggan in Canada, so I my little bark. Now the necessity for

this was gradually decreasing; whatever the cause, it was the greatest

mercy the day had brought me yet. With less strain on the attention,

however, there was more upon the mind. No longer forced to exert some

muscle twice or thrice a minute, I had time to feel very faint, and yet

time to think. My soul flew homing to its proper prison. I was no longer

any unit at unequal strife with the elements; instincts common to my

kind were no longer my only stimulus. I was my poor self again; it was

my own little life, and no other, that I wanted to go on living; and

yet I felt vaguely there was some special thing I wished to live for,

something that had not been very long in my ken; something that had

perhaps nerved and strengthened me all these hours. What, then, could it

be? I could not think.

For moments or for minutes I wondered stupidly, dazed as I was. Then

I remembered--and the tears gushed to my eyes. How could I ever have

forgotten? I deserved it all, all, all! To think that many a time we

must have sat together on this very coop! I kissed its blistering edge

at the thought, and my tears ran afresh, as though they never would

stop.

Ah! how I thought of her as that cruel day's most cruel sun climbed

higher and higher in the flawless flaming vault. A pocket-handkerchief

of all things had remained in my trousers pocket through fire and water;

I knotted it on the old childish plan, and kept it ever drenched upon

the head that had its own fever to endure as well. Eva Denison! Eva

Denison! I was talking to her in the past, I was talking to her in the

future, and oh! how different were the words, the tone! Yes, I hated

myself for having forgotten her; but I hated God for having given her

back to my tortured brain; it made life so many thousandfold more sweet,

and death so many thousandfold more bitter.

She was saved in the gig. Sweet Jesus, thanks for that! But I--I was

dying a lingering death in mid-ocean; she would never know how I loved

her, I, who could only lecture her when I had her at my side.

Dying? No--no--not yet! I must live--live--live--to tell my darling how

I had loved her all the time. So I forced myself from my lethargy of

despair and grief; and this thought, the sweetest thought of all my

life, may or may not have been my unrealized stimulus ere now; it was in

very deed my most conscious and perpetual spur henceforth until the end.

From this onward, while my sense stood by me, I was practical,

resourceful, alert. It was now high-noon, and I had eaten nothing since

dinner the night before. How clearly I saw the long saloon table, only

laid, however, abaft the mast; the glittering glass, the cool white

napery, the poor old dried dessert in the green dishes! Earlier, this

had occupied my mind an hour; now I dismissed it in a moment; there was

Eva, I must live for her; there must be ways of living at least a day or

two without sustenance, and I must think of them.

So I undid that belt of mine which fastened me to my gridiron, and I

straddled my craft with a sudden keen eye for sharks, of which I never

once had thought until now. Then I tightened the belt about my hollow

body, and just sat there with the problem. The past hour I had been

wholly unobservant; the inner eye had had its turn; but that was over

now, and I sat as upright as possible, seeking greedily for a sail. Of

course I saw none. Had we indeed been off our course before the fire

broke out? Had we burned to cinders aside and apart from the regular

track of ships? Then, though my present valiant mood might ignore

the adverse chances, they were as one hundred to a single chance of

deliverance. Our burning had brought no ship to our succor; and how

should I, a mere speck amid the waves, bring one to mine?

Moreover, I was all but motionless; I was barely drifting at all. This

I saw from a few objects which were floating around me now at noon; they

had been with me when the high sun rose. One was, I think, the very

oar which had been my first support; another was a sailor's cap; but

another, which floated nearer, was new to me, as though it had come to

the surface while my eyes were turned inwards. And this was clearly the

case; for the thing was a drowned and bloated corpse.

It fascinated me, though not with extraordinary horror; it came too late

to do that. I thought I recognized the man's back. I fancied it was

the mate who had taken charge of the long-boat. Was I then the single

survivor of those thirty souls? I was still watching my poor lost

comrade, when that happened to him against which even I was not proof.

Through the deep translucent blue beneath me a slim shape glided; three

smaller fish led the way; they dallied an instant a fathom under my

feet, which were snatched up, with what haste you may imagine; then on

they went to surer prey.

He turned over; his dreadful face stared upwards; it was the chief

officer, sure enough. Then he clove the water with a rush, his dead hand

waved, the last of him to disappear; and I had a new horror to think

over for my sins. His poor fingers were all broken and beaten to a pulp.

The voices of the night came back to me--the curses and the cries. Yes,

I must have heard them. In memory now I recognized the voice of the

chief mate, but there again came in the assisted imagination. Yet I

was not so sure of this as before. I thought of Santos and his horrible

heavy cane. Good God! she was in the power of that! I must live for Eva

indeed; must save myself to save and protect my innocent and helpless

girl.

Again I was a man; stronger than ever was the stimulus now, louder than

ever the call on every drop of true man's blood in my perishing frame.

It should not perish! It should not!

Yet my throat was parched; my lips were caked; my frame was hollow. Very

weak I was already; without sustenance I should surely die. But as yet

I was far enough from death, or I had done disdaining the means of life

that all this time lay ready to my hand. A number of dead fowls imparted

ballast to my little craft.

Yet I could not look at them in all these hours; or I could look, but

that was all. So I must sit up one hour more, and keep a sharper eye

than ever for the tiniest glimmer of a sail. To what end, I often asked

myself? I might see them; they would never see me.

Then my eyes would fail, and “you squeamish fool!” I said at intervals,

until my tongue failed to articulate; it had swollen so in my mouth.

Flying fish skimmed the water like thick spray; petrels were so few that

I could count them; another shark swam round me for an hour. In sudden

panic I dashed my knuckles on the wooden bars, to get at a duck to give

the monster for a sop. My knuckles bled. I held them to my mouth. My

cleaving tongue wanted more. The duck went to the shark; a few minutes

more and I had made my own vile meal as well.

CHAPTER V. MY REWARD

The sun declined; my shadow broadened on die waters; and now I felt that

if my cockle-shell could live a little longer, why, so could I.

I had got at the fowls without further hurt. Some of the bars took out,

I discovered how. And now very carefully I got my legs in, and knelt;

but the change of posture was not worth the risk one ran for it; there

was too much danger of capsizing, and failing to free oneself before she

filled and sank.

With much caution I began breaking the bars, one by one; it was hard

enough, weak as I was; my thighs were of more service than my hands.

But at last I could sit, the grating only covering me from the knees

downwards. And the relief of that outweighed all the danger, which, as I

discovered to my untold joy, was now much less than it had been before.

I was better ballast than the fowls.

These I had attached to the lashings which had been blown asunder by the

explosion; at one end of the coop the ring-bolt had been torn clean out,

but at the other it was the cordage that had parted. To the frayed

ends I tied my fowls by the legs, with the most foolish pride in my own

cunning. Do you not see? It would keep them fresh for my use, and it was

a trick I had read of in no book; it was all my own.

So evening fell and found me hopeful and even puffed up; but yet, no

sail.

Now, however, I could lie back, and use had given me a strange sense of

safety; besides, I think I knew, I hope I felt, that the hen-coop was in

other Hands than mine.

All is reaction in the heart of man; light follows darkness nowhere more

surely than in that hidden self, and now at sunset it was my heart's

high-noon. Deep peace pervaded me as I lay outstretched in my narrow

rocking bed, as it might be in my coffin; a trust in my Maker's will

to save me if that were for the best, a trust in His final wisdom and

loving-kindness, even though this night should be my last on earth. For

myself I was resigned, and for others I must trust Him no less. Who was

I to constitute myself the protector of the helpless, when He was in

His Heaven? Such was my sunset mood; it lasted a few minutes, and then,

without radically changing, it became more objective.

The west was a broadening blaze of yellow and purple and red. I cannot

describe it to you. If you have seen the sun set in the tropics, you

would despise my description; and, if not, I for one could never make

you see it. Suffice it that a petrel wheeled somewhere between deepening

carmine and paling blue, and it took my thoughts off at an earthy

tangent. I thanked God there were no big sea-birds in these latitudes;

no molly-hawks, no albatrosses, no Cape-hens. I thought of an albatross

that I had caught going out. Its beak and talons were at the bottom

with the charred remains of the Lady Jermyn. But I could see them

still, could feel them shrewdly in my mind's flesh; and so to the old

superstition, strangely justified by my case; and so to the poem which

I, with my special experience, not unnaturally consider the greatest

poem ever penned.

But I did not know it then as I do now--and how the lines eluded me! I

seemed to see them in the book, yet I could not read the words!

“Water, water, everywhere,

Nor any drop to drink.”

That, of course, came first (incorrectly); and it reminded me of my

thirst, which the blood of the fowls had so very partially appeased. I

see now that it is lucky I could recall but little more. Experience is

less terrible than realization, and that poem makes me realize what I

went through as memory cannot. It has verses which would have driven me

mad. On the other hand, the exhaustive mental search for them distracted

my thoughts until the stars were back in the sky; and now I had a new

occupation, saying to myself all the poetry I could remember, especially

that of the sea; for I was a bookish fellow even then. But I never

was anything of a scholar. It is odd therefore, that the one apposite

passage which recurred to me in its entirety was in hexameters and

pentameters:

Me miserum, quanti montes volvuntur aquarum!

Jam jam tacturos sidera summa putes.

Quantae diducto subsidunt aequore valles!

Jam jam tacturas Tartara nigra putes.

Quocunque adspicio, nihil est nisi pontus et aether;

Fluctibus hic tumidis, nubibus ille minax....

More there was of it in my head; but this much was an accurate statement

of my case; and yet less so now (I was thankful to reflect) than in

the morning, when every wave was indeed a mountain, and its trough a

Tartarus. I had learnt the lines at school; nay, they had formed my very

earliest piece of Latin repetition. And how sharply I saw the room I

said them in, the man I said them to, ever since my friend! I figured

him even now hearing Ovid rep., the same passage in the same room. And I

lay saying it on a hen-coop in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean!

At last I fell into a deep sleep, a long unconscious holiday of the

soul, undefiled by any dream.

They say that our dreaming is done as we slowly wake; then was I out of

the way of it that night, for a sudden violent rocking awoke me in

one horrid instant. I made it worse by the way I started to a sitting

posture. I had shipped some water. I was shipping more. Yet all around

the sea was glassy; whence then the commotion? As my ship came trim

again, and I saw that my hour was not yet, the cause occurred to me; and

my heart turned so sick that it was minutes before I had the courage to

test my theory.

It was the true one.

A shark had been at my trailing fowls; had taken the bunch of them

together, dragging the legs from my loose fastenings. Lucky they had

been no stronger! Else had I been dragged down to perdition too.

Lucky, did I say? The refinement of cruelty rather; for now I had

neither meat nor drink; my throat was a kiln; my tongue a flame; and

another day at hand.

The stars were out; the sea was silver; the sun was up!

. . . . .

Hours passed.

I was waiting now for my delirium.

It came in bits.

I was a child. I was playing on the lawn at home. I was back on the

blazing sea.

I was a schoolboy saying my Ovid; then back once more.

The hen-coop was the Lady Jermyn. I was at Eva Denison's side. They were

marrying us on board. The ship's bell was ringing for us; a guitar in

the background burlesqued the Wedding March under skinny fingers; the

air was poisoned by a million cigarettes, they raised a pall of smoke

above the mastheads, they set fire to the ship; smoke and flame covered

the sea from rim to rim, smoke and flame filled the universe; the sea

dried up, and I was left lying in its bed, lying in my coffin, with

red-hot teeth, because the sun blazed right above them, and my withered

lips were drawn back from them for ever.

So once more I came back to my living death; too weak now to carry a

finger to the salt water and back to my mouth; too weak to think of Eva;

too weak to pray any longer for the end, to trouble or to care any more.

Only so tired.

. . . . .

Death has no more terrors for me. I have supped the last horror of the

worst death a man can die. You shall hear now for what I was delivered;

you shall read of my reward.

My floating coffin was many things in turn; a railway carriage, a

pleasure boat on the Thames, a hammock under the trees; last of all it

was the upper berth in a not very sweet-smelling cabin, with a clatter

of knives and forks near at hand, and a very strong odor of onions in

the Irish stew.

My hand crawled to my head; both felt a wondrous weight; and my head

was covered with bristles no longer than those on my chin, only less

stubborn.

“Where am I?” I feebly asked.

The knives and forks clattered on, and presently I burst out crying

because they had not heard me, and I knew that I could never make them

hear. Well, they heard my sobs, and a huge fellow came with his mouth

full, and smelling like a pickle bottle.

“Where am I?”

“Aboard the brig Eliza, Liverpool, homeward bound; glad to see them eyes

open.”

“Have I been here long?”

“Matter o' ten days.”

“Where did you find me?”

“Floating in a hen-coop; thought you was a dead 'un.”

“Do you know what ship?”

“Do we know? No, that's what you've got to tell us!”

“I can't,” I sighed, too weak to wag my head upon the pillow.

The man went to my cabin door.

“Here's a go,” said he; “forgotten the name of his blessed ship, he has.

Where's that there paper, Mr. Bowles? There's just a chance it may be

the same.”

“I've got it, sir.”

“Well, fetch it along, and come you in, Mr. Bowles; likely you may think

o' somethin'.”

A reddish, hook-nosed man, with a jaunty, wicked look, came and smiled

upon me in the friendliest fashion; the smell of onions became more than

I knew how to endure.

“Ever hear of the ship Lady Jermyn?” asked the first corner, winking at

the other.

I thought very hard, the name did sound familiar; but no, I could not

honestly say that I had beard it before.

The captain looked at his mate.

“It was a thousand to one,” said he; “still we may as well try him with

the other names. Ever heard of Cap'n Harris, mister?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Of Saunderson-stooard?”

“No.”

“Or Crookes-quartermaster.”

“Never.”

“Nor yet of Ready--a passenger?”

“No.”

“It's no use goin' on,” said the captain folding up the paper.

“None whatever, sir,” said the mate

“Ready! Ready!” I repeated. “I do seem to have heard that name before.

Won't you give me another chance?”

The paper was unfolded with a shrug.

“There was another passenger of the name of San-Santos. Dutchman,

seemin'ly. Ever heard o' him?”

My disappointment was keen. I could not say that I had. Yet I would not

swear that I had not.

“Oh, won't you? Well, there's only one more chance. Ever heard of Miss

Eva Denison--”

“By God, yes! Have you?”

I was sitting bolt upright in my bunk. The skipper's beard dropped upon

his chest.

“Bless my soul! The last name o' the lot, too!”

“Have you heard of her?” I reiterated.

“Wait a bit, my lad! Not so fast. Lie down again and tell me who she

was.”

“Who she was?” I screamed. “I want to know where she is!”

“I can't hardly say,” said the captain awkwardly. “We found the gig o'

the Lady Jermyn the week arter we found you, bein' becalmed like; there

wasn't no lady aboard her, though.”

“Was there anybody?”

“Two dead 'uns--an' this here paper.”

“Let me see it!”

The skipper hesitated.

“Hadn't you better wait a bit?”

“No, no; for Christ's sake let me see the worst; do you think I can't

read it in your face?”

I could--I did. I made that plain to them, and at last I had the

paper smoothed out upon my knees. It was a short statement of the last

sufferings of those who had escaped in the gig, and there was nothing

in it that I did not now expect. They had buried Ready first--then my

darling--then her step-father. The rest expected to follow fast enough.

It was all written plainly, on a sheet of the log-book, in different

trembling hands. Captain Harris had gone next; and two had been

discovered dead.

How long I studied that bit of crumpled paper, with the salt spray

still sparkling on it faintly, God alone knows. All at once a peal of

nightmare laughter rattled through the cabin. My deliverers started

back. The laugh was mine.

CHAPTER VI. THE SOLE SURVIVOR

A few weeks later I landed in England, I, who no longer desired to set

foot on any land again.

At nine-and-twenty I was gaunt and gray; my nerves were shattered, my

heart was broken; and my face showed it without let or hindrance from

the spirit that was broken too. Pride, will, courage, and endurance, all

these had expired in my long and lonely battle with the sea. They had

kept me alive-for this. And now they left me naked to mine enemies.

For every hand seemed raised against me, though in reality it was the

hand of fellowship that the world stretched out, and the other was the

reading of a jaundiced eye. I could not help it: there was a poison in

my veins that made me all ingratitude and perversity. The world welcomed

me back, and I returned the compliment by sulking like the recaptured

runaway I was at heart. The world showed a sudden interest in me; so I

took no further interest in the world, but, on the contrary, resented

its attentions with unreasonable warmth and obduracy; and my would-be

friends I regarded as my very worst enemies. The majority, I feel sure,

meant but well and kindly by the poor survivor. But the survivor could

not forget that his name was still in the newspapers, nor blink the fact

that he was an unworthy hero of the passing hour. And he suffered

enough from brazenly meddlesome and self-seeking folk, from impudent and

inquisitive intruders, to justify some suspicion of old acquaintances

suddenly styling themselves old friends, and of distant connections

newly and unduly eager to claim relationship. Many I misjudged, and have

long known it. On the whole, however, I wonder at that attitude of mine

as little as I approve of it.

If I had distinguished myself in any other way, it would have been a

different thing. It was the fussy, sentimental, inconsiderate

interest in one thrown into purely accidental and necessarily painful

prominence--the vulgarization of an unspeakable tragedy--that my soul

abhorred. I confess that I regarded it from my own unique and selfish

point of view. What was a thrilling matter to the world was a torturing

memory to me. The quintessence of the torture was, moreover, my own

secret. It was not the loss of the Lady Jermyn that I could not bear to

speak about; it was my own loss; but the one involved the other. My

loss apart, however, it was plain enough to dwell upon experiences so

terrible and yet so recent as those which I had lived to tell. I did

what I considered my duty to the public, but I certainly did no more. My

reticence was rebuked in the papers that made the most of me, but would

fain have made more. And yet I do not think that I was anything but

docile with those who had a manifest right to question me; to the

owners, and to other interested persons, with whom I was confronted on

one pretext or another, I told my tale as fully and as freely as I have

told it here, though each telling hurt more than the last. That was

necessary and unavoidable; it was the private intrusions which I

resented with all the spleen the sea had left me in exchange for the

qualities it had taken away.

Relatives I had as few as misanthropist could desire; but from

self-congratulation on the fact, on first landing, I soon came to keen

regret. They at least would have sheltered me from spies and busybodies;

they at least would have secured the peace and privacy of one who was

no hero in fact or spirit, whose noblest deed was a piece of self

preservation which he wished undone with all his heart.

Self-consciousness no doubt multiplied my flattering assailants. I

have said that my nerves were shattered. I may have imagined much and

exaggerated the rest. Yet what truth there was in my suspicions you

shall duly see. I felt sure that I was followed in the street, and my

every movement dogged by those to whom I would not condescend to turn

and look. Meanwhile, I had not the courage to go near my club, and

the Temple was a place where I was accosted in every court, effusively

congratulated on the marvellous preservation of my stale spoilt life,

and invited right and left to spin my yarn over a quiet pipe! Well,

perhaps such invitations were not so common as they have grown in my

memory; nor must you confuse my then feelings on all these matters with

those which I entertain as I write. I have grown older, and, I hope,

something kindlier and wiser since then. Yet to this day I cannot blame

myself for abandoning my chambers and avoiding my club.

For a temporary asylum I pitched upon a small, quiet, empty, private

hotel which I knew of in Charterhouse Square. Instantly the room next

mine became occupied.

All the first night I imagined I heard voices talking about me in that

room next door. It was becoming a disease with me. Either I was being

dogged, watched, followed, day and night, indoors and out, or I was the

victim of a very ominous hallucination. That night I never closed an eye

nor lowered my light. In the morning I took a four-wheel cab and

drove straight to Harley Street; and, upon my soul, as I stood on the

specialist's door-step, I could have sworn I saw the occupant of the

room next mine dash by me in a hansom!

“Ah!” said the specialist; “so you cannot sleep; you hear voices;

you fancy you are being followed in the street. You don't think these

fancies spring entirely from the imagination? Not entirely--just so. And

you keep looking behind you, as though somebody were at your elbow; and

you prefer to sit with your back close to the wall. Just so--just so.

Distressing symptoms, to be sure, but--but hardly to be wondered at in a

man who has come through your nervous strain.” A keen professional light

glittered in his eyes. “And almost commonplace,” he added, smiling,

“compared with the hallucinations you must have suffered from on that

hen-coop! Ah, my dear sir, the psychological interest of your case is

very great!”

“It may be,” said I, brusquely. “But I come to you to get that hen-coop

out of my head, not to be reminded of it. Everybody asks me about the

damned thing, and you follow everybody else. I wish it and I were at the

bottom of the sea together!”

This speech had the effect of really interesting the doctor in my

present condition, which was indeed one of chronic irritation and

extreme excitability, alternating with fits of the very blackest

despair. Instead of offending my gentleman I had put him on his mettle,

and for half an hour he honored me with the most exhaustive inquisition

ever elicited from a medical man. His panacea was somewhat in the nature

of an anti-climax, but at least it had the merits of simplicity and

of common sense. A change of air--perfect quiet--say a cottage in the

country--not too near the sea. And he shook my hand kindly when I left.

“Keep up your heart, my dear sir,” said he. “Keep up your courage and

your heart.”

“My heart!” I cried. “It's at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean.”

He was the first to whom I had said as much. He was a stranger. What did

it matter? And, oh, it was so true--so true.

Every day and all day I was thinking of my love; every hour and all

hours she was before me with her sunny hair and young, young face. Her

wistful eyes were gazing into mine continually. Their wistfulness I

had never realized at the time; but now I did; and I saw it for what it

seemed always to have been, the soft, sad, yearning look of one fated

to die young. So young--so young! And I might live to be an old man,

mourning her.

That I should never love again I knew full well. This time there was no

mistake. I have implied, I believe, that it was for another woman I fled

originally to the diggings. Well, that one was still unmarried, and when

the papers were full of me she wrote me a letter which I now believe to

have been merely kind. At the time I was all uncharitableness; but words

of mine would fail to tell you how cold this letter left me; it was as a

candle lighted in the full blaze of the sun.

With all my bitterness, however, you must not suppose that I had quite

lost the feelings which had inspired me at sunset on the lonely ocean,

while my mind still held good. I had been too near my Maker ever to lose

those feelings altogether. They were with me in the better moments of

these my worst days. I trusted His wisdom still. There was a reason for

everything; there were reasons for all this. I alone had been saved out

of all those souls who sailed from Melbourne in the Lady Jermyn. Why

should I have been the favored one; I with my broken heart and now

lonely life? Some great inscrutable reason there must be; at my worst

I did not deny that. But neither did I puzzle my sick brain with the

reason. I just waited for it to be revealed to me, if it were God's will

ever to reveal it. And that I conceive to be the one spirit in which a

man may contemplate, with equal sanity and reverence, the mysteries and

the miseries of his life.

CHAPTER VII. I FIND A FRIEND

The night after I consulted the specialist I was quite determined to

sleep. I had laid in a bundle of the daily papers. No country cottage

was advertised to let but I knew of it by evening, and about all the

likely ones I had already written. The scheme occupied my thoughts.

Trout-fishing was a desideratum. I would take my rod and plenty of

books, would live simply and frugally, and it should make a new man of

me by Christmas. It was now October. I went to sleep thinking of autumn

tints against an autumn sunset. It must have been very early, certainly

not later than ten o'clock; the previous night I had not slept at all.

Now, this private hotel of mine was a very old fashioned house, dark and

dingy all day long, with heavy old chandeliers and black old oak, and

dead flowers in broken flower-pots surrounding a grimy grass-plot in the

rear. On this latter my bedroom window looked; and never am I likely to

forget the vile music of the cats throughout my first long wakeful night

there. The second night they actually woke me; doubtless they had been

busy long enough, but it was all of a sudden that I heard them, and lay

listening for more, wide awake in an instant. My window had been very

softly opened, and the draught fanned my forehead as I held my breath.

A faint light glimmered through a ground-glass pane over the door; and

was dimly reflected by the toilet mirror, in its usual place against the

window. This mirror I saw moved, and next moment I had bounded from bed.

The mirror fell with a horrid clatter: the toilet-table followed it with

a worse: the thief had gone as he had come ere my toes halted aching

amid the debris.

A useless little balcony--stone slab and iron railing--jutted out from

my window. I thought I saw a hand on the railing, another on the slab,

then both together on the lower level for one instant before they

disappeared. There was a dull yet springy thud on the grass below. Then

no more noise but the distant thunder of the traffic, and the one that

woke me, until the window next mine was thrown up.

“What the devil's up?”

The voice was rich, cheery, light-hearted, agreeable; all that my own

was not as I answered “Nothing!” for this was not the first time my

next-door neighbor had tried to scrape acquaintance with me.

“But surely, sir, I heard the very dickens of a row?”

“You may have done.”

“I was afraid some one had broken into your room!”

“As a matter of fact,” said I, put to shame by the undiminished

good-humor of my neighbor, “some one did; but he's gone now, so let him

be.”

“Gone? Not he! He's getting over that wall. After him--after him!” And

the head disappeared from the window next mine.

I rushed into the corridor, and was just in time to intercept a

singularly handsome young fellow, at whom I had hardly taken the trouble

to look until now. He was in full evening dress, and his face was

radiant with the spirit of mischief and adventure.

“For God's sake, sir,” I whispered, “let this matter rest. I shall have

to come forward if you persist, and Heaven knows I have been before the

public quite enough!”

His dark eyes questioned me an instant, then fell as though he would not

disguise that he recollected and understood. I liked him for his good

taste. I liked him for his tacit sympathy, and better still for the

amusing disappointment in his gallant, young face.

“I am sorry to have robbed you of a pleasant chase,” said I. “At one

time I should have been the first to join you. But, to tell you the

truth, I've had enough excitement lately to last me for my life.”

“I can believe that,” he answered, with his fine eyes full upon me.

How strangely I had misjudged him! I saw no vulgar curiosity in his

flattering gaze, but rather that very sympathy of which I stood in need.

I offered him my hand.

“It is very good of you to give in,” I said. “No one else has heard a

thing, you see. I shall look for another opportunity of thanking you

to-morrow.”

“No, no!” cried he, “thanks be hanged, but--but, I say, if I promise

you not to bore you about things--won't you drink a glass of

brandy-and-water in my room before you turn in again?”

Brandy-and-water being the very thing I needed, and this young man

pleasing me more and more, I said that I would join him with all my

heart, and returned to my room for my dressing-gown and slippers. To

find them, however, I had to light my candles, when the first thing

I saw was the havoc my marauder had left behind him. The mirror was

cracked across; the dressing-table had lost a leg; and both lay flat,

with my brushes and shaving-table, and the foolish toilet crockery which

no one uses (but I should have to replace) strewn upon the carpet. But

one thing I found that had not been there before: under the window lay

a formidable sheath-knife without its sheath. I picked it up with

something of a thrill, which did not lessen when I felt its edge. The

thing was diabolically sharp. I took it with me to show my neighbor,

whom I found giving his order to the boots; it seemed that it was barely

midnight, and that he had only just come in when the clatter took place

in my room.

“Hillo!” he cried, when the man was gone, and I produced my trophy.

“Why, what the mischief have you got there?”

“My caller's card,” said I. “He left it behind him. Feel the edge.”

I have seldom seen a more indignant face than the one which my new

acquaintance bent over the weapon, as he held it to the light, and ran

his finger along the blade. He could have not frowned more heavily if he

had recognized the knife.

“The villains!” he muttered. “The damned villains!”

“Villains?” I queried. “Did you see more than one of them, then?”

“Didn't you?” he asked quickly. “Yes, yes, to be sure! There was at

least one other beggar skulking down below.” He stood looking at me, the

knife in his hand, though mine was held out for it. “Don't you think,

Mr. Cole, that it's our duty to hand this over to the police? I--I've

heard of other cases about these Inns of Court. There's evidently a gang

of them, and this knife might convict the lot; there's no saying; anyway

I think the police should have it. If you like I'll take it to Scotland

Yard myself, and hand it over without mentioning your name.”

“Oh, if you keep my name out of it,” said I, “and say nothing about

it here in the hotel, you may do what you like, and welcome! It's the

proper course, no doubt; only I've had publicity enough, and would

sooner have felt that blade in my body than set my name going again in

the newspapers.”

“I understand,” he said, with his well-bred sympathy, which never went

a shade too far; and he dropped the weapon into a drawer, as the boots

entered with the tray. In a minute he had brewed two steaming jorums of

spirits-and-water; as he handed me one, I feared he was going to drink

my health, or toast my luck; but no, he was the one man I had met who

seemed, as he said, to “understand.” Nevertheless, he had his toast.

“Here's confusion to the criminal classes in general,” he cried; “but

death and damnation to the owners of that knife!”

And we clinked tumblers across the little oval table in the middle of

the room. It was more of a sitting-room than mine; a bright fire was

burning in the grate, and my companion insisted on my sitting over it

in the arm-chair, while for himself he fetched the one from his bedside,

and drew up the table so that our glasses should be handy. He then

produced a handsome cigar-case admirably stocked, and we smoked and

sipped in the cosiest fashion, though without exchanging many words.

You may imagine my pleasure in the society of a youth, equally charming

in looks, manners and address, who had not one word to say to me about

the Lady Jermyn or my hen-coop. It was unique. Yet such, I suppose,

was my native contrariety, that I felt I could have spoken of the

catastrophe to this very boy with less reluctance than to any other

creature whom I had encountered since my deliverance. He seemed so full

of silent sympathy: his consideration for my feelings was so marked and

yet so unobtrusive. I have called him a boy. I am apt to write as the

old man I have grown, though I do believe I felt older then than now.

In any case my young friend was some years my junior. I afterwards found

out that he was six-and-twenty.

I have also called him handsome. He was the handsomest man that I have

ever met, had the frankest face, the finest eyes, the brightest smile.

Yet his bronzed forehead was low, and his mouth rather impudent and bold

than truly strong. And there was a touch of foppery about him, in the

enormous white tie and the much-cherished whiskers of the fifties, which

was only redeemed by that other touch of devilry that he had shown me

in the corridor. By the rich brown of his complexion, as well as by a

certain sort of swagger in his walk, I should have said that he was a

naval officer ashore, had he not told me who he was of his own accord.

“By the way,” he said, “I ought to give you my name. It's Rattray,

of one of the many Kirby Halls in this country. My one's down in

Lancashire.”

“I suppose there's no need to tell my name?” said I, less sadly, I

daresay, than I had ever yet alluded to the tragedy which I alone

survived. It was an unnecessary allusion, too, as a reference to the

foregoing conversation will show.

“Well, no!” said he, in his frank fashion; “I can't honestly say there

is.”

We took a few puffs, he watching the fire, and I his firelit face.

“It must seem strange to you to be sitting with the only man who lived

to tell the tale!”

The egotism of this speech was not wholly gratuitous. I thought it did

seem strange to him: that a needless constraint was put upon him by

excessive consideration for my feelings. I desired to set him at his

ease as he had set me at mine. On the contrary, he seemed quite startled

by my remark.

“It is strange,” he said, with a shudder, followed by the biggest sip

of brandy-and-water he had taken yet. “It must have been

horrible--horrible!” he added to himself, his dark eyes staring into the

fire.

“Ah!” said I, “it was even more horrible than you suppose or can ever

imagine.”

I was not thinking of myself, nor of my love, nor of any particular

incident of the fire that still went on burning in my brain. My tone was

doubtless confidential, but I was meditating no special confidence when

my companion drew one with his next words. These, however, came after a

pause, in which my eyes had fallen from his face, but in which I heard

him emptying his glass.

“What do you mean?” he whispered. “That there were other

circumstances--things which haven't got into the papers?”

“God knows there were,” I answered, my face in my hands; and, my

grief brought home to me, there I sat with it in the presence of that

stranger, without compunction and without shame.

He sprang up and paced the room. His tact made me realize my weakness,

and I was struggling to overcome it when he surprised me by suddenly

stopping and laying a rather tremulous hand upon my shoulder.

“You--It wouldn't do you any good to speak of those circumstances, I

suppose?” he faltered.

“No: not now: no good at all.”

“Forgive me,” he said, resuming his walk. “I had no business--I felt so

sorry--I cannot tell you how I sympathize! And yet--I wonder if you will

always feel so?”

“No saying how I shall feel when I am a man again,” said I. “You see

what I am at present.” And, pulling myself together, I rose to find my

new friend quite agitated in his turn.

“I wish we had some more brandy,” he sighed. “I'm afraid it's too late

to get any now.”

“And I'm glad of it,” said I. “A man in my state ought not to look at

spirits, or he may never look past them again. Thank goodness, there are

other medicines. Only this morning I consulted the best man on nerves in

London. I wish I'd gone to him long ago.”

“Harley Street, was it?”

“Yes.”

“Saw you on his doorstep, by Jove!” cried Rattray at once. “I was

driving over to Hampstead, and I thought it was you. Well, what's the

prescription?”

In my satisfaction at finding that he had not been dogging me

intentionally (though I had forgotten the incident till he reminded me

of it), I answered his question with unusual fulness.

“I should go abroad,” said Rattray. “But then, I always am abroad; it's

only the other day I got back from South America, and I shall up anchor

again before this filthy English winter sets in.”

Was he a sailor after all, or only a well-to-do wanderer on the face of

the earth? He now mentioned that he was only in England for a few weeks,

to have a look at his estate, and so forth; after which he plunged into

more or less enthusiastic advocacy of this or that foreign resort, as

opposed to the English cottage upon which I told him I had set my heart.

He was now, however, less spontaneous, I thought, than earlier in the

night. His voice had lost its hearty ring, and he seemed preoccupied, as

if talking of one matter while he thought upon another. Yet he would

not let me go; and presently he confirmed my suspicion, no less than my

first impression of his delightful frankness and cordiality, by candidly

telling me what was on his mind.

“If you really want a cottage in the country,” said he, “and the most

absolute peace and quiet to be got in this world, I know of the very

thing on my land in Lancashire. It would drive me mad in a week; but if

you really care for that sort of thing--”

“An occupied cottage?” I interrupted.

“Yes; a couple rent it from me, very decent people of the name of

Braithwaite. The man is out all day, and won't bother you when he's in;

he's not like other people, poor chap. But the woman 's all there, and

would do her best for you in a humble, simple, wholesome sort of way.”

“You think they would take me in?”

“They have taken other men--artists as a rule.”

“Then it's a picturesque country?”

“Oh, it's that if it's nothing else; but not a town for miles, mind you,

and hardly a village worthy the name.”

“Any fishing?”

“Yes--trout--small but plenty of 'em--in a beck running close behind the

cottage.”

“Come,” cried I, “this sounds delightful! Shall you be up there?”

“Only for a day or two,” was the reply. “I shan't trouble you, Mr.

Cole.”

“My dear sir, that wasn't my meaning at all. I'm only sorry I shall not

see something of you on your own heath. I can't thank you enough for

your kind suggestion. When do you suppose the Braithwaites could do with

me?”

His charming smile rebuked my impatience.

“We must first see whether they can do with you at all,” said he. “I

sincerely hope they can; but this is their time of year for tourists,

though perhaps a little late. I'll tell you what I'll do. As a matter

of fact, I'm going down there to-morrow, and I've got to telegraph to my

place in any case to tell them when to meet me. I'll send the telegram

first thing, and I'll make them send one back to say whether there's

room in the cottage or not.”

I thanked him warmly, but asked if the cottage was close to Kirby Hall,

and whether this would not be giving a deal of trouble at the other end;

whereupon he mischievously misunderstood me a second time, saying the

cottage and the hall were not even in sight of each other, and I really

had no intrusion to fear, as he was a lonely bachelor like myself,

and would only be up there four or five days at the most. So I made my

appreciation of his society plainer than ever to him; for indeed I

had found a more refreshing pleasure in it already than I had hoped to

derive from mortal man again; and we parted, at three o'clock in the

morning, like old fast friends.

“Only don't expect too much, my dear Mr. Cole,” were his last words to

me. “My own place is as ancient and as tumble-down as most ruins that

you pay to see over. And I'm never there myself because--I tell you

frankly--I hate it like poison!”

CHAPTER VIII. A SMALL PRECAUTION

My delight in the society of this young Squire Rattray (as I soon was to

hear him styled) had been such as to make me almost forget the sinister

incident which had brought us together. When I returned to my room,

however, there were the open window and the litter on the floor to

remind me of what had happened earlier in the night. Yet I was less

disconcerted than you might suppose. A common housebreaker can have

few terrors for one who has braved those of mid-ocean single-handed; my

would-be visitor had no longer any for me; for it had not yet occurred

to me to connect him with the voices and the footsteps to which, indeed,

I had been unable to swear before the doctor. On the other hand, these

morbid imaginings (as I was far from unwilling to consider them) had

one and all deserted me in the sane, clean company of the capital young

fellow in the next room.

I have confessed my condition up to the time of this queer meeting.

I have tried to bring young Rattray before you with some hint of his

freshness and his boyish charm; and though the sense of failure is heavy

upon me there, I who knew the man knew also that I must fail to do him

justice. Enough may have been said, however, to impart some faint idea

of what this youth was to me in the bitter and embittering anti-climax

of my life. Conventional figures spring to my pen, but every one of them

is true; he was flowers in spring, he was sunshine after rain, he was

rain following long months of drought. I slept admirably after all;

and I awoke to see the overturned toilet-table, and to thrill as I

remembered there was one fellow-creature with whom I could fraternize

without fear of a rude reopening of my every wound.

I hurried my dressing in the hope of our breakfasting together. I

knocked at the next door, and, receiving no answer, even ventured

to enter, with the same idea. He was not there. He was not in the

coffee-room. He was not in the hotel.

I broke my fast in disappointed solitude, and I hung about disconsolate

all the morning, looking wistfully for my new-made friend. Towards

mid-day he drove up in a cab which he kept waiting at the curb.

“It's all right!” he cried out in his hearty way. “I sent my telegram

first thing, and I've had the answer at my club. The rooms are vacant,

and I'll see that Jane Braithwaite has all ready for you by to-morrow

night.”

I thanked him from my heart. “You seem in a hurry!” I added, as I

followed him up the stairs.

“I am,” said he. “It's a near thing for the train. I've just time to

stick in my things.”

“Then I'll stick in mine,” said I impulsively, “and I'll come with you,

and doss down in any corner for the night.”

He stopped and turned on the stairs.

“You mustn't do that,” said he; “they won't have anything ready. I'm

going to make it my privilege to see that everything is as cosey as

possible when you arrive. I simply can't allow you to come to-day, Mr.

Cole!” He smiled, but I saw that he was in earnest, and of course I gave

in.

“All right,” said I; “then I must content myself with seeing you off at

the station.”

To my surprise his smile faded, and a flush of undisguised annoyance

made him, if anything, better-looking than ever. It brought out a

certain strength of mouth and jaw which I had not observed there

hitherto. It gave him an ugliness of expression which only emphasized

his perfection of feature.

“You mustn't do that either,” said he, shortly. “I have an appointment

at the station. I shall be talking business all the time.”

He was gone to his room, and I went to mine feeling duly snubbed; yet I

deserved it; for I had exhibited a characteristic (though not chronic)

want of taste, of which I am sometimes guilty to this day. Not to show

ill-feeling on the head of it, I nevertheless followed him down again

in four or five minutes. And I was rewarded by his brightest smile as he

grasped my hand.

“Come to-morrow by the same train,” said he, naming station, line, and

hour; “unless I telegraph, all will be ready and you shall be met. You

may rely on reasonable charges. As to the fishing, go up-stream--to the

right when you strike the beck--and you'll find a good pool or two. I

may have to go to Lancaster the day after to-morrow, but I shall give

you a call when I get back.”

With that we parted, as good friends as ever. I observed that my regret

at losing him was shared by the boots, who stood beside me on the steps

as his hansom rattled off.

“I suppose Mr. Rattray stays here always when he comes to town?” said I.

“No, sir,” said the man, “we've never had him before, not in my time;

but I shouldn't mind if he came again.” And he looked twice at the coin

in his hand before pocketing it with evident satisfaction.

Lonely as I was, and wished to be, I think that I never felt my

loneliness as I did during the twenty-four hours which intervened

between Rattray's departure and my own. They dragged like wet days by

the sea, and the effect was as depressing. I have seldom been at such

a loss for something to do; and in my idleness I behaved like a child,

wishing my new friend back again, or myself on the railway with my new

friend, until I blushed for the beanstalk growth of my regard for him,

an utter stranger, and a younger man. I am less ashamed of it now: he

had come into my dark life like a lamp, and his going left a darkness

deeper than before.

In my dejection I took a new view of the night's outrage. It was no

common burglar's work, for what had I worth stealing? It was the work of

my unseen enemies, who dogged me in the street; they alone knew why; the

doctor had called these hallucinations, and I had forced myself to agree

with the doctor; but I could not deceive myself in my present mood.

I remembered the steps, the steps--the stopping when I stopped--the

drawing away in the crowded streets---the closing up in quieter places.

Why had I never looked round? Why? Because till to-day I had thought it

mere vulgar curiosity; because a few had bored me, I had imagined the

many at my heels; but now I knew--I knew! It was the few again: a few

who hated me even unto death.

The idea took such a hold upon me that I did not trouble my head with

reasons and motives. Certain persons had designs upon my life; that was

enough for me. On the whole, the thought was stimulating; it set a new

value on existence, and it roused a certain amount of spirit even in me.

I would give the fellows another chance before I left town. They should

follow me once more, and this time to some purpose. Last night they had

left a knife on me; to-night I would have a keepsake ready for them.

Hitherto I had gone unarmed since my landing, which, perhaps, was no

more than my duty as a civilized citizen. On Black Hill Flats, however,

I had formed another habit, of which I should never have broken myself

so easily, but for the fact that all the firearms I ever had were

reddening and rotting at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean. I now went

out and bought me such a one as I had never possessed before.

The revolver was then in its infancy; but it did exist; and by dusk

I was owner of as fine a specimen as could be procured in the city of

London. It had but five chambers, but the barrel was ten inches long;

one had to cap it, and to put in the powder and the wadded bullet

separately; but the last-named would have killed an elephant. The oak

case that I bought with it cumbers my desk as I write, and, shut,

you would think that it had never contained anything more lethal than

fruit-knives. I open it, and there are the green-baize compartments, one

with a box of percussion caps, still apparently full, another that could

not contain many more wadded-bullets, and a third with a powder-horn

which can never have been much lighter. Within the lid is a label

bearing the makers' names; the gentlemen themselves are unknown to me,

even if they are still alive; nevertheless, after five-and-forty years,

let me dip my pen to Messrs. Deane, Adams and Deane!

That night I left this case in my room, locked, and the key in my

waistcoat pocket; in the right-hand side-pocket of my overcoat I carried

my Deane and Adams, loaded in every chamber; also my right hand, as

innocently as you could wish. And just that night I was not followed! I

walked across Regent's Park, and I dawdled on Primrose Hill, without

the least result. Down I turned into the Avenue Road, and presently was

strolling between green fields towards Finchley. The moon was up, but

nicely shaded by a thin coating of clouds which extended across the sky:

it was an ideal night for it. It was also my last night in town, and I

did want to give the beggars their last chance. But they did not even

attempt to avail themselves of it: never once did they follow me: my

ears were in too good training to make any mistake. And the reason only

dawned on me as I drove back disappointed: they had followed me already

to the gunsmith's!

Convinced of this, I entertained but little hope of another midnight

visitor. Nevertheless, I put my light out early, and sat a long time

peeping through my blind; but only an inevitable Tom, with back hunched

up and tail erect, broke the moonlit profile of the back-garden wall;

and once more that disreputable music (which none the less had saved my

life) was the only near sound all night.

I felt very reluctant to pack Deane and Adams away in his case next

morning, and the case in my portmanteau, where I could not get at it in

case my unknown friends took it into their heads to accompany me out of

town. In the hope that they would, I kept him loaded, and in the same

overcoat pocket, until late in the afternoon, when, being very near my

northern destination, and having the compartment to myself, I locked the

toy away with considerable remorse for the price I had paid for it. All

down the line I had kept an eye for suspicious characters with an eye

upon me; but even my self-consciousness failed to discover one; and I

reached my haven of peace, and of fresh fell air, feeling, I suppose,

much like any other fool who has spent his money upon a white elephant.

CHAPTER IX. MY CONVALESCENT HOME

The man Braithwaite met me at the station with a spring cart. The very

porters seemed to expect me, and my luggage was in the cart before I

had given up my ticket. Nor had we started when I first noticed that

Braithwaite did not speak when I spoke to him. On the way, however, a

more flagrant instance recalled young Rattray's remark, that the man was

“not like other people.” I had imagined it to refer to a mental, not

a physical, defect; whereas it was clear to me now that my prospective

landlord was stone-deaf, and I presently discovered him to be dumb as

well. Thereafter I studied him with some attention during our drive of

four or five miles. I called to mind the theory that an innate physical

deficiency is seldom without its moral counterpart, and I wondered how

far this would apply to the deaf-mute at my side, who was ill-grown,

wizened, and puny into the bargain. The brow-beaten face of him was

certainly forbidding, and he thrashed his horse up the hills in a

dogged, vindictive, thorough-going way which at length made me jump

out and climb one of them on foot. It was the only form of protest that

occurred to me.

The evening was damp and thick. It melted into night as we drove.

I could form no impression of the country, but this seemed desolate

enough. I believe we met no living soul on the high road which we

followed for the first three miles or more. At length we turned into a

narrow lane, with a stiff stone wall on either hand, and this eventually

led us past the lights of what appeared to be a large farm; it was

really a small hamlet; and now we were nearing our destination. Gates

had to be opened, and my poor driver breathed hard from the continual

getting down and up. In the end a long and heavy cart-track brought us

to the loneliest light that I have ever seen. It shone on the side of a

hill--in the heart of an open wilderness--as solitary as a beacon-light

at sea. It was the light of the cottage which was to be my temporary

home.

A very tall, gaunt woman stood in the doorway against the inner glow.

She advanced with a loose, long stride, and invited me to enter in a

voice harsh (I took it) from disuse. I was warming myself before the

kitchen fire when she came in carrying my heaviest box as though it had

nothing in it. I ran to take it from her, for the box was full of books,

but she shook her head, and was on the stairs with it before I could

intercept her.

I conceive that very few men are attracted by abnormal strength in a

woman; we cannot help it; and yet it was not her strength which first

repelled me in Mrs. Braithwaite. It was a combination of attributes. She

had a poll of very dirty and untidy red hair; her eyes were set close

together; she had the jowl of the traditional prize-fighter. But far

more disagreeable than any single feature was the woman's expression,

or rather the expression which I caught her assuming naturally, and

banishing with an effort for my benefit. To me she was strenuously

civil in her uncouth way. But I saw her give her husband one look, as

he staggered in with my comparatively light portmanteau, which she

instantly snatched out of his feeble arms. I saw this look again before

the evening was out, and it was such a one as Braithwaite himself had

fixed upon his horse as he flogged it up the hills.

I began to wonder how the young squire had found it in his conscience to

recommend such a pair. I wondered less when the woman finally ushered

me upstairs to my rooms. These were small and rugged, but eminently snug

and clean. In each a good fire blazed cheerfully; my portmanteau was

already unstrapped, the table in the sitting-room already laid; and I

could not help looking twice at the silver and the glass, so bright was

their condition, so good their quality. Mrs. Braithwaite watched me from

the door.

“I doubt you'll be thinking them's our own,” said she. “I wish they

were; t'squire sent 'em in this afternoon.”

“For my use?”

“Ay; I doubt he thought what we had ourselves wasn't good enough. An'

it's him 'at sent t' armchair, t'bed-linen, t'bath, an' that there

lookin'-glass an' all.”

She had followed me into the bedroom, where I looked with redoubled

interest at each object as she mentioned it, and it was in the glass--a

masqueline shaving-glass--that I caught my second glimpse of my

landlady's evil expression--levelled this time at myself.

I instantly turned round and told her that I thought it very kind of Mr.

Rattray, but that, for my part, I was not a luxurious man, and that I

felt rather sorry the matter had not been left entirely in her hands.

She retired seemingly mollified, and she took my sympathy with her,

though I was none the less pleased and cheered by my new friend's zeal

for my comfort; there were even flowers on my table, without a doubt

from Kirby Hall.

And in another matter the squire had not misled me: the woman was an

excellent plain cook. I expected ham and eggs. Sure enough, this was my

dish, but done to a turn. The eggs were new and all unbroken, the ham

so lean and yet so tender, that I would not have exchanged my humble,

hearty meal for the best dinner served that night in London. It made a

new man of me, after my long journey and my cold, damp drive. I was for

chatting with Mrs. Braithwaite when she came up to clear away. I

thought she might be glad to talk after the life she must lead with her

afflicted husband, but it seemed to have had the opposite effect on her.

All I elicited was an ambiguous statement as to the distance between the

cottage and the hall; it was “not so far.” And so she left me to my pipe

and to my best night yet, in the stillest spot I have ever slept in

on dry land; one heard nothing but the bubble of a beck; and it seemed

very, very far away.

A fine, bright morning showed me my new surroundings in their true

colors; even in the sunshine these were not very gay. But gayety was the

last thing I wanted. Peace and quiet were my whole desire, and both were

here, set in scenery at once lovely to the eye and bracing to the soul.

From the cottage doorstep one looked upon a perfect panorama of

healthy, open English country. Purple hills hemmed in a broad, green,

undulating plateau, scored across and across by the stone walls of the

north, and all dappled with the shadows of rolling leaden clouds with

silver fringes. Miles away a church spire stuck like a spike out of the

hollow, and the smoke of a village dimmed the trees behind. No nearer

habitation could I see. I have mentioned a hamlet which we passed in the

spring-cart. It lay hidden behind some hillocks to the left. My landlady

told me it was better than half a mile away, and “nothing when you get

there; no shop; no post-office; not even a public--house.”

I inquired in which direction lay the hall. She pointed to the nearest

trees, a small forest of stunted oaks, which shut in the view to the

right, after quarter of a mile of a bare and rugged valley. Through this

valley twisted the beck which I had heard faintly in the night. It ran

through the oak plantation and so to the sea, some two or three miles

further on, said my landlady; but nobody would have thought it was so

near.

“T'squire was to be away to-day,” observed the woman, with the broad

vowel sound which I shall not attempt to reproduce in print. “He was

going to Lancaster, I believe.”

“So I understood,” said I. “I didn't think of troubling him, if that's

what you mean. I'm going to take his advice and fish the beck.”

And I proceeded to do so after a hearty early dinner: the keen, chill

air was doing me good already: the “perfect quiet” was finding its

way into my soul. I blessed my specialist, I blessed Squire Rattray, I

blessed the very villains who had brought us within each other's ken;

and nowhere was my thanksgiving more fervent than in the deep cleft

threaded by the beck; for here the shrewd yet gentle wind passed

completely overhead, and the silence was purged of oppression by the

ceaseless symphony of clear water running over clean stones.

But it was no day for fishing, and no place for the fly, though I went

through the form of throwing one for several hours. Here the stream

merely rinsed its bed, there it stood so still, in pools of liquid

amber, that, when the sun shone, the very pebbles showed their shadows

in the deepest places. Of course I caught nothing; but, towards the

close of the gold-brown afternoon, I made yet another new acquaintance,

in the person of a little old clergyman who attacked me pleasantly from

the rear.

“Bad day for fishing, sir,” croaked the cheery voice which first

informed me of his presence. “Ah, I knew it must be a stranger,” he

cried as I turned and he hopped down to my side with the activity of a

much younger man.

“Yes,” I said, “I only came down from London yesterday. I find the spot

so delightful that I haven't bothered much about the sport. Still, I've

had about enough of it now.” And I prepared to take my rod to pieces.

“Spot and sport!” laughed the old gentleman. “Didn't mean it for a

pun, I hope? Never could endure puns! So you came down yesterday, young

gentleman, did you? And where may you be staying?”

I described the position of my cottage without the slightest hesitation;

for this parson did not scare me; except in appearance he had so

little in common with his type as I knew it. He had, however, about the

shrewdest pair of eyes that I have ever seen, and my answer only served

to intensify their open scrutiny.

“How on earth did you come to hear of a God-forsaken place like this?”

said he, making use, I thought, of a somewhat stronger expression than

quite became his cloth.

“Squire Rattray told me of it,” said I.

“Ha! So you're a friend of his, are you?” And his eyes went through and

through me like knitting-needles through a ball of wool.

“I could hardly call myself that,” said I. “But Mr. Rattray has been

very kind to me.”

“Meet him in town?”

I said I had, but I said it with some coolness, for his tone had dropped

into the confidential, and I disliked it as much as this string of

questions from a stranger.

“Long ago, sir?” he pursued.

“No, sir; not long ago,” I retorted.

“May I ask your name?” said he.

“You may ask what you like,” I cried, with a final reversal of all my

first impressions of this impertinent old fellow; “but I'm hanged if

I tell it you! I am here for rest and quiet, sir. I don't ask you your

name. I can't for the life of me see what right you have to ask me mine,

or to question me at all, for that matter.”

He favored me with a brief glance of extraordinary suspicion. It faded

away in mere surprise, and, next instant, my elderly and reverend friend

was causing me some compunction by coloring like a boy.

“You may think my curiosity mere impertinence, sir,” said he; “you would

think otherwise if you knew as much as I do of Squire Rattray's friends,

and how little you resemble the generality of them. You might even feel

some sympathy for one of the neighboring clergy, to whom this godless

young man has been for years as a thorn in their side.”

He spoke so gravely, and what he said was so easy to believe, that I

could not but apologize for my hasty words.

“Don't name it, sir,” said the clergyman; “you had a perfect right to

resent my questions, and I enjoy meeting young men of spirit; but not

when it's an evil spirit, such as, I fear, possesses your friend! I do

assure you, sir, that the best thing I have heard of him for years is

the very little that you have told me. As a rule, to hear of him at all

in this part of the world, is to wish that we had not heard. I see him

coming, however, and shall detain you no longer, for I don't deny that

there is no love lost between us.”

I looked round, and there was Rattray on the top of the bank, a long

way to the left, coming towards me with a waving hat. An extraordinary

ejaculation brought me to the right-about next instant.

The old clergyman had slipped on a stone in mid-stream, and, as he

dragged a dripping leg up the opposite bank, he had sworn an oath worthy

of the “godless young man” who had put him to flight, and on whose

demerits he had descanted with so much eloquence and indignation.

CHAPTER X. WINE AND WEAKNESS

“Sporting old parson who knows how to swear?” laughed Rattray. “Never saw

him in my life before; wondered who the deuce he was.”

“Really?” said I. “He professed to know something of you.”

“Against me, you mean? My dear Cole, don't trouble to perjure yourself.

I don't mind, believe me. They're easily shocked, these country clergy,

and no doubt I'm a bugbear to 'em. Yet, I could have sworn I'd never

seen this one before. Let's have another look.”

We were walking away together. We turned on the top of the bank. And

there the old clergyman was planted on the moorside, and watching us

intently from under his hollowed hands.

“Well, I'm hanged!” exclaimed Rattray, as the hands fell and their

owner beat a hasty retreat. My companion said no more; indeed, for some

minutes we pursued our way in silence. And I thought that it was with an

effort that he broke into sudden inquiries concerning my journey and my

comfort at the cottage.

This gave me an opportunity of thanking him for his little attentions.

“It was awfully good of you,” said I, taking his arm as though I had

known him all my life; nor do I think there was another living man with

whom I would have linked arms at that time.

“Good?” cried he. “Nonsense, my dear sir! I'm only afraid you find

it devilish rough. But, at all events, you're coming to dine with me

to-night.”

“Am I?” I asked, smiling.

“Rather!” said he. “My time here is short enough. I don't lose sight of

you again between this and midnight.”

“It's most awfully good of you,” said I again.

“Wait till you see! You'll find it rough enough at my place; all my

retainers are out for the day at a local show.”

“Then I certainly shall not give you the trouble.”

He interrupted me with his jovial laugh.

“My good fellow,” he cried, “that's the fun of it! How do you suppose

I've been spending the day? Told you I was going to Lancaster, did I?

Well, I've been cooking our dinner instead--laying the table--getting

up the wines--never had such a joke! Give you my word, I almost forgot I

was in the wilderness!”

“So you're quite alone, are you?”

“Yes; as much so as that other beggar who was monarch of all he

surveyed, his right there was none to dispute, from the what-is-it down

to the glade--”

“I'll come,” said I, as we reached the cottage. “Only first you must let

me make myself decent.”

“You're decent enough!”

“My boots are wet; my hands--”

“All serene! I'll give you five minutes.”

And I left him outside, flourishing a handsome watch, while, on my way

upstairs, I paused to tell Mrs. Braithwaite that I was dining at the

hall. She was busy cooking, and I felt prepared for her unpleasant

expression; but she showed no annoyance at my news. I formed the

impression that it was no news to her. And next minute I heard a

whispering below; it was unmistakable in that silent cottage, where not

a word had reached me yet, save in conversation to which I was myself a

party.

I looked out of window. Rattray I could no longer see. And I confess

that I felt both puzzled and annoyed until we walked away together, when

it was his arm which was immediately thrust through mine.

“A good soul, Jane,” said he; “though she made an idiotic marriage, and

leads a life which might spoil the temper of an archangel. She was my

nurse when I was a youngster, Cole, and we never meet without a yarn.”

Which seemed natural enough; still I failed to perceive why they need

yarn in whispers.

Kirby Hall proved startlingly near at hand. We descended the bare

valley to the right, we crossed the beck upon a plank, were in the

oak-plantation about a minute, and there was the hall upon the farther

side.

And a queer old place it seemed, half farm, half feudal castle: fowls

strutting at large about the back premises (which we were compelled to

skirt), and then a front door of ponderous oak, deep-set between walls

fully six feet thick, and studded all over with wooden pegs. The facade,

indeed, was wholly grim, with a castellated tower at one end, and a

number of narrow, sunken windows looking askance on the wreck and

ruin of a once prim, old-fashioned, high-walled garden. I thought that

Rattray might have shown more respect for the house of his ancestors.

It put me in mind of a neglected grave. And yet I could forgive a bright

young fellow for never coming near so desolate a domain.

We dined delightfully in a large and lofty hall, formerly used (said

Rattray) as a court-room. The old judgment seat stood back against the

wall, and our table was the one at which the justices had been wont to

sit. Then the chamber had been low-ceiled; now it ran to the roof, and

we ate our dinner beneath a square of fading autumn sky, with I wondered

how many ghosts looking down on us from the oaken gallery! I was

interested, impressed, awed not a little, and yet all in a way which

afforded my mind the most welcome distraction from itself and from the

past. To Rattray, on the other hand, it was rather sadly plain that the

place was both a burden and a bore; in fact he vowed it was the dampest

and the dullest old ruin under the sun, and that he would sell it

to-morrow if he could find a lunatic to buy. His want of sentiment

struck me as his one deplorable trait. Yet even this displayed his

characteristic merit of frankness. Nor was it at all unpleasant to hear

his merry, boyish laughter ringing round hall and gallery, ere it died

away against a dozen closed doors.

And there were other elements of good cheer: a log fire blazing heartily

in the old dog-grate, casting a glow over the stone flags, a reassuring

flicker into the darkest corner: cold viands of the very best: and the

finest old Madeira that has ever passed my lips.

Now, all my life I have been a “moderate drinker” in the most literal

sense of that slightly elastic term. But at the sad time of which I

am trying to write, I was almost an abstainer, from the fear, the

temptation--of seeking oblivion in strong waters. To give way then was

to go on giving way. I realized the danger, and I took stern measures.

Not stern enough, however; for what I did not realize was my weak and

nervous state, in which a glass would have the same effect on me as

three or four upon a healthy man.

Heaven knows how much or how little I took that evening! I can swear

it was the smaller half of either bottle--and the second we never

finished--but the amount matters nothing. Even me it did not make

grossly tipsy. But it warmed my blood, it cheered my heart, it excited

my brain, and--it loosened my tongue. It set me talking with a freedom

of which I should have been incapable in my normal moments, on a subject

whereof I had never before spoken of my own free will. And yet the will

to--speak--to my present companion--was no novelty. I had felt it at our

first meeting in the private hotel. His tact, his sympathy, his handsome

face, his personal charm, his frank friendliness, had one and all

tempted me to bore this complete stranger with unsolicited confidences

for which an inquisitive relative might have angled in vain. And the

temptation was the stronger because I knew in my heart that I should

not bore the young squire at all; that he was anxious enough to hear my

story from my own lips, but too good a gentleman intentionally to

betray such anxiety. Vanity was also in the impulse. A vulgar newspaper

prominence had been my final (and very genuine) tribulation; but to

please and to interest one so pleasing and so interesting to me, was

another and a subtler thing. And then there was his sympathy--shall I

add his admiration?--for my reward.

I do not pretend that I argued thus deliberately in my heated and

excited brain. I merely hold that all these small reasons and motives

were there, fused and exaggerated by the liquor which was there as well.

Nor can I say positively that Rattray put no leading questions; only

that I remember none which had that sound; and that, once started, I am

afraid I needed only too little encouragement to run on and on.

Well, I was set going before we got up from the table. I continued in

an armchair that my host dragged from a little book-lined room adjoining

the hall. I finished on my legs, my back to the fire, my hands beating

wildly together. I had told my dear Rattray of my own accord more than

living man had extracted from me yet. He interrupted me very little;

never once until I came to the murderous attack by Santos on the drunken

steward.

“The brute!” cried Rattray. “The cowardly, cruel, foreign devil! And you

never let out one word of that!”

“What was the good?” said I. “They are all gone now--all gone to their

account. Every man of us was a brute at the last. There was nothing to

be gained by telling the public that.”

He let me go on until I came to another point which I had hitherto kept

to myself: the condition of the dead mate's fingers: the cries that the

sight of them had recalled.

“That Portuguese villain again!” cried my companion, fairly leaping from

the chair which I had left and he had taken. “It was the work of the

same cane that killed the steward. Don't tell me an Englishman would

have done it; and yet you said nothing about that either!”

It was my first glimpse of this side of my young host's character. Nor

did I admire him the less, in his spirited indignation, because much of

this was clearly against myself. His eyes flashed. His face was white. I

suddenly found myself the cooler man of the two.

“My dear fellow, do consider!” said I. “What possible end could have

been served by my stating what I couldn't prove against a man who

could never be brought to book in this world? Santos was punished as he

deserved; his punishment was death, and there's an end on't.”

“You might be right,” said Rattray, “but it makes my blood boil to hear

such a story. Forgive me if I have spoken strongly;” and he paced his

hall for a little in an agitation which made me like him better and

better. “The cold-blooded villain!” he kept muttering; “the infernal,

foreign, blood-thirsty rascal! Perhaps you were right; it couldn't have

done any good, I know; but--I only wish he'd lived for us to hang him,

Cole! Why, a beast like that is capable of anything: I wonder if

you've told me the worst even now?” And he stood before me, with candid

suspicion in his fine, frank eyes.

“What makes you say that?” said I, rather nettled.

“I shan't tell you if it's going to rile you, old fellow,” was his reply.

And with it reappeared the charming youth whom I found it impossible

to resist. “Heaven knows you have had enough to worry you!” he added, in

his kindly, sympathetic voice.

“So much,” said I, “that you cannot add to it, my dear Rattray. Now,

then! Why do you think there was something worse?”

“You hinted as much in town: rightly or wrongly I gathered there was

something you would never speak about to living man.”

I turned from him with a groan.

“Ah! but that had nothing to do with Santos.”

“Are you sure?” he cried.

“No,” I murmured; “it had something to do with him, in a sense; but

don't ask me any more.” And I leaned my forehead on the high oak

mantel-piece, and groaned again.

His hand was upon my shoulder.

“Do tell me,” he urged. I was silent. He pressed me further. In my

fancy, both hand and voice shook with his sympathy.

“He had a step-daughter,” said I at last.

“Yes? Yes?”

“I loved her. That was all.”

His hand dropped from my shoulder. I remained standing, stooping,

thinking only of her whom I had lost for ever. The silence was intense.

I could hear the wind sighing in the oaks without, the logs burning

softly away at my feet And so we stood until the voice of Rattray

recalled me from the deck of the Lady Jermyn and my lost love's side.

“So that was all!”

I turned and met a face I could not read.

“Was it not enough?” cried I. “What more would you have?”

“I expected some more-foul play!”

“Ah!” I exclaimed bitterly. “So that was all that interested you! No,

there was no more foul play that I know of; and if there was, I don't

care. Nothing matters to me but one thing. Now that you know what that

is, I hope you're satisfied.”

It was no way to speak to one's host. Yet I felt that he had pressed me

unduly. I hated myself for my final confidence, and his want of sympathy

made me hate him too. In my weakness, however, I was the natural prey

of violent extremes. His hand flew out to me. He was about to speak.

A moment more and I had doubtless forgiven him. But another sound

came instead and made the pair of us start and stare. It was the soft

shutting of some upstairs door.

“I thought we had the house to ourselves?” cried I, my miserable nerves

on edge in an instant.

“So did I,” he answered, very pale. “My servants must have come back. By

the Lord Harry, they shall hear of this!”

He sprang to a door, I heard his feet clattering up some stone stairs,

and in a trice he was running along the gallery overhead; in another

I heard him railing behind some upper door that he had flung open and

banged behind him; then his voice dropped, and finally died away. I was

left some minutes in the oppressively silent hall, shaken, startled,

ashamed of my garrulity, aching to get away. When he returned it was by

another of the many closed doors, and he found me awaiting him, hat in

hand. He was wearing his happiest look until he saw my hat.

“Not going?” he cried. “My dear Cole, I can't apologize sufficiently for

my abrupt desertion of you, much less for the cause. It was my man,

just come in from the show, and gone up the back way. I accused him of

listening to our conversation. Of course he denies it; but it really

doesn't matter, as I'm sorry to say he's much too 'fresh' (as they call

it down here) to remember anything to-morrow morning. I let him have it,

I can tell you. Varlet! Caitiff! But if you bolt off on the head of it,

I shall go back and sack him into the bargain!”

I assured him I had my own reasons for wishing to retire early. He could

have no conception of my weakness, my low and nervous condition of

body and mind; much as I had enjoyed myself, he must really let me go.

Another glass of wine, then? Just one more? No, I had drunk too much

already. I was in no state to stand it. And I held out my hand with

decision.

Instead of taking it he looked at me very hard.

“The place doesn't suit you,” said he. “I see it doesn't, and I'm

devilish sorry! Take my advice and try something milder; now do,

to-morrow; for I should never forgive myself if it made you worse

instead of better; and the air is too strong for lots of people.”

I was neither too ill nor too vexed to laugh outright in his face.

“It's not the air,” said I; “it's that splendid old Madeira of yours,

that was too strong for me, if you like! No, no, Rattray, you don't get

rid of me so cheaply-much as you seem to want to!”

“I was only thinking of you,” he rejoined, with a touch of pique that

convinced me of his sincerity. “Of course I want you to stop, though

I shan't be here many days; but I feel responsible for you, Cole,

and that's the fact. Think you can find your way?” he continued,

accompanying me to the gate, a postern in the high garden wall. “Hadn't

you better have a lantern?”

No; it was unnecessary. I could see splendidly, had the bump of locality

and as many more lies as would come to my tongue. I was indeed burning

to be gone.

A moment later I feared that I had shown this too plainly. For his final

handshake was hearty enough to send me away something ashamed of

my precipitancy, and with a further sense of having shown him

small gratitude for his kindly anxiety on my behalf. I would behave

differently to-morrow. Meanwhile I had new regrets.

At first it was comparatively easy to see, for the lights of the house

shone faintly among the nearer oaks. But the moon was hidden behind

heavy clouds, and I soon found myself at a loss in a terribly dark zone

of timber. Already I had left the path. I felt in my pocket for matches.

I had none.

My head was now clear enough, only deservedly heavy. I was still

quarrelling with myself for my indiscretions and my incivilities, one

and all the result of his wine and my weakness, and this new predicament

(another and yet more vulgar result) was the final mortification. I

swore aloud. I simply could not see a foot in front of my face. Once I

proved it by running my head hard against a branch. I was hopelessly and

ridiculously lost within a hundred yards of the hall!

Some minutes I floundered, ashamed to go back, unable to proceed for

the trees and the darkness. I heard the beck running over its stones. I

could still see an occasional glimmer from the windows I had left. But

the light was now on this side, now on that; the running water chuckled

in one ear after the other; there was nothing for it but to return in

all humility for the lantern which I had been so foolish as to refuse.

And as I resigned myself to this imperative though inglorious course, my

heart warmed once more to the jovial young squire. He would laugh, but

not unkindly, at my grotesque dilemma; at the thought of his laughter I

began to smile myself. If he gave me another chance I would smoke that

cigar with him before starting home afresh, and remove, from my own

mind no less than from his, all ill impressions. After all it was not

his fault that I had taken too much of his wine; but a far worse offence

was to be sulky in one's cups. I would show him that I was myself again

in all respects. I have admitted that I was temporarily, at all events,

a creature of extreme moods. It was in this one that I retraced my steps

towards the lights, and at length let myself into the garden by the

postern at which I had shaken Rattray's hand not ten minutes before.

Taking heart of grace, I stepped up jauntily to the porch. The weeds

muffled my steps. I myself had never thought of doing so, when all at

once I halted in a vague terror. Through the deep lattice windows I

had seen into the lighted hall. And Rattray was once more seated at his

table, a little company of men around him.

I crept nearer, and my heart stopped. Was I delirious, or raving mad

with wine? Or had the sea given up its dead?

CHAPTER XI. I LIVE AGAIN

Squire Rattray, as I say, was seated at the head of his table, where

the broken meats still lay as he and I had left them; his fingers, I

remember, were playing with a crust, and his eyes fixed upon a distant

door, as he leant back in his chair. Behind him hovered the nigger of

the Lady Jermyn, whom I had been the slower to recognize, had not her

skipper sat facing me on the squire's right. Yes, there was Captain

Harris in the flesh, eating heartily between great gulps of wine,

instead of feeding the fishes as all the world supposed. And nearer

still, nearer me than any, with his back to my window but his chair

slued round a little, so that he also could see that door, and I his

profile, sat Joaquin Santos with his cigarette!

None spoke; all seemed waiting; and all were silent but the captain,

whose vulgar champing reached me through the crazy lattice, as I stood

spellbound and petrified without.

They say that a drowning man lives his life again before the last; but

my own fight with the sea provided me with no such moments of vivid and

rapid retrospect as those during which I stood breathless outside the

lighted windows of Kirby Hall. I landed again. I was dogged day and

night. I set it down to nerves and notoriety; but took refuge in a

private hotel. One followed me, engaged the next room, set a watch on

all my movements; another came in by the window to murder me in my

bed; no party to that, the first one nevertheless turned the outrage to

account, wormed himself into my friendship on the strength of it, and

lured me hither, an easy prey. And here was the gang of them, to meet

me! No wonder Rattray had not let me see him off at the station; no

wonder I had not been followed that night. Every link I saw in its

right light instantly. Only the motive remained obscure. Suspicious

circumstances swarmed upon my slow perception: how innocent I had been!

Less innocent, however, than wilfully and wholly reckless: what had it

mattered with whom I made friends? What had anything mattered to me?

What did anything matter--

I thought my heart had snapped!

Why were they watching that door, Joaquin Santos and the young squire?

Whom did they await? I knew! Oh, I knew! My heart leaped, my blood

danced, my eyes lay in wait with theirs. Everything began to matter

once more. It was as though the machinery of my soul, long stopped, had

suddenly been set in motion; it was as though I was born again.

How long we seemed to wait I need not say. It cannot have been many

moments in reality, for Santos was blowing his rings of smoke in the

direction of the door, and the first that I noticed were but dissolving

when it opened--and the best was true! One instant I saw her very

clearly, in the light of a candle which she carried in its silver stick;

then a mist blinded me, and I fell on my knees in the rank bed into

which I had stepped, to give such thanks to the Almighty as this heart

has never felt before or since. And I remained kneeling; for now my face

was on a level with the sill; and when my eyes could see again, there

stood my darling before them in the room.

Like a queen she stood, in the very travelling cloak in which I had seen

her last; it was tattered now, but she held it close about her as though

a shrewd wind bit her to the core. Her sweet face was all peeked and

pale in the candle-light: she who had been a child was come to womanhood

in a few weeks. But a new spirit flashed in her dear eyes, a new

strength hardened her young lips. She stood as an angel brought to book

by devils; and so noble was her calm defiance, so serene her scorn,

that, as I watched and listened; all present fear for her passed out of

my heart.

The first sound was the hasty rising of young Rattray; he was at Eva's

side next instant, essaying to lead her to his chair, with a flush which

deepened as she repulsed him coldly.

“You have sent for me, and I have come,” said she. “But I prefer not to

sit down in your presence; and what you have to say, you will be good

enough to say as quickly as possible, that I may go again before I

am--stifled!”

It was her one hot word; aimed at them all, it seemed to me to fall like

a lash on Rattray's cheek, bringing the blood to it like lightning. But

it was Santos who snatched the cigarette from his mouth, and opened upon

the defenceless girl in a torrent of Portuguese, yellow with rage, and a

very windmill of lean arms and brown hands in the terrifying rapidity of

his gesticulations. They did not terrify Eva Denison. When Rattray took

a step towards the speaker, with flashing eyes, it was some word from

Eva that checked him; when Santos was done, it was to Rattray that she

turned with her answer.

“He calls me a liar for telling you that Mr. Cole knew all,” said she,

thrilling me with my own name. “Don't you say anything,” she added, as

the young man turned on Santos with a scowl; “you are one as wicked as

the other, but there was a time when I thought differently of you: his

character I have always known. Of the two evils, I prefer to speak to

you.”

Rattray bowed, humbly enough, I thought; but my darling's nostrils only

curled the more.

“He calls me a liar,” she continued; “so may you all. Since you have

found it out, I admit it freely and without shame; one must be false in

the hands of false fiends like all of you. Weakness is nothing to you;

helplessness is nothing; you must be met with your own weapons, and so I

lied in my sore extremity to gain the one miserable advantage within my

reach. He says you found me out by making friends with Mr. Cole. He

says that Mr. Cole has been dining with you in this very room, this

very night. You still tell the truth sometimes; has that man--that

demon--told it for once?”

“It is perfectly true,” said Rattray in a low voice.

“And poor Mr. Cole told you that he knew nothing of your villany?”

“I found out that he knew absolutely nothing--after first thinking

otherwise.”

“Suppose he had known? What would you have done?”

Rattray said nothing. Santos shrugged as he lit a fresh cigarette. The

captain went on with his supper.

“Ashamed to say!” cried Eva Denison. “So you have some shame left still!

Well, I will tell you. You would have murdered him, as you murdered all

the rest; you would have killed him in cold blood, as I wish and pray

that you would kill me!”

The young fellow faced her, white to the lips. “You have no right to

say that, Miss Denison!” he cried. “I may be bad, but, as I am ready to

answer for my sins, the crime of murder is not among them.”

Well, it is still some satisfaction to remember that my love never

punished me with such a look as was the young squire's reward for this

protestation. The curl of the pink nostrils, the parting of the proud

lips, the gleam of the sound white teeth, before a word was spoken,

were more than I, for one, could have borne. For I did not see the grief

underlying the scorn, but actually found it in my heart to pity this

poor devil of a Rattray: so humbly fell those fine eyes of his, so like

a dog did he stand, waiting to be whipped.

“Yes; you are very innocent!” she began at last, so softly that I could

scarcely hear. “You have not committed murder, so you say; let it stand

to your credit by all means. You have no blood upon your hands; you say

so; that is enough. No! you are comparatively innocent, I admit. All

you have done is to make murder easy for others; to get others to do the

dirty work, and then shelter them and share the gain; all you need have

on your conscience is every life that was lost with the Lady Jermyn, and

every soul that lost itself in losing them. You call that innocence?

Then give me honest guilt! Give me the man who set fire to the ship, and

who sits there eating his supper; he is more of a man than you. Give me

the wretch who has beaten men to death before my eyes; there's something

great about a monster like that, there's something to loathe. His

assistant is only little--mean--despicable!” Loud and hurried in its

wrath, low and deliberate in its contempt, all this was uttered with a

furious and abnormal eloquence, which would have struck me, loving her,

to the ground. On Rattray it had a different effect. His head lifted as

she heaped abuse upon it, until he met her flashing eye with that of a

man very thankful to take his deserts and something more; and to mine he

was least despicable when that last word left her lips. When he saw that

it was her last, he took her candle (she had put it down on the ancient

settle against the door), and presented it to her with another bow. And

so without a word he led her to the door, opened it, and bowed yet lower

as she swept out, but still without a tinge of mockery in the obeisance.

He was closing the door after her when Joaquin Santos reached it.

“Diablo!” cried he. “Why let her go? We have not done with her.”

“That doesn't matter; she is done with us,” was the stern reply.

“It does matter,” retorted Santos; “what is more, she is my

step-daughter, and back she shall come!”

“She is also my visitor, and I'm damned if you're going to make her!”

An instant Santos stood, his back to me, his fingers working, his neck

brown with blood; then his coat went into creases across the shoulders,

and he was shrugging still as he turned away.

“Your veesitor!” said he. “Your veesitor! Your veesitor!”

Harris laughed outright as he raised his glass; the hot young squire

had him by the collar, and the wine was spilling on the cloth, as I rose

very cautiously and crept back to the path.

“When rogues fall out!” I was thinking to myself. “I shall save her

yet--I shall save my darling!”

Already I was accustomed to the thought that she still lived, and to the

big heart she had set beating in my feeble frame; already the continued

existence of these villains, with the first dim inkling of their

villainy, was ceasing to be a novelty in a brain now quickened and

prehensile beyond belief. And yet--but a few minutes had I knelt at the

window--but a few more was it since Rattray and I had shaken hands!

Not his visitor; his prisoner, without a doubt; but alive! alive! and,

neither guest nor prisoner for many hours more. O my love! O my heart's

delight! Now I knew why I was spared; to save her; to snatch her from

these rascals; to cherish and protect her evermore!

All the past shone clear behind me; the dark was lightness and the

crooked straight. All the future lay clear ahead it presented no

difficulties yet; a mad, ecstatic confidence was mine for the wildest,

happiest moments of my life.

I stood upright in the darkness. I saw her light!

It was ascending the tower at the building's end; now in this window it

glimmered, now in the one above. At last it was steady, high up near the

stars, and I stole below.

“Eva! Eva!”

There was no answer. Low as it was, my voice was alarming; it cooled

and cautioned me. I sought little stones. I crept back to throw them.

Ah God! her form eclipsed that lighted slit in the gray stone tower. I

heard her weeping high above me at her window.

“Eva! Eva!”

There was a pause, and then a little cry of gladness.

“Is it Mr. Cole?” came in an eager whisper through her tears.

“Yes! yes! I was outside the window. I heard everything.”

“They will hear you!” she cried softly, in a steadier voice.

“No-listen!” They were quarrelling. Rattray's voice was loud and angry.

“They cannot hear,” I continued, in more cautious tones; “they think

I'm in bed and asleep half-a-mile away. Oh, thank God! I'll get you away

from them; trust me, my love, my darling!”

In my madness I knew not what I said; it was my wild heart speaking.

Some moments passed before she replied.

“Will you promise to do nothing I ask you not to do?”

“Of course.”

“My life might answer for it--”

“I promise--I promise.”

“Then wait--hide--watch my light. When you see it back in the window,

watch with all your eyes! I am going to write and then throw it out. Not

another syllable!”

She was gone; there was a long yellow slit in the masonry once more; her

light burnt faint and far within.

I retreated among some bushes and kept watch.

The moon was skimming beneath the surface of a sea of clouds: now the

black billows had silver crests: now an incandescent buoy bobbed among

them. O for enough light, and no more!

In the hall the high voices were more subdued. I heard the captain's

tipsy laugh. My eyes fastened themselves upon that faint and lofty

light, and on my heels I crouched among the bushes.

The flame moved, flickered, and shone small but brilliant on the very

sill. I ran forward on tip-toe. A white flake fluttered to my feet. I

secured it and waited for one word; none came; but the window was softly

shut.

I stood in doubt, the treacherous moonlight all over me now, and once

more the window opened.

“Go quickly!”

And again it was shut; next moment I was stealing close by the spot

where I had knelt. I saw within once more.

Harris nodded in his chair. The nigger had disappeared. Rattray was

lighting a candle, and the Portuguese holding out his hand for the

match.

“Did you lock the gate, senhor?” asked Santos.

“No; but I will now.”

As I opened it I heard a door open within. I could hardly let the latch

down again for the sudden trembling of my fingers. The key turned behind

me ere I had twenty yards' start.

Thank God there was light enough now! I followed the beck. I found

my way. I stood in the open valley, between the oak-plantation and my

desolate cottage, and I kissed my tiny, twisted note again and again in

a paroxysm of passion and of insensate joy. Then I unfolded it and held

it to my eyes in the keen October moonshine.

CHAPTER XII. MY LADY'S BIDDING

Scribbled in sore haste, by a very tremulous little hand, with a pencil,

on the flyleaf of some book, my darling's message is still difficult to

read; it was doubly so in the moonlight, five-and-forty autumns ago. My

eyesight, however, was then perhaps the soundest thing about me, and in

a little I had deciphered enough to guess correctly (as it proved) at

the whole:--

“You say you heard everything just now, and there is no time for further

explanations. I am in the hands of villains, but not ill-treated, though

they are one as bad as the other. You will not find it easy to rescue

me. I don't see how it is to be done. You have promised not to do

anything I ask you not to do, and I implore you not to tell a soul until

you have seen me again and heard more. You might just as well kill me as

come back now with help.

“You see you know nothing, though I told them you knew all. And so you

shall as soon as I can see you for five minutes face to face. In the

meantime do nothing--know nothing when you see Mr. Rattray--unless you

wish to be my death.

“It would have been possible last night, and it may be again to-morrow

night. They all go out every night when they can, except Jose, who is

left in charge. They are out from nine or ten till two or three; if they

are out to-morrow night my candle will be close to the window as I shall

put it when I have finished this. You can see my window from over the

wall. If the light is in front you must climb the wall, for they will

leave the gate locked. I shall see you and will bribe Jose to let me

out for a turn. He has done it before for a bottle of wine. I can manage

him. Can I trust to you? If you break your promise--but you will not?

One of them would as soon kill me as smoke a cigarette, and the rest are

under his thumb. I dare not write more. But my life is in your hands.

“EVA DENISON.”

“Oh! beware of the woman Braithwaite; she is about the worst of the

gang.”

I could have burst out crying in my bitter discomfiture, mortification,

and alarm: to think that her life was in my hands, and that it depended,

not on that prompt action which was the one course I had contemplated,

but on twenty-four hours of resolute inactivity! I would not think it.

I refused the condition. It took away my one prop, my one stay, that

prospect of immediate measures which alone preserved in me such coolness

as I had retained until now. I was cool no longer; where I had relied

on practical direction I was baffled and hindered and driven mad; on my

honor believe I was little less for some moments, groaning, cursing,

and beating the air with impotent fists--in one of them my poor love's

letter crushed already to a ball.

Danger and difficulty I had been prepared to face; but the task that I

was set was a hundred-fold harder than any that had whirled through my

teeming brain. To sit still; to do nothing; to pretend I knew nothing;

an hour of it would destroy my reason--and I was invited to wait

twenty-four!

No; my word was passed; keep it I must. She knew the men, she must know

best; and her life depended on my obedience: she made that so plain.

Obey I must and would; to make a start, I tottered over the plank that

spanned the beck, and soon I saw the cottage against the moonlit sky.

I came up to it. I drew back in sudden fear. It was alight upstairs and

down, and the gaunt strong figure of the woman Braithwaite stood out

as I had seen it first, in the doorway, with the light showing warmly

through her rank red hair.

“Is that you, Mr. Cole?” she cried in a tone that she reserved for me;

yet through the forced amiability there rang a note of genuine surprise.

She had been prepared for me never to return at all!

My knees gave under me as I forced myself to advance; but my wits took

new life from the crisis, and in a flash I saw how to turn my weakness

into account. I made a false step on my way to the door; when I reached

it I leant heavily against the jam, and I said with a slur that I felt

unwell. I had certainly been flushed with wine when I left Rattray; it

would be no bad thing for him to hear that I had arrived quite tipsy at

the cottage; should he discover I had been near an hour on the way, here

was my explanation cut and dried.

So I shammed a degree of intoxication with apparent success, and Jane

Braithwaite gave me her arm up the stairs. My God, how strong it was,

and how weak was mine!

Left to myself, I reeled about my bedroom, pretending to undress; then

out with my candles, and into bed in all my clothes, until the cottage

should be quiet. Yes, I must lie still and feign sleep, with every nerve

and fibre leaping within me, lest the she-devil below should suspect

me of suspicions! It was with her I had to cope for the next

four-and-twenty hours; and she filled me with a greater present terror

than all those villains at the hall; for had not their poor little

helpless captive described her as “about the worst of the gang?”

To think that my love lay helpless there in the hands of those wretches;

and to think that her lover lay helpless here in the supervision of this

vile virago!

It must have been one or two in the morning when I stole to my

sitting-room window, opened it, and sat down to think steadily, with the

counterpane about my shoulders.

The moon sailed high and almost full above the clouds; these were

dispersing as the night wore on, and such as remained were of a

beautiful soft tint between white and gray. The sky was too light for

stars, and beneath it the open country stretched so clear and far that

it was as though one looked out at noonday through slate-colored glass.

Down the dewy slope below my window a few calves fed with toothless

mouthings; the beck was very audible, the oak-trees less so; but for

these peaceful sounds the stillness and the solitude were equally

intense.

I may have sat there like a mouse for half an hour. The reason was that

I had become mercifully engrossed in one of the subsidiary problems:

whether it would be better to drop from the window or to trust to the

creaking stairs. Would the creaking be much worse than the thud, and

the difference worth the risk of a sprained ankle? Well worth it, I at

length decided; the risk was nothing; my window was scarce a dozen feet

from the ground. How easily it could be done, how quickly, how safely in

this deep, stillness and bright moonlight! I would fall so lightly on

my stocking soles; a single soft, dull thud; then away under the moon

without fear or risk of a false step; away over the stone walls to the

main road, and so to the nearest police-station with my tale; and before

sunrise the villains would be taken in their beds, and my darling would

be safe!

I sprang up softly. Why not do it now? Was I bound to keep my rash,

blind promise? Was it possible these murderers would murder her?

I struck a match on my trousers, I lit a candle, I read her letter

carefully again, and again it maddened and distracted me. I struck my

hands together. I paced the room wildly. Caution deserted me, and I made

noise enough to wake the very mute; lost to every consideration but that

of the terrifying day before me, the day of silence and of inactivity,

that I must live through with an unsuspecting face, a cool head, a civil

tongue! The prospect appalled me as nothing else could or did; nay, the

sudden noise upon the stairs, the knock at my door, and the sense that

I had betrayed myself already even now all was over--these came as a

relief after the haunting terror which they interrupted.

I flung the door open, and there stood Mrs. Braithwaite, as fully

dressed as myself.

“You'll not be very well sir?”

“No, I'm not.”

“What's t' matter wi' you?”

This second question was rude and fierce with suspicion: the real woman

rang out in it, yet its effect on me was astonishing: once again was I

inspired to turn my slip into a move.

“Matter?” I cried. “Can't you see what's the matter; couldn't you see

when I came in? Drink's the matter! I came in drunk, and now I'm mad. I

can't stand it; I'm not in a fit state. Do you know nothng of me? Have

they told you nothing? I'm the only man that was saved from the Lady

Jermyn, the ship that was burned to the water's edge with every soul but

me. My nerves are in little ends. I came down here for peace and quiet

and sleep. Do you know that I have hardly slept for two months? And now

I shall never sleep again! O my God I shall die for want of it! The wine

has done it. I never should have touched a drop. I can't stand it; I

can't sleep after it; I shall kill myself if I get no sleep. Do you

hear, you woman? I shall kill myself in your house if I don't get to

sleep!”

I saw her shrink, virago as she was. I waved my arms, I shrieked in

her face. It was not all acting. Heaven knows how true it was about the

sleep. I was slowly dying of insomnia. I was a nervous wreck. She must

have heard it. Now she saw it for herself.

No; it was by no means all acting. Intending only to lie, I found

myself telling little but the strictest truth, and longing for sleep as

passionately as though I had nothing to keep me awake. And yet, while my

heart cried aloud in spite of me, and my nerves relieved themselves in

this unpremeditated ebullition, I was all the time watching its effect

as closely as though no word of it had been sincere.

Mrs. Braithwaite seemed frightened; not at all pitiful; and as I calmed

down she recovered her courage and became insolent. I had spoilt her

night. She had not been told she was to take in a raving lunatic. She

would speak to Squire Rattray in the morning.

“Morning?” I yelled after her as she went. “Send your husband to the

nearest chemist as soon as it's dawn; send him for chloral, chloroform,

morphia, anything they've got and as much of it as they'll let him have.

I'll give you five pounds if you get me what'll send me to sleep all

to-morrow--and to-morrow night!”

Never, I feel sure, were truth and falsehood more craftily interwoven;

yet I had thought of none of it until the woman was at my door, while of

much I had not thought at all. It had rushed from my heart and from my

lips. And no sooner was I alone than I burst into hysterical tears, only

to stop and compliment myself because they sounded genuine--as though

they were not! Towards morning I took to my bed in a burning fever, and

lay there, now congratulating myself upon it, because when night came

they would all think me so secure; and now weeping because the night

might find me dying or dead. So I tossed, with her note clasped in my

hand underneath the sheets; and beneath my very body that stout weapon

that I had bought in town. I might not have to use it, but I was

fatalist enough to fancy that I should. In the meantime it helped me to

lie still, my thoughts fixed on the night, and the day made easy for me

after all.

If only I could sleep!

About nine o'clock Jane Braithwaite paid me a surly visit; in half an

hour she was back with tea and toast and an altered mien. She not only

lit my fire, but treated me the while to her original tone of almost

fervent civility and respect and determination. Her vagaries soon ceased

to puzzle me: the psychology of Jane Braithwaite was not recondite. In

the night it had dawned upon her that Rattray had found me harmless and

was done with me, therefore there was no need for her to put herself out

any further on my account. In the morning, finding me really ill, she

had gone to the hall in alarm; her subsequent attentions were an act of

obedience; and in their midst came Rattray himself to my bedside.

CHAPTER XIII. THE LONGEST DAY OF MY LIFE

The boy looked so blithe and buoyant, so gallant and still so frank,

that even now I could not think as meanly of him as poor Eva did. A

rogue he must be, but surely not the petty rogue that she had made him

out. Yet it was dirty work that he had done by me; and there I had to

lie and take his kind, false, felon's hand in mine.

“My poor dear fellow,” he cried, “I'm most sorry to find you like this.

But I was afraid of it last night. It's all this infernally strong air!”

How I longed to tell him what it was, and to see his face! The thought

of Eva alone restrained me, and I retorted as before, in a tone I strove

to make as friendly, that it was his admirable wine and nothing else.

“But you took hardly any.”

“I shouldn't have touched a drop. I can't stand it. Instead of soothing

me it excites me to the verge of madness. I'm almost over the verge--for

want of sleep--my trouble ever since the trouble.”

Again I was speaking the literal truth, and again congratulating myself

as though it were a lie: the fellow looked so distressed at my state;

indeed I believe that his distress was as genuine as mine, and his

sentiments as involved. He took my hand again, and his brow wrinkled at

its heat. He asked for the other hand to feel my pulse. I had to drop my

letter to comply.

“I wish to goodness there was something I could do for you,” he said.

“Would you--would you care to see a doctor?”

I shook my head, and could have smiled at his visible relief.

“Then I'm going to prescribe for you,” he said with decision. “It's the

place that doesn't agree with you, and it was I who brought you to the

place; therefore it's for me to get you out of it as quick as possible.

Up you get, and I'll drive you to the station myself!”

I had another work to keep from smiling: he was so ingenuously

disingenuous. There was less to smile at in his really nervous anxiety

to get me away. I lay there reading him like a book: it was not my

health that concerned him, of course: was it my safety? I told him he

little knew how ill I was--an inglorious speech that came hard, though

not by any means untrue. “Move me with this fever on me?” said I; “it

would be as much as my miserable life is worth.”

“I'm afraid,” said he, “that it may be as much as your life's worth to

stay on here!” And there was such real fear, in his voice and eyes,

that it reconciled me there and then to the discomfort of a big revolver

between the mattress and the small of my back. “We must get you out

of it,” he continued, “the moment you feel fit to stir. Shall we say

to-morrow?”

“If you like,” I said, advisedly; “and if I can get some sleep to-day.”

“Then to-morrow it is! You see I know it's the climate,” he added,

jumping from tone to tone; “it couldn't have been those two or three

glasses of sound wine.”

“Shall I tell you what it is?” I said, looking him full in the face,

with eyes that I dare say were wild enough with fever and insomnia.

“It's the burning of the Lady Jermyn!” I cried. “It's the faces and the

shrieks of the women; it's the cursing and the fighting of the men; it's

boat-loads struggling in an oily sea; it's husbands and wives jumping

overboard together; it's men turned into devils, it's hell-fire

afloat--”

“Stop! stop!” he whispered, hoarse as a crow. I was sitting up with my

hot eyes upon him. He was white as the quilt, and the bed shook with his

trembling. I had gone as far as was prudent, and I lay back with a glow

of secret satisfaction.

“Yes, I will stop,” said I, “and I wouldn't have begun if you hadn't

found it so difficult to understand my trouble. Now you know what it

is. It's the old trouble. I came up here to forget it; instead of that

I drink too much and tell you all about it; and the two things together

have bowled me over. But I'll go to-morrow; only give me something to

put me asleep till then.”

“I will!” he vowed. “I'll go myself to the nearest chemist, and he shall

give me the very strongest stuff he's got. Good-by, and don't you stir

till I come back--for your own sake. I'll go this minute, and I'll ride

like hell!” And if ever two men were glad to be rid of each other, they

were this young villain and myself.

But what was his villany? It was little enough that I had overheard

at the window, and still less that poor Eva had told me in her hurried

lines. All I saw clearly was that the Lady Jermyn and some hundred souls

had perished by the foulest of foul play; that, besides Eva and myself,

only the incendiaries had escaped; that somehow these wretches had made

a second escape from the gig, leaving dead men and word of their own

death behind them in the boat. And here the motive was as much a mystery

to me as the means; but, in my present state, both were also matters

of supreme indifference. My one desire was to rescue my love from her

loathsome captors; of little else did I pause to think. Yet Rattray's

visit left its own mark on my mind; and long after he was gone I lay

puzzling over the connection between a young Lancastrian, of good

name, of ancient property, of great personal charm, and a crime of

unparalleled atrocity committed in cold blood on the high seas. That

his complicity was flagrant I had no room to doubt, after Eva's own

indictment of him, uttered to his face and in my hearing. Was it then

the usual fraud on the underwriters, and was Rattray the inevitable

accomplice on dry land? I could think of none but the conventional

motive for destroying a vessel. Yet I knew there must be another and a

subtler one, to account not only for the magnitude of the crime, but for

the pains which the actual perpetrators had taken to conceal the fact

of their survival, and for the union of so diverse a trinity as Senhor

Santos, Captain Harris, and the young squire.

It must have been about mid-day when Rattray reappeared, ruddy, spurred,

and splashed with mud; a comfort to sick eyes, I declare, in spite

of all. He brought me two little vials, put one on the chimney-piece,

poured the other into my tumbler, and added a little water.

“There, old fellow,” said he; “swallow that, and if you don't get some

sleep the chemist who made it up is the greatest liar unhung.”

“What is it?' I asked, the glass in my hand, and my eyes on those of my

companion.

“I don't know,” said he. “I just told them to make up the strongest

sleeping-draught that was safe, and I mentioned something about your

case. Toss it off, man; it's sure to be all right.”

Yes, I could trust him; he was not that sort of villain, for all that

Eva Denison had said. I liked his face as well as ever. I liked his eye,

and could have sworn to its honesty as I drained the glass. Even had it

been otherwise, I must have taken my chance or shown him all; as it was,

when he had pulled down my blind, and shaken my pillow, and he gave

me his hand once more, I took it with involuntary cordiality. I only

grieved that so fine a young fellow should have involved himself in so

villainous a business; yet for Eva's sake I was glad that he had; for

my mind failed (rather than refused) to believe him so black as she had

painted him.

The long, long afternoon that followed I never shall forget. The opiate

racked my head; it did not do its work; and I longed to sleep till

evening with a longing I have never known before or since. Everything

seemed to depend upon it; I should be a man again, if only I could

first be a log for a few hours. But no; my troubles never left me for an

instant; and there I must lie, pretending that they had! For the other

draught was for the night; and if they but thought the first one had

taken due effect, so much the less would they trouble their heads about

me when they believed that I had swallowed the second.

Oh, but it was cruel! I lay and wept with weakness and want of sleep;

ere night fell I knew that it would find me useless, if indeed my reason

lingered on. To lie there helpless when Eva was expecting me, that would

be the finishing touch. I should rise a maniac if ever I rose at

all. More probably I would put one of my five big bullets into my own

splitting head; it was no small temptation, lying there in a double

agony, with the loaded weapon by my side.

Then sometimes I thought it was coming; and perhaps for an instant would

be tossing in my hen-coop; then back once more. And I swear that

my physical and mental torments, here in my bed, would have been

incomparably greater than anything I had endured on the sea, but for the

saving grace of one sweet thought. She lived! She lived! And the God who

had taken care o me, a castaway, would surely deliver her also from

the hands of murderers and thieves. But not through me--I lay weak and

helpless--and my tears ran again and yet again as I felt myself growing

hourly weaker.

I remember what a bright fine day it was, with the grand open country

all smiles beneath a clear, almost frosty sky, once when I got up on

tip-toe and peeped out. A keen wind whistled about the cottage; I felt

it on my feet as I stood; but never have I known a more perfect and

invigorating autumn day. And there I must lie, with the manhood ebbing

Out of me, the manhood that I needed so for the night! I crept back into

bed. I swore that I would sleep. Yet there I lay, listening sometimes to

that vile woman's tread below; sometimes to mysterious whispers, between

whom I neither knew nor cared; anon to my watch ticking by my side, to

the heart beating in my body, hour after hour--hour after hour. I prayed

as I have seldom prayed. I wept as I have never wept. I railed and

blasphemed--not with my lips, because the woman must think I was

asleep--but so much the more viciously in my heart.

Suddenly it turned dark. There were no gradations--not even a tropical

twilight. One minute I aw the sun upon the blind; the next--thank God!

Oh, thank God! No light broke any longer through the blind; just a faint

and narrow glimmer stole between it and the casement; and the light that

had been bright golden was palest silver now.

It was the moon. I had been in dreamless sleep for hours.

The joy of that discovery! The transport of waking to it, and waking

refreshed! The swift and sudden miracle that it seemed! I shall never,

never forget it, still less the sickening thrill of fear which was

cruelly quick to follow upon my joy. The cottage was still as the tomb.

What if I had slept too long!

With trembling hand I found my watch.

Luckily I had wound it in the early morning. I now carried it to the

window, drew back the blind, and held it in the moonlight. It was not

quite ten o'clock. And yet the cottage was so still--so still.

I stole to the door, opened it by cautious degrees, and saw the

reflection of a light below. Still not a sound could I hear, save the

rapid drawing of my own breath, and the startled beating of my own

heart.

I now felt certain that the Braithwaites were out, and dressed hastily,

making as little noise as possible, and still hearing absolutely none

from below. Then, feeling faint with hunger, though a new being after my

sleep, I remembered a packet of sandwiches which I had not opened on my

journey north. These I transferred from my travelling-bag (where they

had lain forgotten to my jacket pocket), before drawing down the blind,

leaving the room on tip-toe, and very gently fastening the door behind

me. On the stairs, too, I trod with the utmost caution, feeling the wall

with my left hand (my right was full), lest by any chance I might

be mistaken in supposing I had the cottage to myself. In spite of my

caution there came a creak at every step. And to my sudden horror I

heard a chair move in the kitchen below.

My heart and I stood still together. But my right hand tightened on

stout wood, my right forefinger trembled against thin steel. The sound

was not repeated. And at length I continued on my way down, my teeth

set, an excuse on my lips, but determination in every fibre of my frame.

A shadow lay across the kitchen floor; it was that of the deaf mute, as

he stood on a chair before the fire, supporting himself on the chimney

piece with one puny arm, while he reached overhead with the other. I

stood by for an instant, glorying in the thought that he could not hear

me; the next, I saw what it was he was reaching up for--a bell-mouthed

blunderbuss--and I knew the little devil for the impostor that he was.

“You touch it,” said I, “and you'll drop dead on that hearth.”

He pretended not to hear me, but he heard the click of the splendid

spring which Messrs. Deane and Adams had put into that early revolver of

theirs, and he could not have come down much quicker with my bullet in

his spine.

“Now, then,” I said, “what the devil do you mean by shamming deaf and

dumb?”

“I niver said I was owt o' t' sort,” he whimpered, cowering behind the

chair in a sullen ague.

“But you acted it, and I've a jolly good mind to shoot you dead!”

(Remember, I was so weak myself that I thought my arm would break from

presenting my five chambers and my ten-inch barrel; otherwise I should

be sorry to relate how I bullied that mouse of a man.) “I may let you

off,” I continued, “if you answer questions. Where's your wife?”

“Eh, she'll be back directly!” said Braithwaite, with some tact; but his

look was too cunning to give the warning weight. “I've a bullet to spare

for her,” said I, cheerfully; “now, then, where is she?”

“Gone wi' the oothers, for owt I knaw.”

“And where are the others gone?”

“Where they allus go, ower to t' say.”

“Over to the sea, eh? We're getting on! What takes them there?”

“That's more than I can tell you, sir,” said Braithwaite, with so much

emphasis and so little reluctance as to convince me that for once at

least he had spoken the truth. There was even a spice of malice in his

tone. I began to see possibilities in the little beast.

“Well,” I said, “you're a nice lot! I don't know what your game is, and

don't want to. I've had enough of you without that. I'm off to-night.”

“Before they get back?” asked Braithwaite, plainly in doubt about his

duty, and yet as plainly relieved to learn the extent of my intention.

“Certainly,” said I; “why not? I'm not particularly anxious to see your

wife again, and you may ask Mr. Rattray from me why the devil he led

me to suppose you were deaf and dumb? Or, if you like, you needn't say

anything at all about it,” I added, seeing his thin jaw fall; “tell him

I never found you out, but just felt well enough to go, and went. When

do you expect them back?”

“It won't be yet a bit,” said he.

“Good! Now look here. What would you say to these?” And I showed him a

couple of sovereigns: I longed to offer him twenty, but feared to excite

his suspicions. “These are yours if you have a conveyance at the end of

the lane--the lane we came up the night before last--in an hour's time.”

His dull eyes glistened; but a tremor took him from top to toe, and he

shook his head.

“I'm ill, man!” I cried. “If I stay here I'll die! Mr. Rattray knows

that, and he wanted me to go this morning; he'll be only too thankful to

find me gone.”

This argument appealed to him; indeed, I was proud of it.

“But I was to stop an' look after you,” he mumbled; “it'll get me into

trooble, it will that!”

I took out three more sovereigns; not a penny higher durst I go.

“Will five pounds repay you? No need to tell your wife it was five, you

know! I should keep four of them all to myself.”

The cupidity of the little wretch was at last overcoming his abject

cowardice. I could see him making up his miserable mind. And I still

flatter myself that I took only safe (and really cunning) steps to

precipitate the process. To offer him more money would have been

madness; instead, I poured it all back into my pocket.

“All right!” I cried; “you're a greedy, cowardly, old idiot, and I'll

just save my money.” And out I marched into the moonlight, very briskly,

towards the lane; he was so quick to follow me that I had no fears of

the blunderbuss, but quickened my step, and soon had him running at my

heels.

“Stop, stop, sir! You're that hasty wi' a poor owd man.” So he whimpered

as he followed me like the little cur he was.

“I'm hanged if I stop,” I answered without looking back; and had him

almost in tears before I swung round on him so suddenly that he yelped

with fear. “What are you bothering me for?” I blustered. “Do you want me

to wring your neck?”

“Oh, I'll go, sir! I'll go, I'll go,” he moaned.

“I've a good mind not to let you. I wouldn't if I was fit to walk five

miles.”

“But I'll roon 'em, sir! I will that! I'll go as fast as iver I can!”

“And have a conveyance at the road-end of the lane as near an hour hence

as you possibly can?”

“Why, there, sir!” he cried, crassly inspired; “I could drive you in our

own trap in half the time.”

“Oh, no, you couldn't! I--I'm not fit to be out at all; it must be a

closed conveyance; but I'll come to the end of the lane to save time,

so let him wait there. You needn't wait yourself; here's a sovereign

of your money, and I'll leave the rest in the jug in my bedroom. There!

It's worth your while to trust me, I think. As for my luggage, I'll

write to Mr. Rattray about that. But I'll be shot if I spend another

night on his property.”

I was rid of him at last; and there I stood, listening to his headlong

steps, until they stumbled out of earshot down the lane; then back to

the cottage, at a run myself, and up to my room to be no worse than my

word. The sovereigns plopped into the water and rang together at

the bottom of the jug. In another minute I was hastening through the

plantation, in my hand the revolver that had served me well already, and

was still loaded and capped in all five chambers.

CHAPTER XIV. IN THE GARDEN

It so happened that I met nobody at all; but I must confess that my

luck was better than my management. As I came upon the beck, a new sound

reached me with the swirl. It was the jingle of bit and bridle; the beat

of hoofs came after; and I had barely time to fling myself flat, when

two horsemen emerged from the plantation, riding straight towards me in

the moonlight. If they continued on that course they could not fail

to see me as they passed along the opposite bank. However, to my

unspeakable relief, they were scarce clear of the trees when they turned

their horses' heads, rode them through the water a good seventy yards

from where I lay, and so away at a canter across country towards the

road. On my hands and knees I had a good look at them as they bobbed up

and down under the moon; and my fears subsided in astonished curiosity.

For I have already boasted of my eyesight, and I could have sworn that

neither Rattray nor any one of his guests was of the horsemen; yet the

back and shoulders of one of these seemed somehow familiar to me. Not

that I wasted many moments over the coincidence, for I had other things

to think about as I ran on to the hall.

I found the rear of the building in darkness unrelieved from within; on

the other hand, the climbing moon beat so full upon the garden wall, it

was as though a lantern pinned me as I crept beneath it. In passing I

thought I might as well try the gate; but Eva was right; it was locked;

and that made me half inclined to distrust my eyes in the matter of the

two horsemen, for whence could they have come, if not from the hall?

In any case I was well rid of them. I now followed the wall some little

distance, and then, to see over it, walked backwards until I was all but

in the beck; and there, sure enough, shone my darling's candle, close as

close against the diamond panes of her narrow, lofty window! It brought

those ready tears back to my foolish, fevered eyes. But for sentiment

there was no time, and every other emotion was either futile or

premature. So I mastered my full heart, I steeled, my wretched nerves,

and braced my limp muscles for the task that lay before them.

I had a garden wall to scale, nearly twice my own height, and without

notch or cranny in the ancient, solid masonry. I stood against it on my

toes, and I touched it with my finger-tips as high up as possible. Some

four feet severed them from the coping that left only half a sky above

my upturned eyes.

I do not know whether I have made it plain that the house was not

surrounded by four walls, but merely filled a breach in one of the

four, which nipped it (as it were) at either end. The back entrance was

approachable enough, but barred or watched, I might be very sure. It is

ever the vulnerable points which are most securely guarded, and it was

my one comfort that the difficult way must also be the safe way, if only

the difficulty could be overcome. How to overcome it was the problem.

I followed the wall right round to the point at which it abutted on the

tower that immured my love; the height never varied; nor could my hands

or eyes discover a single foot-hole, ledge, or other means of mounting

to the top.

Yet my hot head was full of ideas; and I wasted some minutes in trying

to lift from its hinges a solid, six-barred, outlying gate, that my

weak arms could hardly stir. More time went in pulling branches from the

oak-trees about the beck, where the latter ran nearest to the moonlit

wall. I had an insane dream of throwing a long forked branch over

the coping, and so swarming up hand-over-hand. But even to me the

impracticability of this plan came home at last. And there I stood in a

breathless lather, much time and strength thrown away together; and the

candle burning down for nothing in that little lofty window; and the

running water swirling noisily over its stones at my back.

This was the only sound; the wind had died away; the moonlit valley

lay as still as the dread old house in its midst but for the splash and

gurgle of the beck. I fancied this grew louder as I paused and listened

in my helplessness. All at once--was it the tongue of Nature telling me

the way, or common gumption returning at the eleventh hour? I ran down

to the water's edge, and could have shouted for joy. Great stones lay in

equal profusion on bed and banks. I lifted one of the heaviest in both

hands. I staggered with it to the wall. I came back for another; for

some twenty minutes I was so employed; my ultimate reward a fine heap of

boulders against the wall.

Then I began to build; then mounted my pile, clawing the wall to keep

my balance. My fingers were still many inches from the coping. I jumped

down and gave another ten minutes to the back-breaking work of carrying

more boulders from the water to the wall. Then I widened my cairn below,

so that I could stand firmly before springing upon the pinnacle with

which I completed it. I knew well that this would collapse under me if

I allowed my weight to rest more than an instant upon it. And so at last

it did; but my fingers had clutched the coping in time; had grabbed it

even as the insecure pyramid crumbled and left me dangling.

Instantly exerting what muscle I had left, and the occasion gave me,

I succeeded in pulling myself up until my chin was on a level with my

hands, when I flung an arm over and caught the inner coping. The other

arm followed; then a leg; and at last I sat astride the wall, panting

and palpitating, and hardly able to credit my own achievement. One great

difficulty had been my huge revolver. I had been terribly frightened it

might go off, and had finally used my cravat to sling it at the back

of my neck. It had shifted a little, and I was working it round again,

preparatory to my drop, when I saw the light suddenly taken from the

window in the tower, and a kerchief waving for one instant in its place.

So she had been waiting and watching for me all these hours! I dropped

into the garden in a very ecstasy of grief and rapture, to think that I

had been so long in coming to my love, but that I had come at last. And

I picked myself up in a very frenzy of fear lest, after all, I should

fail to spirit her from this horrible place.

Doubly desolate it looked in the rays of that bright October moon.

Skulking in the shadow of the wall which had so long baffled me, I

looked across a sharp border of shade upon a chaos, the more striking

for its lingering trim design. The long, straight paths were barnacled

with weeds; the dense, fine hedges, once prim and angular, had fattened

out of all shape or form; and on the velvet sward of other days you

might have waded waist high in rotten hay. Towards the garden end this

rank jungle merged into a worse wilderness of rhododendrons, the tallest

I have ever seen. On all this the white moon smiled, and the grim house

glowered, to the eternal swirl and rattle of the beck beyond its walls.

Long enough I stood where I had dropped, listening with all my being

for some other sound; but at last that great studded door creaked

and shivered on its ancient hinges, and I heard voices arguing in the

Portuguese tongue. It was poor Eva wheedling that black rascal Jose.

I saw her in the lighted porch; the nigger I saw also, shrugging and

gesticulating for all the world like his hateful master; yet giving in,

I felt certain, though I could not understand a word that reached me.

And indeed my little mistress very soon sailed calmly out, followed by

final warnings and expostulations hurled from the step: for the black

stood watching her as she came steadily my way, now raising her head to

sniff the air, now stooping to pluck up a weed, the very picture of a

prisoner seeking the open air for its own sake solely. I had a keen eye

apiece for them as I cowered closer to the wall, revolver in hand. But

ere my love was very near me (for she would stand long moments gazing

ever so innocently at the moon), her jailer had held a bottle to the

light, and had beaten a retreat so sudden and so hasty that I expected

him back every moment, and so durst not stir. Eva saw me, however,

and contrived to tell me so without interrupting the air that she was

humming as she walked.

“Follow me,” she sang, “only keep as you are, keep as you are, close to

the wall, close to the wall.”

And on she strolled to her own tune, and came abreast of me without

turning her head; so I crept in the shadow (my ugly weapon tucked out of

sight), and she sauntered in the shine, until we came to the end of

the garden, where the path turned at right angles, running behind the

rhododendrons; once in their shelter, she halted and beckoned me, and

next instant I had her hands in mine.

“At last!” was all that I could say for many a moment, as I stood there

gazing into her dear eyes, no hero in my heroic hour, but the bigger

love-sick fool than ever. “But quick--quick--quick!” I added, as she

brought me to my senses by withdrawing her hands. “We've no time to

lose.” And I looked wildly from wall to wall, only to find them as

barren and inaccessible on this side as on the other.

“We have more time than you think,” were Eva's first words. “We can do

nothing for half-an-hour.”

“Why not?”

“I'll tell you in a minute. How did you manage to get over?”

“Brought boulders from the beck, and piled 'em up till I could reach the

top.”

I thought her eyes glistened.

“What patience!” she cried softly. “We must find a simpler way of

getting out--and I think I have. They've all gone, you know, but Jose.”

“All three?”

“The captain has been gone all day.”

Then the other two must have been my horse-men, very probably in some

disguise; and my head swam with the thought of the risk that I had run

at the very moment when I thought myself safest. Well, I would have

finished them both! But I did not say so to Eva. I did not mention

the incident, I was so fearful of destroying her confidence in me.

Apologizing, therefore, for my interruption, without explaining it, I

begged her to let me hear her plan.

It was simple enough. There was no fear of the others returning before

midnight; the chances were that they would be very much later; and

now it was barely eleven, and Eva had promised not to stay out above

half-an-hour. When it was up Jose would come and call her.

“It is horrid to have to be so cunning!” cried little Eva, with an angry

shudder; “but it's no use thinking of that,” she was quick enough to

add, “when you have such dreadful men to deal with, such fiends! And I

have had all day to prepare, and have suffered till I am so desperate I

would rather die to-night than spend another in that house. No; let me

finish! Jose will come round here to look for me. But you and I will

be hiding on the other side of these rhododendrons. And when we hear him

here we'll make a dash for it across the long grass. Once let us get the

door shut and locked in his face, and he'll be in a trap. It will take

him some time to break in; time enough to give us a start; what's more,

when he finds us gone, he'll do what they all used to do in any doubt.”

“What's that?”

“Say nothing till it's found out; then lie for their lives; and it was

their lives, poor creatures on the Zambesi!” She was silent a moment,

her determined little face hard--set upon some unforgotten horror.

“Once we get away, I shall be surprised if it's found out till morning,”

concluded Eva, without a word as to what I was to do with her; neither,

indeed, had I myself given that question a moment's consideration.

“Then let's make a dash for it now!” was all I said or thought.

“No; they can't come yet, and Jose is strong and brutal, and I

have heard how ill you are. That you should have come to me

notwithstanding--” and she broke off with her little hands lying

so gratefully on my shoulders, that I know not how I refrained from

catching her then and there to my heart. Instead, I laughed and said

that my illness was a pure and deliberate sharp, and my presence there

its direct result. And such was the virtue in my beloved's voice, the

magic of her eyes, the healing of her touch, that I was scarce conscious

of deceit, but felt a whole man once more as we two stood together in

the moonlight.

In a trance I stood there gazing into her brave young eyes. In a

trance I suffered her to lead me by the hand through the rank, dense

rhododendrons. And still entranced I crouched by her side near the

further side, with only unkempt grass-plot and a weedy path between us

and that ponderous door, wide open still, and replaced by a section of

the lighted hail within. On this we fixed our attention with mingled

dread and impatience, those contending elements of suspense; but the

black was slow to reappear; and my eyes stole home to my sweet girl's

face, with its glory of moonlit curls, and the eager, resolute,

embittered look that put the world back two whole months, and Eva

Denison upon the Lady Jermyn's poop, in the ship's last hours. But it

was not her look alone; she had on her cloak, as the night before,

but with me (God bless her!) she found no need to clasp herself in its

folds; and underneath she wore the very dress in which she had sung at

our last concert, and been rescued in the gig. It looked as though she

had worn it ever since. The roses were crushed and soiled, the tulle all

torn, and tarnished some strings of beads that had been gold: a tatter

of Chantilly lace hung by a thread: it is another of the relics that I

have unearthed in the writing of this narrative.

“I thought men never noticed dresses?” my love said suddenly, a pleased

light in her eyes (I thought) in spite of all. “Do you really remember

it?”

“I remember every one of them,” I said indignantly; and so I did.

“You will wonder why I wear it,” said Eva, quickly. “It was the first

that came that terrible night. They have given me many since. But I

won't wear one of them--not one!”

How her eyes flashed! I forgot all about Jose.

“I suppose you know why they hadn't room for you in the gig?” she went

on.

“No, I don't know, and I don't care. They had room for you,” said I;

“that's all I care about.” And to think she could not see I loved her!

“But do you mean to say you don't know that these--murderers--set fire

to the ship?”

“No--yes! I heard you say so last night.”

“And you don't want to know what for?”

Out of politeness I protested that I did; but, as I live, all I wanted

to know just then was whether my love loved me--whether she ever

could--whether such happiness was possible under heaven!

“You remember all that mystery about the cargo?” she continued eagerly,

her pretty lips so divinely parted!

“It turned out to be gunpowder,” said I, still thinking only of her.

“No--gold!”

“But it was gunpowder,” I insisted; for it was my incorrigible passion

for accuracy which had led up to half our arguments on the voyage; but

this time Eva let me off.

“It was also gold: twelve thousand ounces from the diggings. That was

the real mystery. Do you mean to say you never guessed?”

“No, by Jove I didn't!” said I. She had diverted my interest at last. I

asked her if she had known on board.

“Not until the last moment. I found out during the fire. Do you remember

when we said good-by? I was nearly telling you then.”

Did I remember! The very letter of that last interview was cut deep in

my heart; not a sleepless night had I passed without rehearsing it word

for word and look for look; and sometimes, when sorrow had spent itself,

and the heart could bleed no more, vain grief had given place to vainer

speculation, and I had cudgelled my wakeful brains for the meaning of

the new and subtle horror which I had read in my darling's eyes at the

last. Now I understood; and the one explanation brought such a tribe

in its train, that even the perilous ecstasy of the present moment was

temporarily forgotten in the horrible past.

“Now I know why they wouldn't have me in the gig!” I cried softly.

“She carried four heavy men's weight in gold.”

“When on earth did they get it aboard?”

“In provision boxes at the last; but they had been filling the boxes for

weeks.”

“Why, I saw them doing it!” I cried. “But what about the gig? Who picked

you up?”

She was watching that open door once more, and she answered with notable

indifference, “Mr. Rattray.”

“So that's the connection!” said I; and I think its very simplicity was

what surprised me most.

“Yes; he was waiting for us at Ascension.”

“Then it was all arranged?”

“Every detail.”

“And this young blackguard is as bad as any of them!”

“Worse,” said she, with bitter brevity. Nor had I ever seen her look so

hard but once, and that was the night before in the old justice hall,

when she told Rattray her opinion of him to his face. She had now the

same angry flush, the same set mouth and scornful voice; and I took

it finally into my head that she was unjust to the poor devil, villain

though he was. With all his villainy I declined to believe him as bad

as the others. I told her so in as many words. And in a moment we were

arguing as though we were back on the Lady Jermyn with nothing else to

do.

“You may admire wholesale murderers and thieves,” said Eva. “I do not.”

“Nor I. My point is simply that this one is not as bad as the rest. I

believe he was really glad for my sake when he discovered that I knew

nothing of the villainy. Come now, has he ever offered you any personal

violence?”

“Me? Mr. Rattray? I should hope not, indeed!”

“Has he never saved you from any?”

“I--I don't know.”

“Then I do. When you left them last night there was some talk of

bringing you back by force. You can guess who suggested that--and who

set his face against it and got his way. You would think the better of

Rattray had you heard what passed.”

“Should I?” she asked half eagerly, as she looked quickly round at me;

and suddenly I saw her eyes fill. “Oh, why will you speak about him?”

she burst out. “Why must you defend him, unless it's to go against me,

as you always did and always will! I never knew anybody like you--never!

I want you to take me away from these wretches, and all you do is to

defend them!”

“Not all,” said I, clasping her hand warmly in mine. “Not all--not all!

I will take you away from them, never fear; in another hour God grant

you may be out of their reach for ever!”

“But where are we to go?” she whispered wildly. “What are you to do with

me? All my friends think me dead, and if they knew I was not it would

all come out.”

“So it shall,” said I; “the sooner the better; if I'd had my way it

would all be out already.”

I see her yet, my passionate darling, as she turned upon me, whiter than

the full white moon.

“Mr. Cole,” said she, “you must give me your sacred promise that so far

as you are concerned, it shall never come out at all!”

“This monstrous conspiracy? This cold blooded massacre?”

And I crouched aghast.

“Yes; it could do no good; and, at any rate, unless you promise I remain

where I am.”

“In their hands?”

“Decidedly--to warn them in time. Leave them I would, but betray

them--never!”

What could I say? What choice had I in the face of an alternative so

headstrong and so unreasonable? To rescue Eva from these miscreants I

would have let every malefactor in the country go unscathed: yet the

condition was a hard one; and, as I hesitated, my love went on her knees

to me, there in the moonlight among the rhododendrons.

“Promise--promise--or you will kill me!” she gasped. “They may deserve

it richly, but I would rather be torn in little pieces than--than have

them--hanged!”

“It is too good for most of them.”

“Promise!”

“To hold my tongue about them all?”

“Yes--promise!”

“Promise!”

“When a hundred lives were sacrificed--”

“Promise!”

“I can't,” I said. “It's wrong.”

“Then good-by!” she cried, starting to her feet.

“No--no--” and I caught her hand.

“Well, then?”

“I--promise.”

CHAPTER XV. FIRST BLOOD

So I bound myself to a guilty secrecy for Eva's sake, to save her from

these wretches, or if you will, to win her for myself. Nor did it

strike me as very strange, after a moment's reflection, that she should

intercede thus earnestly for a band headed by her own mother's widower,

prime scoundrel of them all though she knew him to be. The only

surprise was that she had not interceded in his name; that I should have

forgotten, and she should have allowed me to forget, the very existence

of so indisputable a claim upon her loyalty. This, however, made it a

little difficult to understand the hysterical gratitude with which my

unwilling promise was received. Poor darling! she was beside herself

with sheer relief. She wept as I had never seen her weep before. She

seized and even kissed my hands, as one who neither knew nor cared what

she did, surprising me so much by her emotion that this expression of it

passed unheeded. I was the best friend she had ever had. I was her one

good friend in all the world; she would trust herself to me; and if I

would but take her to the convent where she had been brought up, she

would pray for me there until her death, but that would not be very

long.

All of which confused me utterly; it seemed an inexplicable breakdown

in one who had shown such nerve and courage hitherto, and so hearty a

loathing for that damnable Santos. So completely had her presence of

mind forsaken her that she looked no longer where she had been gazing

hitherto. And thus it was that neither of us saw Jose until we heard

him calling, “Senhora Evah! Senhora Evah!” with some rapid sentences in

Portuguese.

“Now is our time,” I whispered, crouching lower and clasping a small

hand gone suddenly cold. “Think of nothing now but getting out of this.

I'll keep my word once we are out; and here's the toy that's going to

get us out.” And I produced my Deane and Adams with no small relish.

A little trustful pressure was my answer and my reward; meanwhile the

black was singing out lustily in evident suspicion and alarm.

“He says they are coming back,” whispered Eva; “but that's impossible.”

“Why?”

“Because if they were he couldn't see them, and if he heard them he

would be frightened of their hearing him. But here he comes!”

A shuffling quick step on the path; a running grumble of unmistakable

threats; a shambling moonlit figure seen in glimpses through the leaves,

very near us for an instant, then hidden by the shrubbery as he passed

within a few yards of our hiding-place. A diminuendo of the

shuffling steps; then a cursing, frightened savage at one end of the

rhododendrons, and we two stealing out at the other, hand in hand, and

bent quite double, into the long neglected grass.

“Can you run for it?” I whispered.

“Yes, but not too fast, for fear we trip.'

“Come on, then!”

The lighted open doorway grew greater at every stride.

“He hasn't seen us yet--”

“No, I hear him threatening me still.”

“Now he has, though!”

A wild whoop proclaimed the fact, and upright we tore at top speed

through the last ten yards of grass, while the black rushed down one of

the side paths, gaining audibly on us over the better ground. But our

start had saved us, and we flew up the steps as his feet ceased to

clatter on the path; he had plunged into the grass to cut off the

corner.

“Thank God!” cried Eva. “Now shut it quick.”

The great door swung home with a mighty clatter, and Eva seized the key

in both hands.

“I can't turn it!”

To lose a second was to take a life, and unconsciously I was sticking

at that, perhaps from no higher instinct than distrust of my aim. Our

pursuer, however, was on the steps when I clapped my free hand on top of

those little white straining ones, and by a timely effort bent both them

and the key round together; the ward shot home as Jose hurled himself

against the door. Eva bolted it. But the thud was not repeated, and I

gathered myself together between the door and the nearest window, for by

now I saw there was but one thing for us. The nigger must be disabled,

if I could manage such a nicety; if not, the devil take his own.

Well, I was not one tick too soon for him. My pistol was not cocked

before the crash came that I was counting on, and with it a shower of

small glass driving across the six-foot sill and tinkling on the flags.

Next came a black and bloody face, at which I could not fire. I had

to wait till I saw his legs, when I promptly shattered one of them at

disgracefully short range. The report was as deafening as one upon the

stage; the hall filled with white smoke, and remained hideous with the

bellowing of my victim. I searched him without a qualm, but threats

of annihilation instead, and found him unarmed but for that very knife

which Rattray had induced me to hand over to him in town. I had a grim

satisfaction in depriving him of this, and but small compunction in

turning my back upon his pain.

“Come,” I said to poor Eva, “don't pity him, though I daresay he's the

most pitiable of the lot; show me the way through, and I'll follow with

this lamp.”

One was burning on the old oak table. I carried it along a narrow

passage, through a great low kitchen where I bumped my head against the

black oak beams; and I held it on high at a door almost as massive as

the one which we had succeeded in shutting in the nigger's face.

“I was afraid of it!” cried Eva, with a sudden sob.

“What is it?”

“They've taken away the key!”

Yes, the keen air came through an empty keyhole; and my lamp, held

close, not only showed that the door was locked, but that the lock was

one with which an unskilled hand might tamper for hours without result.

I dealt it a hearty kick by way of a test. The heavy timber did not

budge; there was no play at all at either lock or hinges; nor did I see

how I could spend one of my four remaining bullets upon the former, with

any chance of a return.

“Is this the only other door?”

“Then it must be a window.”

“All the back ones are barred.”

“Securely?”

“Yes.”

“Then we've no choice in the matter.”

And I led the way back to the hall, where the poor black devil lay

blubbering in his blood. In the kitchen I found the bottle of wine

(Rattray's best port, that they were trying to make her take for her

health) with which Eva had bribed him, and I gave it to him before

laying hands on a couple of chairs.

“What are you going to do?”'

“Go out the way we came.”

“But the wall?”

“Pile up these chairs, and as many more as we may need, if we can't open

the gate.”

But Eva was not paying attention any longer, either to me or to Jose;

his white teeth were showing in a grin for all his pain; her eyes were

fixed in horror on the floor.

“They've come back,” she gasped. “The underground passage! Hark--hark!”

There was a muffled rush of feet beneath our own, then a dull but very

distinguishable clatter on some invisible stair.

“Underground passage!” I exclaimed, and in my sheer disgust I forgot

what was due to my darling. “Why on earth didn't you tell me of it

before?”

“There was so much to tell you! It leads to the sea. Oh, what shall we

do? You must hide--upstairs--anywhere!” cried Eva, wildly. “Leave them

to me--leave them to me.”

“I like that,” said I; and I did; but I detested myself for the tears my

words had drawn, and I prepared to die for them.

“They'll kill you, Mr. Cole!”

“It would serve me right; but we'll see about it.”

And I stood with my revolver very ready in my right hand, while with

the other I caught poor Eva to my side, even as a door flew open,

and Rattray himself burst upon us, a lantern in his hand, and the

perspiration shining on his handsome face in its light.

I can see him now as he stood dumfounded on the threshold of the hall;

and yet, at the time, my eyes sped past him into the room beyond.

It was the one I have described as being lined with books; there was

a long rent in this lining, where the books had opened with a door,

through which Captain Harris, Joaquin Santos, and Jane Braithwaite

followed Rattray in quick succession, the men all with lanterns, the

woman scarlet and dishevelled even for her. It was over the squire's

shoulders I saw their faces; he kept them from passing him in the

doorway by a free use of his elbows; and when I looked at him again, his

black eyes were blazing from a face white with passion, and they were

fixed upon me.

“What the devil brings you here?” he thundered at last.

“Don't ask idle questions,” was my reply to that.

“So you were shamming to-day!”

“I was taking a leaf out of your book.”

“You'll gain nothing by being clever!” sneered the squire, taking

a threatening step forward. For at the last moment I had tucked my

revolver behind my back, not only for the pleasure, but for the obvious

advantage of getting them all in front of me and off their guard. I

had no idea that such eyes as Rattray's could be so fierce: they were

dancing from me to my companion, whom their glitter frightened into an

attempt to disengage herself from me; but my arm only tightened about

her drooping figure.

“I shall gain no more than I expect,” said I, carelessly. “And I know

what to expect from brave gentlemen like you! It will be better than

your own fate, at all events; anything's better than being taken hence

to the place of execution, and hanged by the neck until you're dead, all

three of you in a row, and your bodies buried within the precincts of

the prison!”

“The very thing for him,” murmured Santos. “The--very--theeng!”

“But I'm so soft-hearted,” I went insanely on, “that I should be sorry

to see that happen to such fine fellows as you are. Come out of that,

you little fraud behind there!” It was my betrayer skulking in the

room. “Come out and line up with the rest! No, I'm not going to see you

fellows dance on nothing; I've another kind of ball apiece for you, and

one between 'em for the Braithwaites!”

Well, I suppose I always had a nasty tongue in me, and rather enjoyed

making play with it on provocation; but, if so, I met with my deserts

that night. For the nigger of the Lady Jermyn lay all but hid behind Eva

and me; if they saw him at all, they may have thought him drunk; but, as

for myself, I had fairly forgotten his existence until the very moment

came for showing my revolver, when it was twisted out of my grasp

instead, and a ball sang under my arm as the brute fell back exhausted

and the weapon clattered beside him. Before I could stoop for it there

was a dead weight on my left arm, and Squire Rattray was over the table

at a bound, with his arms jostling mine beneath Eva Denison's senseless

form.

“Leave her to me,” he cried fiercely. “You fool,” he added in a lower

key, “do you think I'd let any harm come to her?”

I looked him in the bright and honest eyes that had made me trust him

in the beginning. And I did not utterly distrust him yet. Rather was the

guile on my side as I drew back and watched Rattray lift the young girl

tenderly, and slowly carry her to the door by which she had entered and

left the hall just twenty-four hours before. I could not take my eyes

off them till they were gone. And when I looked for my revolver, it also

had disappeared.

Jose had not got it--he lay insensible. Santos was whispering to Harris.

Neither of them seemed armed. I made sure that Rattray had picked it up

and carried it off with Eva. I looked wildly for some other weapon. Two

unarmed men and a woman were all I had to deal with, for Braithwaite

had long since vanished. Could I but knock the worthless life out of the

men, I should have but the squire and his servants to deal with; and in

that quarter I still had my hopes of a bloodless battle and a treaty of

war.

A log fire was smouldering in the open grate. I darted to it, and had a

heavy, half-burned brand whirling round my head next instant. Harris was

the first within my reach. He came gamely at me with his fists. I sprang

upon him, and struck him to the ground with one blow, the sparks flying

far and wide as my smoking brand met the seaman's skull. Santos was upon

me next instant, and him, by sheer luck, I managed to serve the same;

but I doubt whether either man was stunned; and I was standing ready for

them to rise, when I felt myself seized round the neck from behind, and

a mass of fluffy hair tickling my cheek, while a shrill voice set up a

lusty scream for the squire.

I have said that the woman Braithwaite was of a sinister strength; but I

had little dreamt how strong she really was. First it was her arms

that wound themselves about my neck, long, sinuous, and supple as the

tentacles of some vile monster; then, as I struggled, her thumbs were on

my windpipe like pads of steel. Tighter she pressed, and tighter yet. My

eyeballs started; my tongue lolled; I heard my brand drop, and through

a mist I saw it picked up instantly. It crashed upon my skull as I still

struggled vainly; again and again it came down mercilessly in the same

place; until I felt as though a sponge of warm water had been squeezed

over my head, and saw a hundred withered masks grinning sudden

exultation into mine; but still the lean arm whirled, and the splinters

flew, till I was blind with my blood and the seven senses were beaten

out of me.

CHAPTER XVI. A DEADLOCK

It must have been midnight when I opened my eyes; a clock was striking

as though it never would stop. My mouth seemed fire; a pungent flavor

filled my nostrils; the wineglass felt cold against my teeth. “That's

more like it!” muttered a voice close to my ear. An arm was withdrawn

from under my shoulders. I was allowed to sink back upon some pillows.

And now I saw where I was. The room was large and poorly lighted. I lay

in my clothes on an old four-poster bed. And my enemies were standing

over me in a group.

“I hope you are satisfied!” sneered Joaquin Santos, with a flourish of

his eternal cigarette.

“I am. You don't do murder in my house, wherever else you may do it.”

“And now better lid 'im to the nirrest polissstation; or weel you go

and tell the poliss yourself?” asked the Portuguese, in the same tone of

mordant irony.

“Ay, ay,” growled Harris; “that's the next thing!”

“No,” said Rattray; “the next thing's for you two to leave him to me.”

“We'll see you damned!” cried the captain.

“No, no, my friend,” said Santos, with a shrug; “let him have his way.

He is as fond of his skeen as you are of yours; he'll come round to our

way in the end. I know this Senhor Cole. It is necessary for 'im to die.

But it is not necessary this moment; let us live them together for a

leetle beet.”

“That's all I ask,” said Rattray.

“You won't ask it twice,” rejoined Santos, shrugging. “I know this

Senhor Cole. There is only one way of dilling with a man like that.

Besides, he 'as 'alf-keeled my good Jose; it is necessary for 'im to

die.”

“I agree with the senhor,” said Harris, whose forehead was starred

with sticking-plaster. “It's him or us, an' we're all agen you, squire.

You'll have to give in, first or last.”

And the pair were gone; their steps grew faint in the corridor; when we

could no longer hear them, Rattray closed the door and quietly locked

it. Then he turned to me, stern enough, and pointed to the door with a

hand that shook.

“You see how it is?”

“Perfectly.”

“They want to kill you!”

“Of course they do.”

“It's your own fault; you've run yourself into this. I did my best to

keep you out of it. But in you come, and spill first blood.”

“I don't regret it,” said I.

“Oh, you're damned mule enough not to regret anything!” cried Rattray.

“I see the sort you are; yet but for me, I tell you plainly, you'd be a

dead man now.”

“I can't think why you interfered.”

“You've heard the reason. I won't have murder done here if I can prevent

it; so far I have; it rests with you whether I can go on preventing it

or not.”

“With me, does it?”

He sat down on the side of the bed. He threw an arm to the far side of

my body, and he leaned over me with savage eyes now staring into mine,

now resting with a momentary gleam of pride upon my battered head. I put

up my hand; it lit upon a very turban of bandages, and at that I tried

to take his hand in mine. He shook it off, and his eyes met mine more

fiercely than before.

“See here, Cole,” said he; “I don t know how the devil you got wind of

anything to start with, and I don't care. What I do know is that you've

made bad enough a long chalk worse for all concerned, and you'll have to

get yourself out of the mess you've got yourself into, and there's only

one way. I suppose Miss Denison has really told you everything this

time? What's that? Oh, yes, she's all right again; no thanks to you. Now

let's hear what she did tell you. It'll save time.”

I repeated the hurried disclosures made by Eva in the rhododendrons. He

nodded grimly in confirmation of their truth.

“Yes, those are the rough facts. The game was started in Melbourne. My

part was to wait at Ascension till the Lady Jermyn signalled herself,

follow her in a schooner we had bought and pick up the gig with the gold

aboard. Well, I did so; never mind the details now, and never mind the

bloody massacre the others had made of it before I came up. God knows I

was never a consenting party to that, though I know I'm responsible.

I'm in this thing as deep as any of them. I've shared the risks and I'm

going to share the plunder, and I'll swing with the others if it ever

comes to that. I deserve it hard enough. And so here we are, we three

and the nigger, all four fit to swing in a row, as you were fool enough

to tell us; and you step in and find out everything. What's to be done?

You know what the others want to do. I say it rests with you whether

they do it or not. There's only one other way of meeting the case.”

“What's that?”

“Be in it yourself, man! Come in with me and split my share!”

I could have burst out laughing in his handsome, eager face; the good

faith of this absurd proposal was so incongruously apparent; and so

obviously genuine was the young villain's anxiety for my consent. Become

accessory after the fact in such a crime! Sell my silence for a price! I

concealed my feelings with equal difficulty and resolution. I had plans

of my own already, but I must gain time to think them over. Nor could I

afford to quarrel with Rattray meanwhile.

“What was the haul?” I asked him, with the air of one not unprepared to

consider the matter.

“Twelve thousand ounces!”

“Forty-eight thousand pounds, about?”

“Yes-yes.”

“And your share?”

“Fourteen thousand pounds. Santos takes twenty, and Harris and I

fourteen thousand each.”

“And you offer me seven?”

“I do! I do!”

He was becoming more and more eager and excited. His eyes were brighter

than I had ever seen them, but slightly bloodshot, and a coppery flush

tinged his clear, sunburnt skin. I fancied he had been making somewhat

free with the brandy. But loss of blood had cooled my brain; and,

perhaps, natural perversity had also a share in the composure which grew

upon me as it deserted my companion.

“Why make such a sacrifice?” said I, smiling. “Why not let them do as

they like?”

“I've told you why! I'm not so bad as all that. I draw the line at

bloody murder! Not a life should have been lost if I'd had my way.

Besides, I've done all the dirty work by you, Cole; there's been no

help for it. We didn't know whether you knew or not; it made all the

difference to us; and somebody had to dog you and find out how much you

did know. I was the only one who could possibly do it. God knows how I

detested the job! I'm more ashamed of it than of worse things. I had to

worm myself into your friendship; and, by Jove, you made me think you

did know, but hadn't let it out, and might any day. So then I got you up

here, where you would be in our power if it was so; surely you can see

every move? But this much I'll swear--I had nothing to do with Jose

breaking into your room at the hotel; they went behind me there, curse

them! And when at last I found out for certain, down here, that you knew

nothing after all, I was never more sincerely thankful in my life. I

give you my word it took a load off my heart.”

“I know that,” I said. “I also know who broke into my room, and I'm glad

I'm even with one of you.”

“It's done you no good,” said Rattray. “Their first thought was to put

you out of the way, and it's more than ever their last. You see the sort

of men you've got to deal with; and they're three to one, counting the

nigger; but if you go in with me they'll only be three to two.”

He was manifestly anxious to save me in this fashion. And I suppose that

most sensible men, in my dilemma, would at least have nursed or played

upon good-will so lucky and so enduring. But there was always a twist in

me that made me love (in my youth) to take the unexpected course; and it

amused me the more to lead my young friend on.

“And where have you got this gold?” I asked him, in a low voice so

promising that he instantly lowered his, and his eyes twinkled naughtily

into mine.

“In the old tunnel that runs from this place nearly to the sea,” said

he. “We Rattrays have always been a pretty warm lot, Cole, and in the

old days we were the most festive smugglers on the coast; this tunnel's

a relic of 'em, although it was only a tradition till I came into the

property. I swore I'd find it, and when I'd done so I made the new

connection which you shall see. I'm rather proud of it. And I won't say

I haven't used the old drain once or twice after the fashion of my rude

forefathers; but never was it such a godsend as it's been this time. By

Jove, it would be a sin if you didn't come in with us, Cole; but for the

lives these blackguards lost the thing's gone splendidly; it would be a

sin if you went and lost yours, whereas, if you come in, the two of us

would be able to shake off those devils: we should be too strong for

'em.”

“Seven thousand pounds!” I murmured. “Forty-eight thousand between us!”

“Yes, and nearly all of it down below, at this end of the tunnel, and

the rest where we dropped it when we heard you were trying to bolt. We'd

got it all at the other end, ready to pop aboard the schooner that's

lying there still, if you turned out to know anything and to have told

what you knew to the police. There was always the possibility of that,

you see; we simply daren't show our noses at the bank until we knew how

much you knew, and what you'd done or were thinking of doing. As it is,

we can take 'em the whole twelve thousand ounces, or rather I can, as

soon as I like, in broad daylight. I'm a lucky digger. It's all right.

Everybody knows I've been out there. They'll have to pay me over the

counter; and if you wait in the cab, by the Lord Harry, I'll pay you

your seven thousand first! You don't deserve it, Cole, but you shall

have it, and between us we'll see the others to blazes!”

He jumped up all excitement, and was at the door next instant.

“Stop!” I cried. “Where are you going?”

“Downstairs to tell them.”

“Tell them what?”

“That you're going in with me, and it's all right.”

“And do you really think I am?”

He had unlocked the door; after a pause I heard him lock it again. But

I did not see his face until he returned to the bedside. And then it

frightened me. It was distorted and discolored with rage and chagrin.

“You've been making a fool of me!” he cried fiercely.

“No, I have been considering the matter, Rattray.”

“And you won't accept my offer?”

“Of course I won't. I didn't say I'd been considering that.”

He stood over me with clenched fists and starting eyes.

“Don't you see that I want to save your life?” he cried. “Don't you see

that this is the only way? Do you suppose a murder more or less makes

any difference to that lot downstairs? Are you really such a fool as to

die rather than hold your tongue?”

“I won't hold it for money, at all events,” said I. “But that's what I

was coming to.”

“Very well!” he interrupted. “You shall only pretend to touch it. All I

want is to convince the others that it's against your interest to split.

Self-interest is the one motive they understand. Your bare word would be

good enough for me.”

“Suppose I won't give my bare word?” said I, in a gentle manner which I

did not mean to be as irritating as it doubtless was. Yet his proposals

and his assumptions were between them making me irritable in my turn.

“For Heaven's sake don't be such an idiot, Cole!” he burst out in a

passion. “You know I'm against the others, and you know what they want,

yet you do your best to put me on their side! You know what they are,

and yet you hesitate! For the love of God be sensible; at least give me

your word that you'll hold your tongue for ever about all you know.”

“All right,” I said. “I'll give you my word--my sacred promise,

Rattray--on one condition.”

“What's that?”

“That you let me take Miss Denison away from you, for good and all!”

His face was transformed with fury: honest passion faded from it and

left it bloodless, deadly, sinister.

“Away from me?” said Rattray, through his teeth.

“From the lot of you.”

“I remember! You told me that night. Ha, ha, ha! You were in love with

her--you--you!”

“That has nothing to do with it,” said I, shaking the bed with my anger

and my agitation.

“I should hope not! You, indeed, to look at her!”

“Well,” I cried, “she may never love me; but at least she doesn't loathe

me as she loathes you--yes, and the sight of you, and your very name!”

So I drew blood for blood; and for an instant I thought he was going to

make an end of it by incontinently killing me himself. His fists flew

out. Had I been a whole man on my legs, he took care to tell me what he

would have done, and to drive it home with a mouthful of the oaths which

were conspicuously absent from his ordinary talk.

“You take advantage of your weakness, like any cur,” he wound up.

“And you of your strength--like the young bully you are!” I retorted.

“You do your best to make me one,” he answered bitterly. “I try to stand

by you at all costs. I want to make amends to you, I want to prevent

a crime. Yet there you lie and set your face against a compromise; and

there you lie and taunt me with the thing that's gall and wormwood to me

already. I know I gave you provocation. And I know I'm rightly served.

Why do you suppose I went into this accursed thing at all? Not for the

gold, my boy, but for the girl! So she won't look at me. And it serves

me right. But--I say--do you really think she loathes me, Cole?”

“I don't see how she can think much better of you than of the crime

in which you've had a hand,” was my reply, made, however, with as much

kindness as I could summon. “The word I used was spoken in anger,” said

I; for his had disappeared; and he looked such a miserable, handsome dog

as he stood there hanging his guilty head--in the room, I fancied, where

he once had lain as a pretty, innocent child.

“Cole,” said he, “I'd give twice my share of the damned stuff never to

have put my hand to the plough; but go back I can't; so there's an end

of it.”

“I don't see it,” said I. “You say you didn't go in for the gold? Then

give up your share; the others'll jump at it; and Eva won't think the

worse of you, at any rate.”

“But what's to become of her if I drop out?

“You and I will take her to her friends, or wherever she wants to go.”

“No, no!” he cried. “I never yet deserted my pals, and I'm not going to

begin.”

“I don't believe you ever before had such pals to desert,” was my reply

to that. “Quite apart from my own share in the matter, it makes me

positively sick to see a fellow like you mixed up with such a crew in

such a game. Get out of it, man, get out of it while you can! Now's your

time. Get out of it, for God's sake!”

I sat up in my eagerness. I saw him waver. And for one instant a great

hope fluttered in my heart. But his teeth met. His face darkened. He

shook his head.

“That's the kind of rot that isn't worth talking, and you ought to know

it,” said he. “When I begin a thing I go through with it, though it

lands me in hell, as this one will. I can't help that. It's too late to

go back. I'm going on and you're going with me, Cole, like a sensible

chap!”

I shook my head.

“Only on the one condition.”

“You--stick--to--that?” he said, so rapidly that the words ran into one,

so fiercely that his decision was as plain to me as my own.

“I do,” said I, and could only sigh when he made yet one more effort to

persuade me, in a distress not less apparent than his resolution, and

not less becoming in him.

“Consider, Cole, consider!”

“I have already done so, Rattray.”

“Murder is simply nothing to them!”

“It is nothing to me either.”

“Human life is nothing!”

“No; it must end one day.”

“You won't give your word unconditionally?”

“No; you know my condition.”

He ignored it with a blazing eye, his hand upon the door.

“You prefer to die, then?” “Infinitely.”

“Then die you may, and be damned to you!”

CHAPTER XVII. THIEVES FALL OUT

The door slammed. It was invisibly locked and the key taken out. I

listened for the last of an angry stride. It never even began. But after

a pause the door was unlocked again, and Rattray re-entered.

Without looking at me, he snatched the candle from the table on which it

stood by the bedside, and carried it to a bureau at the opposite side

of the room. There he stood a minute with his back turned, the candle,

I fancy, on the floor. I saw him putting something in either jacket

pocket. Then I heard a dull little snap, as though he had shut some

small morocco case; whatever it was, he tossed it carelessly back into

the bureau; and next minute he was really gone, leaving the candle

burning on the floor.

I lay and heard his steps out of earshot, and they were angry enough

now, nor had he given me a single glance. I listened until there was

no more to be heard, and then in an instant I was off the bed and on

my feet. I reeled a little, and my head gave me great pain, but greater

still was my excitement. I caught up the candle, opened the unlocked

bureau, and then the empty case which I found in the very front.

My heart leapt; there was no mistaking the depressions in the case. It

was a brace of tiny pistols that Rattray had slipped into his jacket

pockets.

Mere toys they must have been in comparison with my dear Deane and

Adams; that mattered nothing. I went no longer in dire terror of my

life; indeed, there was that in Rattray which had left me feeling fairly

safe, in spite of his last words to me, albeit I felt his fears on my

behalf to be genuine enough. His taking these little pistols (of

course, there were but three chambers left loaded in mine) confirmed my

confidence in him.

He would stick at nothing to defend me from the violence of his

bloodthirsty accomplices. But it should not come to that. My legs were

growing firmer under me. I was not going to lie there meekly without

making at least an effort at self-deliverance. If it succeeded--the

idea came to me in a flash--I would send Rattray an ultimatum from the

nearest town; and either Eva should be set instantly and unconditionally

free, or the whole matter be put unreservedly in the hands of the local

police.

There were two lattice windows, both in the same immensely thick wall;

to my joy, I discovered that they overlooked the open premises at the

back of the hall, with the oak-plantation beyond; nor was the distance

to the ground very great. It was the work of a moment to tear the sheets

from the bed, to tie the two ends together and a third round the mullion

by which the larger window was bisected. I had done this, and had let

down my sheets, when a movement below turned my heart to ice. The night

had clouded over. I could see nobody; so much the greater was my alarm.

I withdrew from the window, leaving the sheets hanging, in the hope that

they also might be invisible in the darkness. I put out the candle,

and returned to the window in great perplexity. Next moment I stood

aghast--between the devil and the deep sea. I still heard a something

down below, but a worse sound came to drown it. An unseen hand was very

quietly trying the door which Rattray had locked behind him.

“Diablo!” came to my horrified ears, in a soft, vindictive voice.

“I told ye so,” muttered another; “the young swab's got the key.”

There was a pause, in which it would seem that Joaquin Santos had his

ear at the empty keyhole.

“I think he must be slipping,” at last I heard him sigh. “It was not

necessary to awaken him in this world. It is a peety.”

“One kick over the lock would do it,” said Harris; “only the young

swab'll hear.”

“Not perhaps while he is dancing attendance on the senhora. Was it not

good to send him to her? If he does hear, well, his own turn will come

the queecker, that is all. But it would be better to take them one at a

time; so keeck away, my friend, and I will give him no time to squil.”

While my would-be murderers were holding this whispered colloquy, I had

stood half-petrified by the open window; unwilling to slide down the

sheets into the arms of an unseen enemy, though I had no idea which

of them it could be; more hopeful of slipping past my butchers in the

darkness, and so to Rattray and poor Eva; but not the less eagerly

looking for some hiding-place in the room. The best that offered was a

recess in the thick wall between the two windows, filled with hanging

clothes: a narrow closet without a door, which would shelter me well

enough if not too curiously inspected. Here I hid myself in the end,

after a moment of indecision which nearly cost me my life. The coats and

trousers still shook in front of me when the door flew open at the first

kick, and Santos stood a moment in the moonlight, looking for the bed.

With a stride he reached it, and I saw the gleam of a knife from where I

stood among the squire's clothes; it flashed over my bed, and was still.

“He is not 'ere!”

“He heard us, and he's a-hiding.”

“Make light, my friend, and we shall very soon see.”

Harris did so.

“Here's a candle,” said Santos; “light it, and watch the door. Perro mal

dicto! What have we here?”

I felt certain he had seen me, but the candle passed within a yard of my

feet, and was held on high at the open window.

“We are too late!” said Santos. “He's gone!”

“Are you sure

“Look at this sheet.”

“Then the other swab knew of it, and we'll settle with him.”

“Yes, yes. But not yet, my good friend--not yet. We want his asseestance

in getting the gold back to the sea; he will be glad enough to give it,

now that his pet bird has flown; after that--by all mins. You shall cut

his troth, and I will put one of 'is dear friend's bullets in 'im for my

own satisfaction.”

There was a quick step on the stairs-in the corridor.

“I'd like to do it now,” whispered Harris; “no time like the present.”

“Not yet, I tell you!”

And Rattray was in the room, a silver-mounted pistol in each hand; the

sight of these was a surprise to his treacherous confederates, as even I

could see.

“What the devil are you two doing here?” he thundered.

“We thought he was too quite,” said Santos. “You percive the rizzon.”

And he waved from empty bed to open window, then held the candle close

to the tied sheet, and shrugged expressively.

“You thought he was too quiet!” echoed Rattray with fierce scorn. “You

thought I was too blind--that's what you mean. To tell me that Miss

Denison wished to see me, and Miss Denison that I wished to speak to

her! As if we shouldn't find you out in about a minute! But a minute was

better than nothing, eh? And you've made good use of your minute, have

you. You've murdered him, and you pretend he's got out? By God, if you

have, I'll murder you! I've been ready for this all night!”

And he stood with his back to the window, his pistols raised, and his

head carried proudly--happily--like a man whose self-respect was coming

back to him after many days. Harris shrank before his fierce eyes

and pointed barrels. The Portuguese, however, had merely given a

characteristic shrug, and was now rolling the inevitable cigarette.

“Your common sense is almost as remarkable as your sense of justice, my

friend,” said he. “You see us one, two, tree meenutes ago, and you see

us now. You see the empty bed, the empty room, and you imagine that in

one, two, tree meenutes we have killed a man and disposed of his body.

Truly, you are very wise and just, and very loyal also to your friends.

You treat a dangerous enemy as though he were your tween-brother. You

let him escape--let him, I repit--and then you threaten to shoot those

who, as it is, may pay for your carelessness with their lives. We have

been always very loyal to you, Senhor Rattray. We have leestened to your

advice, and often taken it against our better judgment. We are here, not

because we think it wise, but because you weeshed it. Yet at the first

temptation you turn upon us, you point your peestols at your friends.”

“I don't believe in your loyalty,” rejoined Rattray. “I believe you

would shoot me sooner than I would you. The only difference would be

than I should be shot in the back!”

“It is untrue,” said Santos, with immense emotion. “I call the saints to

witness that never by thought or word have I been disloyal to you”--and

the blasphemous wretch actually crossed himself with a trembling, skinny

hand. “I have leestened to you, though you are the younger man. I have

geeven way to you in everything from the moment we were so fullish as to

set foot on this accursed coast; that also was your doeeng; and it will

be your fault if ivil comes of it. Yet I have not complained. Here

in your own 'ouse you have been the master, I the guest. So far from

plotting against you, show me the man who has heard me brith one

treacherous word behind your back; you will find it deeficult, friend

Rattray; what do you say, captain?”

“Me?” cried Harris, in a voice bursting with abuse. And what the captain

said may or may not be imagined. It cannot be set down.

But the man who ought to have spoken--the man who had such a chance as

few men have off the stage--who could have confounded these villains

in a breath, and saved the wretched Rattray at once from them and

from himself--that unheroic hero remained ignobly silent in his homely

hiding-place. And, what is more, he would do the same again!

The rogues had fallen out; now was the time for honest men. They all

thought I had escaped; therefore they would give me a better chance than

ever of still escaping; and I have already explained to what purpose

I meant to use my first hours of liberty. That purpose I hold to have

justified any ingratitude that I may seem now to have displayed towards

the man who had undoubtedly stood between death and me. Was not Eva

Denison of more value than many Rattrays? And it was precisely in

relation with this pure young girl that I most mistrusted the squire:

obviously then my first duty was to save Eva from Rattray, not Rattray

from these traitors.

Not that I pretend for a moment to have been the thing I never was: you

are not so very grateful to the man who pulls you out of the mud when he

has first of all pushed you in; nor is it chivalry alone which spurs

one to the rescue of a lovely lady for whom, after all, one would rather

live than die. Thus I, in my corner, was thinking (I will say) of Eva

first; but next I was thinking of myself; and Rattray's blood be on his

own hot head! I hold, moreover, that I was perfectly right in all this;

but if any think me very wrong, a sufficient satisfaction is in store

for them, for I was very swiftly punished.

The captain's language was no worse in character than in effect: the bed

was bloody from my wounded head, all tumbled from the haste with which

I had quitted it, and only too suggestive of still fouler play. Rattray

stopped the captain with a sudden flourish of one of his pistols, the

silver mountings making lightning in the room; then he called upon the

pair of them to show him what they had done with me; and to my horror,

Santos invited him to search the room. The invitation was accepted. Yet

there I stood. It would have been better to step forward even then. Yet

I cowered among his clothes until his own hand fell upon my collar, and

forth I was dragged to the plain amazement of all three.

Santos was the first to find his voice.

“Another time you will perhaps think twice before you spik, friend

squire.”

Rattray simply asked me what I had been doing in there, in a white flame

of passion, and with such an oath that I embellished the truth for him

in my turn.

“Trying to give you blackguards the slip,” said I.

“Then it was you who let down the sheet?”

“Of course it was.”

“All right! I'm done with you,” said he; “that settles it. I make you an

offer. You won't accept it. I do my best; you do your worst; but I'll be

shot if you get another chance from me!”

Brandy and the wine-glass stood where Rattray must have set them, on an

oak stool beside the bed; as he spoke he crossed the room, filled

the glass till the spirit dripped, and drained it at a gulp. He was

twitching and wincing still when he turned, walked up to Joaquin Santos,

and pointed to where I stood with a fist that shook.

“You wanted to deal with him,” said Rattray; “you're at liberty to do

so. I'm only sorry I stood in your way.”

But no answer, and for once no rings of smoke came from those shrivelled

lips: the man had rolled and lighted a cigarette since Rattray entered,

but it was burning unheeded between his skinny fingers. I had his

attention, all to myself. He knew the tale that I was going to tell.

He was waiting for it; he was ready for me. The attentive droop of his

head; the crafty glitter in his intelligent eyes; the depth and

breadth of the creased forehead; the knowledge of his resource, the

consciousness of my error, all distracted and confounded me so that my

speech halted and my voice ran thin. I told Rattray every syllable that

these traitors had been saying behind his back, but I told it all very

ill; what was worse, and made me worse, I was only too well aware of my

own failure to carry conviction with my words.

“And why couldn't you come out and say so,” asked Rattray, as even I knew

that he must. “Why wait till now?”

“Ah, why!” echoed Santos, with a smile and a shake of the head; a

suspicious tolerance, an ostentatious truce, upon his parchment face.

And already he was sufficiently relieved to suck his cigarette alight

again.

“You know why,” I said, trusting to bluff honesty with the one of them

who was not rotten to the core: “because I still meant escaping.”

“And then what?” asked Rattray fiercely.

“You had given me my chance,” I said; “I hould have given you yours.”

“You would, would you? Very kind of you, Mr. Cole!”

“No, no,” said Santos; “not kind, but clever! Clever, spicious, and

queeck-weeted beyond belif! Senhor Rattray, we have all been in the

dark; we thought we had fool to die with, but what admirable knave the

young man would make! Such readiness, such resource, with his tongue

or with his peestol; how useful would it be to us! I am glad you have

decided to live him to me, friend Rattray, for I am quite come round to

your way of thinking. It is no longer necessary for him to die!”

“You mean that?” cried Rattray keenly.

“Of course I min it. You were quite right. He must join us. But he will

when I talk to him.”

I could not speak. I was fascinated by this wretch: it was reptile and

rabbit with us. Treachery I knew he meant; my death, for one; my death

was certain; and yet I could not speak.

“Then talk to him, for God's sake,” cried Rattray, “and I shall be only

too glad if you can talk some sense into him. I've tried, and failed.”

“I shall not fail,” said Santos softly. “But it is better that he has a

leetle time to think over it calmly; better steel for 'im to slip upon

it, as you say. Let us live 'im for the night, what there is of it; time

enough in the morning.”

I could hardly believe my ears; still I knew that it was treachery, all

treachery; and the morning I should never see.

“But we can't leave him up here,” said Rattray; “it would mean one of us

watching him all night.”

“Quite so,” said Santos. “I will tell you where we could live him,

however, if you will allow me to wheesper one leetle moment.”

They drew aside; and, as I live, I thought that little moment was to

be Rattray's last on earth. I watched, but nothing happened; on the

contrary, both men seemed agreed, the Portuguese gesticulating, the

Englishman nodding, as they stood conversing at the window. Their faces

were strangely reassuring. I began to reason with myself, to rid my mind

of mere presentiment and superstition. If these two really were at one

about me (I argued) there might be no treachery after all. When I came

to think of it, Rattray had been closeted long enough with me to awake

the worst suspicions in the breasts of his companions; now that these

were allayed, there might be no more bloodshed after all (if, for

example, I pretended to give in), even though Santos had not cared whose

blood was shed a few minutes since. That was evidently the character of

the wretch: to compass his ends or to defend his person he would take

life with no more compunction than the ordinary criminal takes money;

but (and hence) murder for murder's sake was no amusement to him.

My confidence was further restored by Captain Harris; ever a gross

ruffian, with no refinements to his rascality, he had been at the brandy

bottle after Rattray's example; and now was dozing on the latter's bed,

taking his watch below when he could get it, like the good seaman he

had been. I was quite sorry for him when the conversation at the window

ceased suddenly, and Rattray roused the captain up.

“Watches aft!” said he. “We want that mattress; you can bring it along,

while I lead the way with the pillows and things. Come on, Cole!”

“Where to?” I asked, standing firm.

“Where there's no window for you to jump out of, old boy, and no clothes

of mine for you to hide behind. You needn't look so scared; it's as dry

as a bone, as cellars go. And it's past three o'clock. And you've just

got to come.”

CHAPTER XVIII. A MAN OF MANY MURDERS

It was a good-sized wine-cellar, with very little wine in it; only one

full bin could I discover. The bins themselves lined but two of the

walls, and most of them were covered in with cobwebs, close-drawn like

mosquito-curtains. The ceiling was all too low: torpid spiders hung

in disreputable parlors, dead to the eye, but loathsomely alive at an

involuntary touch. Rats scuttled when we entered, and I had not been

long alone when they returned to bear me company. I am not a natural

historian, and had rather face a lion with the right rifle than a rat

with a stick. My jailers, however, had been kind enough to leave me a

lantern, which, set upon the ground (like my mattress), would afford a

warning, if not a protection, against the worst; unless I slept; and as

yet I had not lain down. The rascals had been considerate enough, more

especially Santos, who had a new manner for me with his revised opinion

of my character; it was a manner almost as courtly as that which had

embellished his relations with Eva Denison, and won him my early regard

at sea. Moreover, it was at the suggestion of Santos that they had

detained me in the hall, for much-needed meat and drink, on the way

down. Thereafter they had conducted me through the book-lined door of my

undoing, down stone stairs leading to three cellar doors, one of which

they had double-locked upon me.

As soon as I durst I was busy with this door; but to no purpose; it was

a slab of solid oak, hung on hinges as massive as its lock. It galled

me to think that but two doors stood between me and the secret tunnel to

the sea: for one of the other two must lead to it. The first, however,

was all beyond me, and I very soon gave it up. There was also a

very small grating which let in a very little fresh air: the massive

foundations had been tunnelled in one place; a rude alcove was the

result, with this grating at the end and top of it, some seven feet

above the earth floor. Even had I been able to wrench away the bars, it

would have availed me nothing, since the aperture formed the segment of

a circle whose chord was but a very few inches long. I had nevertheless

a fancy for seeing the stars once more and feeling the breath of heaven

upon my bandaged temples, which impelled me to search for that which

should add a cubit to my stature. And at a glance I descried two

packing-cases, rather small and squat, but the pair of them together

the very thing for me. To my amazement, however, I could at first move

neither one nor the other of these small boxes. Was it that I was weak

as water, or that they were heavier than lead? At last I managed to get

one of them in my arms--only to drop it with a thud. A side started;

a thin sprinkling of yellow dust glittered on the earth. I fetched the

lantern: it was gold-dust from Bendigo or from Ballarat.

To me there was horror unspeakable, yet withal a morbid fascination,

in the spectacle of the actual booty for which so many lives had been

sacrificed before my eyes. Minute followed minute in which I looked at

nothing, and could think of nothing, but the stolen bullion at my feet;

then I gathered what of the dust I could, pocketed it in pinches to hide

my meddlesomeness, and blew the rest away. The box had dropped very much

where I had found it; it had exhausted my strength none the less, and

I was glad at last to lie down on the mattress, and to wind my body in

Rattray's blankets.

I shuddered at the thought of sleep: the rats became so lively the

moment I lay still. One ventured so near as to sit up close to the

lantern; the light showed its fat white belly, and the thing itself was

like a dog begging, as big to my disgusted eyes. And yet, in the midst

of these horrors (to me as bad as any that had preceded them), nature

overcame me, and for a space my torments ceased.

“He is aslip,” a soft voice said.

“Don't wake the poor devil,” said another.

“But I weesh to spik with 'im. Senhor Cole! Senhor Cole!”

I opened my eyes. Santos looked of uncanny stature in the low yellow

light, from my pillow close to the earth. Harris turned away at my

glance; he carried a spade, and began digging near the boxes without

more ado, by the light of a second lantern set on one of them: his back

was to me from this time on. Santos shrugged a shoulder towards the

captain as he opened a campstool, drew up his trousers, and seated

himself with much deliberation at the foot of my mattress.

“When you 'ave treasure,” said he, “the better thing is to bury it,

Senhor Cole. Our young friend upstairs begs to deefer; but he is

slipping; it is peety he takes such quantity of brandy! It is leetle

wikness of you Engleesh; we in Portugal never touch it, save as a

liqueur; therefore we require less slip. Friend squire upstairs is at

this moment no better than a porker. Have I made mistake? I thought it

was the same word in both languages; but I am glad to see you smile,

Senhor Cole; that is good sign. I was going to say, he is so fast aslip

up there, that he would not hear us if we were to shoot each other

dead!”

And he gave me his paternal smile, benevolent, humorous, reassuring; but

I was no longer reassured; nor did I greatly care any more what happened

to me. There is a point of last, as well as one of least resistance, and

I had reached both points at once.

“Have you shot him dead?” I inquired, thinking that if he had, this

would precipitate my turn. But he was far from angry; the parchment

face crumpled into tolerant smiles; the venerable head shook a playful

reproval, as he threw away the cigarette that I am tired of mentioning,

and put the last touch to a fresh one with his tongue.

“What question?” said he; “reely, Senhor Cole! But you are quite right:

I would have shot him, or cut his troth” (and he shrugged indifference

on the point), “if it had not been for you; and yet it would have been

your fault! I nid not explain; the poseetion must have explained itself

already; besides, it is past. With you two against us--but it is past.

You see, I have no longer the excellent Jose. You broke his leg, bad

man. I fear it will be necessary to destroy 'im.” Santos made a pause;

then inquired if he shocked me.

“Not a bit,” said I, neither truly nor untruly; “you interest me.” And

that he did.

“You see,” he continued, “I have not the respect of you Engleesh for

'uman life. We will not argue it. I have at least some respect for

prejudice. In my youth I had myself such prejudices; but one loses them

on the Zambesi. You cannot expect one to set any value upon the life of

a black nigger; and when you have keeled a great many Kaffirs, by the

lash, with the crocodiles, or what-not, then a white man or two makes

less deeference. I acknowledge there were too many on board that sheep;

but what was one to do? You have your Engleesh proverb about the dead

men and the stories; it was necessary to make clin swip. You see the

result.”

He shrugged again towards the boxes; but this time, being reminded

of them (I supposed), he rose and went over to see how Harris was

progressing. The captain had never looked round; neither did he look at

Santos. “A leetle dipper,” I heard the latter say, “and, perhaps, a few

eenches--” but I lost the last epithet. It followed a glance over the

shoulder in my direction, and immediately preceded the return of Santos

to his camp-stool.

“Yes, it is always better to bury treasure,” said he once more; but his

tone was altered; it was more contemplative; and many smoke-rings came

from the shrunk lips before another word; but through them all, his dark

eyes, dull with age, were fixed upon me.

“You are a treasure!” he exclaimed at last, softly enough, but quickly

and emphatically for him, and with a sudden and most diabolical smile.

“So you are going to bury me?”

I had suspected it when first I saw the spade; then not; but since the

visit to the hole I had made up my mind to it.

“Bury you? No, not alive,” said Santos, in his playfully reproving

tone. “It would be necessary to deeg so dip!” he added through his few

remaining teeth.

“Well,” I said, “you'll swing for it. That's something.”

Santos smiled again, benignantly enough this time: in contemplation

also: as an artist smiles upon his work. I was his!

“You live town,” said he; “no one knows where you go. You come down

here; no one knows who you are. Your dear friend squire locks you up

for the night, but dreenks too much and goes to slip with the key in his

pocket; it is there when he wakes; but the preesoner, where is he? He is

gone, vanished, escaped in the night, and, like the base fabreec of your

own poet's veesion, he lives no trace--is it trace?--be'ind! A leetle

earth is so easily bitten down; a leetle more is so easily carried up

into the garden; and a beet of nice strong wire might so easily be

found in a cellar, and afterwards in the lock! No, Senhor Cole, I do not

expect to 'ang. My schims have seldom one seengle flaw. There was just

one in the Lady Jermyn; there was--Senhor Cole! If there is one this

time, and you will be so kind as to point it out, I will--I will run the

reesk of shooting you instead of--”

A pinch of his baggy throat, between the fingers and thumbs of both

hands, foreshadowed a cleaner end; and yet I could look at him; nay, it

was more than I could do not to look upon that bloodless face, with the

two dry blots upon the parchment, that were never withdrawn from mine.

“No you won't, messmate! If it's him or us for it, let a bullet do it,

and let it do it quick, you bloody Spaniard! You can't do the other

without me, and my part's done.”

Harris was my only hope. I had seen this from the first, but my appeal

I had been keeping to the very end. And now he was leaving me before a

word would come! Santos had gone over to my grave, and there was Harris

at the door!

“It is not dip enough,” said the Portuguese.

“It's as deep as I mean to make it, with you sittin' there talkin' about

it.”

And the door stood open.

“Captain!” I screamed. “For Christ's sake, captain!”

He stood there, trembling, yet even now not looking my way.

“Did you ever see a man hanged?” asked Santos, with a vile eye for each

of us. “I once hanged fifteen in a row; abominable thifs. And I once

poisoned nearly a hundred at one banquet; an untrustworthy tribe; but

the hanging was the worse sight and the worse death. Heugh! There was

one man--he was no stouter than you are captain--”

But the door slammed; we heard the captain on the stairs; there was a

rustle from the leaves outside, and then a silence that I shall not

attempt to describe.

And, indeed, I am done with this description: as I live to tell the tale

(or spoil it, if I choose) I will make shorter work of this particular

business than I found it at the time. Perverse I may be in old age as

in my youth; but on that my agony--my humiliating agony--I decline

to dwell. I suffer it afresh as I write. There are the cobwebs on the

ceiling, a bloated spider crawling in one: a worse monster is gloating

over me: those dull eyes of his, and my own pistol-barrel, cover me in

the lamp-light. The crucifix pin is awry in his cravat; that is because

he has offered it me to kiss. As a refinement (I feel sure) my revolver

is not cocked; and the hammer goes up--up--

He missed me because a lantern was flashed into his eyes through the

grating. He wasted the next ball in firing wildly at the light. And

the last chamber's load became suddenly too precious for my person; for

there were many voices overhead; there were many feet upon the stairs.

Harris came first--head-first--saw me still living as he reeled--hurled

himself upon the boxes and one of these into the hole--all far quicker

than my pen can write it. The manoeuvre, being the captain's, explained

itself: on his heels trod Rattray, with one who brought me to my feet

like the call of silver trumpets.

“The house is surrounded,” says the squire, very quick and quiet; “is

this your doing, Cole?”

“I wish it was,” said I; “but I can't complain; it's saved my life.”

And I looked at Santos, standing dignified and alert, my still smoking

pistol in his hand.

“Two things to do,” says Rattray--“I don't care which.” He strode across

the cellar and pulled at the one full bin; something slid out, it was a

binful of empty bottles, and this time they were allowed to crash upon

the floor; the squire stood pointing to a manhole at the back of the

bin. “That's one alternative,” said he; “but it will mean leaving this

much stuff at least,” pointing to the boxes, “and probably all the rest

at the other end. The other thing's to stop and fight!”

“I fight,” said Santos, stalking to the door. “Have you no more

ammunition for me, friend Cole? Then I must live you alive; adios,

senhor!”

Harris cast a wistful look towards the manhole, not in cowardice, I

fancy, but in sudden longing for the sea, the longing of a poor devil

of a sailor-man doomed to die ashore. I am still sorry to remember that

Rattray judged him differently. “Come on, skipper,” said he; “it's all

or none aboard the lugger, and I think it will be none. Up you go; wait

a second in the room above, and I'll find you an old cutlass. I shan't

be longer.” He turned to me with a wry smile. “We're not half-armed,” he

said; “they've caught us fairly on the hop; it should be fun! Good-by,

Cole; I wish you'd had another round for that revolver. Good-by, Eva!”

And he held out his hand to our love, who had been watching him all this

time with eyes of stone; but now she turned her back upon him without

a word. His face changed; the stormlight of passion and remorse played

upon it for an instant; he made a step towards her, wheeled abruptly,

and took me by the shoulder instead.

“Take care of her, Cole,” said he. “Whatever happens--take care of her.”

I caught him at the foot of the stairs. I do not defend what I did. But

I had more ammunition; a few wadded bullets, caps, and powder-charges,

loose in a jacket pocket; and I thrust them into one of his, upon a

sudden impulse, not (as I think) altogether unaccountable, albeit (as I

have said) so indefensible.

My back was hardly turned an instant. I had left a statue of unforgiving

coldness. I started round to catch in my arms a half-fainting,

grief-stricken form, shaken with sobs that it broke my heart to hear. I

placed her on the camp-stool. I knelt down and comforted her as well as

I could, stroking her hands, my arm about her heaving shoulders, with

the gold-brown hair streaming over them. Such hair as it was! So much

longer than I had dreamt. So soft--so fine--my soul swam with the sight

and touch of it. Well for me that there broke upon us from above such

a sudden din as turned my hot blood cold! A wild shout of surprise; an

ensuing roar of defiance; shrieks and curses; yells of rage and pain;

and pistol-shot after pistol-shot as loud as cannon in the confined

space.

I know now that the battle in the hall was a very brief affair; while

it lasted I had no sense of time; minutes or moments, they were (God

forgive me!) some of the very happiest in all my life. My joy was as

profound as it was also selfish and incongruous. The villains were being

routed; of that there could be no doubt or question. I hoped Rattray

might escape, but for the others no pity stirred in my heart, and even

my sneaking sympathy with the squire could take nothing from the joy

that was in my heart. Eva Denison was free. I was free. Our oppressors

would trouble us no more. We were both lonely; we were both young; we

had suffered together and for each other. And here she lay in my arms,

her head upon my shoulder, her soft bosom heaving on my own! My blood

ran hot and cold by turns. I forgot everything but our freedom and my

love. I forgot my sufferings, as I would have you all forget them. I

am not to be pitied. I have been in heaven on earth. I was there that

night, in my great bodily weakness, and in the midst of blood-shed,

death, and crime.

“They have stopped!” cried Eva suddenly. “It is over! Oh, if he is

dead!”

And she sat upright, with bright eyes starting from a deathly face. I do

not think she knew that she had been in my arms at all: any more than I

knew that the firing had ceased before she told me. Excited voices were

still raised overhead; but some sounded distant, yet more distinct,

coming through the grating from the garden; and none were voices that we

knew. One poor wretch, on the other hand, we heard plainly groaning to

his death; and we looked in each other's eyes with the same thought.

“That's Harris,” said I, with, I fear, but little compassion in my tone

or in my heart just then.

“Where are the others?” cried Eva piteously.

“God knows,” said I; “they may be done for, too.”

“If they are!”

“It's better than the death they would have lived to die.”

“But only one of them was a wilful murderer! Oh, Mr. Cole--Mr. Cole--go

and see what has happened; come back and tell me! I dare not come. I

will stay here and pray for strength to bear whatever news you may bring

me. Go quickly. I will--wait--and pray!”

So I left the poor child on her knees in that vile cellar, white face

and straining hands uplifted to the foul ceiling, sweet lips quivering

with prayer, eyelids reverently lowered, and the swift tears flowing

from beneath them, all in the yellow light of the lantern that stood

burning by her side. How different a picture from that which awaited me

overhead!

CHAPTER XIX. MY GREAT HOUR

The library doors were shut, and I closed the secret one behind me

before opening the other and peering out through a wrack of bluish

smoke; and there lay Captain Harris, sure enough, breathing his last in

the arms of one constable, while another was seated on the table with a

very wry face, twisting a tourniquet round his arm, from which the blood

was dripping like raindrops from the eaves. A third officer stood in the

porch, issuing directions to his men without.

“He's over the wall, I tell you! I saw him run up our ladder. After him

every man of you--and spread!”

I looked in vain for Rattray and the rest; yet it seemed as if only

one of them had escaped. I was still looking when the man in the porch

wheeled back into the hall, and instantly caught sight of me at my door.

“Hillo! here's another of them,” cried he. “Out you come, young fellow!

Your mates are all dead men.”

“They're not my mates.”

“Never mind; come you out and let's have a look at you.”

I did so, and was confronted by a short, thickset man, who recognized me

with a smile, but whom I failed to recognize.

“I might have guessed it was Mr. Cole,” said he. “I knew you were here

somewhere, but I couldn't make head or tail of you through the smoke.”

“I'm surprised that you can make head or tail of me at all,” said I.

“Then you've quite forgotten the inquisitive parson you met out fishing?

You see I found out your name for myself!”

“So it was a detective!”

“It was and is,” said the little man, nodding. “Detective or Inspector

Royds, if you're any the wiser.

“What has happened? Who has escaped?” “Your friend Rattray; but he won't

get far.”

“What of the Portuguese and the nigger?”

I forgot that I had crippled Jose, but remembered with my words, and

wondered the more where he was.

“I'll show you,” said Royds. “It was the nigger let us in. We heard him

groaning round at the back--who smashed his leg? One of our men was at

that cellar grating; there was some of them down there; we wanted to

find our way down and corner them, but the fat got in the fire too soon.

Can you stand something strong? Then come this way.”

He led me out into the garden, and to a tangled heap lying in the

moonlight, on the edge of the long grass. The slave had fallen on top

of his master; one leg lay swathed and twisted; one black hand had but

partially relaxed upon the haft of a knife (the knife) that stood up

hilt-deep in a blacker heart. And in the hand of Santos was still the

revolver (my Deane and Adams) which had sent its last ball through the

nigger's body.

“They slipped out behind us, all but the one inside,” said Royds,

ruefully; “I'm hanged if I know yet how it happened--but we were on them

next second. Before that the nigger had made us hide him in the grass,

but the old devil ran straight into him, and the one fired as the other

struck. It's the worst bit of luck in the whole business, and I'm rather

disappointed on the whole. I've been nursing the job all this week; had

my last look round this very evening, with one of these officers, and

only rode back for more to make sure of taking our gentlemen alive. And

we've lost three out of four of 'em, and have still to lay hands on

the gold! I suppose you didn't know there was any aboard?” he asked

abruptly.

“Not before to-night.”

“Nor did we till the Devoren came in with letters last week, a hundred

and thirty days out. She should have been in a month before you, but she

got amongst the ice around the Horn. There was a letter of advice about

the gold, saying it would probably go in the Lady Jermyn; and another

about Rattray and his schooner, which had just sailed; the young

gentleman was known to the police out there.”

“Do you know where the schooner is?”

“Bless you, no, we've had no time to think about her; the man had been

seen about town, and we've done well to lay hands on him in the time.”

“You will do better still when you do lay hands on him,” said I,

wresting my eyes from the yellow dead face of the foreign scoundrel.

The moon shone full upon his high forehead, his shrivelled lips, dank in

their death agony, and on the bauble with the sacred device that he wore

always in his tie. I recovered my property from the shrunken fingers,

and so turned away with a harder heart than I ever had before or since

for any creature of Almighty God.

Harris had expired in our absence.

“Never spoke, sir,” said the constable in whose arms we had left him.

“More's the pity. Well, cut out at the back and help land the young

gent, or we'll have him giving us the slip too. He may double back,

but I'm watching out for that. Which way should you say he'd head, Mr.

Cole?”

“Inland,” said I, lying on the spur of the moment, I knew not why. “Try

at the cottage where I've been staying.”

“We have a man posted there already. That woman is one of the gang,

and we've got her safe. But I'll take your advice, and have that side

scoured whilst I hang about the place.”

And he walked through the house, and out the back way, at the officer's

heels; meanwhile the man with the wounded arm was swaying where he sat

from loss of blood, and I had to help him into the open air before at

last I was free to return to poor Eva in her place of loathsome safety.

I had been so long, however, that her patience was exhausted, and as I

returned to the library by one door, she entered by the other.

“I could bear it no longer. Tell me--the worst!”

“Three of them are dead.”

“Which three?”

She had crossed to the other door, and would not have me shut it. So

I stood between her and the hearth, on which lay the captain's corpse,

with the hearthrug turned up on either side to cover it.

“Harris for one,” said I. “Outside lie Jose and--”

“Quick! Quick!”

“Senhor Santos.”

Her face was as though the name meant nothing to her.

“And Mr. Rattray?” she cried. “And Mr. Rattray--”

“Has escaped for the present. He seems to have cut his way through the

police and got over the wall by a ladder they left behind them. They are

scouring the country--Miss Denison! Eva! My poor love!”

She had broken down utterly in a second fit of violent weeping; and a

second time I took her in my arms, and stood trying in my clumsy way to

comfort her, as though she were a little child. A lamp was burning in

the library, and I recognized the arm-chair which Rattray had drawn

thence for me on the night of our dinner--the very night before! I led

Eva back into the room, and I closed both doors. I supported my poor

girl to the chair, and once more I knelt before her and took her hands

in mine. My great hour was come at last: surely a happy omen that it was

also the hour before the dawn.

“Cry your fill, my darling,” I whispered, with the tears in my own

voice. “You shall never have anything more to cry for in this world! God

has been very good to us. He brought you to me, and me to you. He has

rescued us for each other. All our troubles are over; cry your fill; you

will never have another chance so long as I live, if only you will let

me live for you. Will you, Eva? Will you? Will you?”

She drew her hands from mine, and sat upright in the chair, looking at

me with round eyes; but mine were dim; astonishment was all that I

could read in her look, and on I went headlong, with growing impetus and

passion.

“I know I am not much, my darling; but you know I was not always what my

luck, good and bad, has left me now, and you will make a new man of

me so soon! Besides, God must mean it, or He would not have thrown us

together amid such horrors, and brought us through them together still.

And you have no one else to take care of you in the world! Won't you let

me try, Eva? Say that you will!”

“Then--you--owe me?” she said slowly, in a low, awe-struck voice that

might have told me my fate at once; but I was shaking all over in the

intensity of my passion, and for the moment it was joy enough to be able

at last to tell her all.

“Love you?” I echoed. “With every fibre of my being! With every atom of

my heart and soul and body! I love you well enough to live to a hundred

for you, or to die for you to-night!”

“Well enough to--give me up?” she whispered.

I felt as though a cold hand had checked my heart at its hottest, but

I mastered myself sufficiently to face her question and to answer it as

honestly as I might.

“Yes!” I cried; “well enough even to do that, if it was for your

happiness; but I might be rather difficult to convince about that.”

“You are very strong and true,” she murmured. “Yes, I can trust you as

I have never trusted anybody else! But--how long have you been so

foolish?” And she tried very hard to smile.

“Since I first saw you; but I only knew it on the night of the fire.

Till that night I resisted it like an idiot. Do you remember how we used

to argue? I rebelled so against my love! I imagined that I had loved

once already and once for all. But on the night of the fire I knew that

my love for you was different from all that had gone before or would

ever come again. I gave in to it at last, and oh! the joy of giving in!

I had fought against the greatest blessing of my life, and I never knew

it till I had given up fighting. What did I care about the fire? I

was never happier--until now! You sang through my heart like the wind

through the rigging; my one fear was that I might go to the bottom

without telling you my love. When I asked to say a few last words to you

on the poop, it was to tell you my love before we parted, that you might

know I loved you whatever came. I didn't do so, because you seemed

so frightened, poor darling! I hadn't it in my heart to add to your

distress. So I left you without a word. But I fought the sea for days

together simply to tell you what I couldn't die without telling you.

When they picked me up, it was your name that brought back my senses

after days of delirium. When I heard that you were dead, I longed to

die myself. And when I found you lived after all, the horror of your

surroundings was nothing to be compared with the mere fact that you

lived; that you were unhappy and in danger was my only grief, but it was

nothing to the thought of your death; and that I had to wait twenty-four

hours without coming to you drove me nearer to madness than ever I was

on the hen-coop. That's how I love you, Eva,” I concluded; “that's how I

love and will love you, for ever and ever, no matter what happens.”

Those sweet gray eyes of hers had been fixed very steadily upon me all

through this outburst; as I finished they filled with tears, and my poor

love sat wringing her slender fingers, and upbraiding herself as though

she were the most heartless coquette in the country.

“How wicked I am!” she moaned. “How ungrateful I must be! You offer me

the unselfish love of a strong, brave man. I cannot take it. I have no

love to give you in return.”

“But some day you may,” I urged, quite happily in my ignorance. “It

will come. Oh, surely it will come, after all that we have gone through

together!”

She looked at me very steadily and kindly through her tears.

“It has come, in a way,” said she; “but it is not your way, Mr. Cole. I

do love you for your bravery and your--love--but that will not quite do

for either of us.”

“Why not?” I cried in an ecstasy. “My darling, it will do for me! It

is more than I dared to hope for; thank God, thank God, that you should

care for me at all!”

She shook her head.

“You do not understand,” she whispered.

“I do. I do. You do not love me as you want to love.”

“As I could love--”

“And as you will! It will come. It will come. I'll bother you no more

about it now. God knows I can afford to leave well alone! I am only too

happy--too thankful--as it is!”

And indeed I rose to my feet every whit as joyful as though she had

accepted me on the spot. At least she had not rejected me; nay, she

confessed to loving me in a way. What more could a lover want? Yet there

was a dejection in her drooping attitude which disconcerted me in the

hour of my reward. And her eyes followed me with a kind of stony remorse

which struck a chill to my bleeding heart.

I went to the door; the hall was still empty, and I shut it again with a

shudder at what I saw before the hearth, at all that I had forgotten

in the little library. As I turned, another door opened--the door made

invisible by the multitude of books around and upon it--and young Squire

Rattray stood between my love and me.

His clear, smooth skin was almost as pale as Eva's own, but pale brown,

the tint of rich ivory. His eyes were preternaturally bright. And they

never glanced my way, but flew straight to Eva, and rested on her very

humbly and sadly, as her two hands gripped the arms of the chair, and

she leant forward in horror and alarm.

“How could you come back?” she cried. “I was told you had escaped!”

“Yes, I got away on one of their horses.”

“I pictured you safe on board!”

“I very nearly was.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To get your forgiveness before I go.”

He took a step forward; her eyes and mine were riveted upon him; and I

still wonder which of us admired him the more, as he stood there in his

pride and his humility, gallant and young, and yet shamefaced and sad.

“You risk your life--for my forgiveness?” whispered Eva at last. “Risk

it? I'll give myself up if you'll take back some of the things you said

to me--last night--and before.”

There was a short pause.

“Well, you are not a coward, at all events!”

“Nor a murderer, Eva!”

“God forbid.”

“Then forgive me for everything else that I have been--to you!”

And he was on his knees where I had knelt scarce a minute before; nor

could I bear to watch them any longer. I believed that he loved her in

his own way as sincerely as I did in mine. I believed that she detested

him for the detestable crime in which he had been concerned. I believed

that the opinion of him which she had expressed to his face, in my

hearing, was her true opinion, and I longed to hear her mitigate it ever

so little before he went. He won my sympathy as a gallant who valued

a kind word from his mistress more than life itself. I hoped earnestly

that that kind word would be spoken. But I had no desire to wait to hear

it. I felt an intruder. I would leave them alone together for the last

time. So I walked to the door, but, seeing a key in it, I changed

my mind, and locked it on the inside. In the hall I might become the

unintentional instrument of the squire's capture, though, so far as my

ears served me, it was still empty as we had left it. I preferred to run

no risks, and would have a look at the subterranean passage instead.

“I advise you to speak low,” I said, “and not to be long. The place is

alive with the police. If they hear you all will be up.”

Whether he heard me I do not know. I left him on his knees still, and

Eva with her face hidden in her hands.

The cellar was a strange scene to revisit within an hour of my

deliverance from that very torture-chamber. It had been something more

before I left it, but in it I could think only of the first occupant of

the camp-stool. The lantern still burned upon the floor. There was the

mattress, still depressed where I had lain face to face with insolent

death. The bullet was in the plaster; it could not have missed by the

breadth of many hairs. In the corner was the shallow grave, dug by

Harris for my elements. And Harris was dead. And Santos was dead. But

life and love were mine.

I would have gone through it all again!

And all at once I was on fire to be back in the library; so much so,

that half a minute at the manhole, lantern in hand, was enough for me;

and a mere funnel of moist brown earth--a terribly low arch propped with

beams--as much as I myself ever saw of the subterranean conduit between

Kirby House and the sea. But I understood that the curious may traverse

it for themselves to this day on payment of a very modest fee.

As for me, I returned as I had come after (say) five minutes' absence;

my head full once more of Eva, and of impatient anxiety for the wild

young squire's final flight; and my heart still singing with the joy of

which my beloved's kindness seemed a sufficient warranty. Poor egotist!

Am I to tell you what I found when I came up those steep stairs to the

chamber where I had left him on his knees to her? Or can you guess?

He was on his knees no more, but he held her in his arms, and as I

entered he was kissing the tears from her wet, flushed cheek. Her

eyelids drooped; she was pale as the dead without, so pale that her

eyebrows looked abnormally and dreadfully dark. She did not cling to

him. Neither did she resist his caresses, but lay passive in his arms as

though her proper paradise was there. And neither heard me enter; it was

as though they had forgotten all the world but one another.

“So this is it,” said I very calmly. I can hear my voice as I write.

They fell apart on the instant. Rattray glared at me, yet I saw that his

eyes were dim. Eva clasped her hands before her, and looked me steadily

in the face. But never a word.

“You love him?” I said sternly.

The silence of consent remained unbroken.

“Villain as he is?” I burst out.

And at last Eva spoke.

“I loved him before he was one,” said she. “We were engaged.”

She looked at him standing by, his head bowed, his arms folded; next

moment she was very close to me, and fresh tears were in her eyes. But I

stepped backward, for I had had enough.

“Can you not forgive me?”

“Oh, dear, yes.”

“Can't you understand?”

“Perfectly,” said I.

“You know you said--”

“I have said so many things!”

“But this was that you--you loved me well enough to--give me up.”

And the silly ego in me--the endless and incorrigible I--imagined her

pouting for a withdrawal of those brave words.

“I not only said it,” I declared, “but I meant every word of it.”

None the less had I to turn from her to hide my anguish. I leaned my

elbows on the narrow stone chimney-piece, which, with the grate below

and a small mirror above, formed an almost solitary oasis in the four

walls of books. In the mirror I saw my face; it was wizened, drawn, old

before its time, and merely ugly in its sore distress, merely repulsive

in its bloody bandages. And in the mirror also I saw Rattray, handsome,

romantic, audacious, all that I was not, nor ever would be, and I

“understood” more than ever, and loathed my rival in my heart.

I wheeled round on Eva. I was not going to give her up--to him. I would

tell her so before him--tell him so to his face. But she had turned

away; she was listening to some one else. Her white forehead glistened.

There were voices in the hall.

“Mr. Cole! Mr. Cole! Where are you, Mr. Cole?”

I moved over to the locked door. My hand found the key. I turned round

with evil triumph in my heart, and God knows what upon my face. Rattray

did not move. With lifted hands the girl was merely begging him to go by

the door that was open, down the stair. He shook his head grimly. With

an oath I was upon them.

“Go, both of you!” I whispered hoarsely. “Now--while you can--and I can

let you. Now! Now!”

Still Rattray hung back.

I saw him glancing wistfully at my great revolver lying on the table

under the lamp. I thrust it upon him, and pushed him towards the door.

“You go first. She shall follow. You will not grudge me one last word?

Yes, I will take your hand. If you escape--be good to her!”

He was gone. Without, there was a voice still calling me; but now it

sounded overhead.

“Good-by, Eva,” I said. “You have not a moment to lose.”

Yet those divine eyes lingered on my ugliness.

“You are in a very great hurry,” said she, in the sharp little voice of

her bitter moments.

“You love him; that is enough.”

“And you, too!” she cried. “And you, too!”

And her pure, warm arms were round my neck; another instant, and she

would have kissed me, she! I know it. I knew it then. But it was more

than I would bear. As a brother! I had heard that tale before. Back I

stepped again, all the man in me rebelling.

“That's impossible,” said I rudely.

“It isn't. It's true. I do love you--for this!”

God knows how I looked!

“And I mayn't say good-by to you,” she whispered. “And--and I love

you--for that!”

“Then you had better choose between us,” said I.

CHAPTER XX. THE STATEMENT OF FRANCIS RATTRAY

In the year 1858 I received a bulky packet bearing the stamp of the

Argentine Republic, a realm in which, to the best of my belief, I had

not a solitary acquaintance. The superscription told me nothing. In

my relations with Rattray his handwriting had never come under my

observation. Judge then of my feelings when the first thing I read was

his signature at the foot of the last page.

For five years I had been uncertain whether he was alive or dead. I had

heard nothing of him from the night we parted in Kirby Hall. All I knew

was that he had escaped from England and the English police; his letter

gave no details of the incident. It was an astonishing letter; my breath

was taken on the first close page; at the foot of it the tears were in

my eyes. And all that part I must pass over without a word. I have never

shown it to man or woman. It is sacred between man and man.

But the letter possessed other points of interest--of almost universal

interest--to which no such scruples need apply; for it cleared up

certain features of the foregoing narrative which had long been

mysteries to all the world; and it gave me what I had tried in vain

to fathom all these years, some explanation, or rather history, of

the young Lancastrian's complicity with Joaquin Santos in the foul

enterprise of the Lady Jermyn. And these passages I shall reproduce word

for word; partly because of their intrinsic interest; partly for such

new light as they day throw on this or that phase of the foregoing

narrative; and, lastly, out of fairness to (I hope) the most gallant and

most generous youth who ever slipped upon the lower slopes of Avemus.

Wrote Rattray:

“You wondered how I could have thrown in my lot with such a man. You may

wonder still, for I never yet told living soul. I pretended I had joined

him of my own free will. That was not quite the case. The facts were as

follows:

“In my teens (as I think you know) I was at sea. I took my second mate's

certificate at twenty, and from that to twenty-four my voyages were far

between and on my own account. I had given way to our hereditary passion

for smuggling. I kept a 'yacht' in Morecambe Bay, and more French brandy

than I knew what to do with in my cellars. It was exciting for a time,

but the excitement did not last. In 1851 the gold fever broke out in

Australia. I shipped to Melbourne as third mate on a barque, and

I deserted for the diggings in the usual course. But I was never a

successful digger. I had little luck and less patience, and I have no

doubt that many a good haul has been taken out of claims previously

abandoned by me; for of one or two I had the mortification of hearing

while still in the Colony. I suppose I had not the temperament for the

work. Dust would not do for me--I must have nuggets. So from Bendigo I

drifted to the Ovens, and from the Ovens to Ballarat. But I did no more

good on one field than on another, and eventually, early in 1853, I cast

up in Melbourne again with the intention of shipping home in the first

vessel. But there were no crews for the homeward-bounders, and while

waiting for a ship my little stock of gold dust gave out. I became

destitute first--then desperate. Unluckily for me, the beginning of '53

was the hey-day of Captain Melville, the notorious bushranger. He was

a young fellow of my own age. I determined to imitate his exploits. I

could make nothing out there from an honest life; rather than starve

I would lead a dishonest one. I had been born with lawless tendencies;

from smuggling to bushranging was an easy transition, and about the

latter there seemed to be a gallantry and romantic swagger which put it

on the higher plane of the two. But I was not born to be a bushranger

either. I failed at the very first attempt. I was outwitted by my first

victim, a thin old gentleman riding a cob at night on the Geelong road.

“'Why rob me?' said he. 'I have only ten pounds in my pocket, and the

punishment will be the same as though it were ten thousand.'

“'I want your cob,' said I (for I was on foot); 'I'm a starving Jack,

and as I can't get a ship I'm going to take to the bush.'

“He shrugged his shoulders.

“'To starve there?' said he. 'My friend, it is a poor sport, this

bushranging. I have looked into the matter on my own account. You not

only die like a dog, but you live like one too. It is not worth while.

No crime is worth while under five figures, my friend. A starving Jack,

eh? Instead of robbing me of ten pounds, why not join me and take ten

thousand as your share of our first robbery? A sailor is the very man I

want!'

“I told him that what I wanted was his cob, and that it was no use his

trying to hoodwink me by pretending he was one of my sort, because I

knew very well that he was not; at which he shrugged again, and slowly

dismounted, after offering me his money, of which I took half. He shook

his head, telling me I was very foolish, and I was coolly mounting (for

he had never offered me the least resistance), with my pistols in my

belt, when suddenly I heard one cocked behind me.

“'Stop!' said he. 'It's my turn! Stop, or I shoot you dead!' The tables

were turned, and he had me at his mercy as completely as he had been at

mine. I made up my mind to being marched to the nearest police-station.

But nothing of the kind. I had misjudged my man as utterly as you

misjudged him a few months later aboard the Lady Jermyn. He took me

to his house on the outskirts of Melbourne, a weather-board bungalow,

scantily furnished, but comfortable enough. And there he seriously

repeated the proposal he had made me off-hand in the road. Only he put

it a little differently. Would I go to the hulks for attempting to rob

him of five pounds, or would I stay and help him commit a robbery, of

which my share alone would be ten or fifteen thousand? You know which

I chose. You know who this man was. I said I would join him. He made me

swear it. And then he told me what his enterprise was: there is no need

for me to tell you; nor indeed had it taken definite shape at this time.

Suffice it that Santos had wind that big consignments of Austrailian

gold were shortly to be shipped home to England; that he, like myself,

had done nothing on the diggings, where he had looked to make his

fortune, and out of which he meant to make it still.

“It was an extraordinary life that we led in the bungalow, I the guest,

he the host, and Eva the unsuspecting hostess and innocent daughter

of the house. Santos had failed on the fields, but he had succeeded in

making valuable friends in Melbourne. Men of position and of influence

spent their evenings on our veranda, among others the Melbourne agent

for the Lady Jermyn, the likeliest vessel then lying in the harbor, and

the one to which the first consignment of gold-dust would be entrusted

if only a skipper could be found to replace the deserter who took

you out. Santos made up his mind to find one. It took him weeks, but

eventually he found Captain Harris on Bendigo, and Captain Harris was

his man. More than that he was the man for the agent; and the Lady

Jermyn was once more made ready for sea.

“Now began the complications. Quite openly, Santos had bought the

schooner Spindrift, freighted her with wool, given me the command, and

vowed that he would go home in her rather than wait any longer for the

Lady Jermyn. At the last moment he appeared to change his mind, and I

sailed alone as many days as possible in advance of the ship, as had

been intended from the first; but it went sorely against the grain when

the time came. I would have given anything to have backed out of the

enterprise. Honest I might be no longer; I was honestly in love with Eva

Denison. Yet to have backed out would have been one way of losing her

for ever. Besides, it was not the first time I had run counter to the

law, I who came of a lawless stock; but it would be the first time I had

deserted a comrade or broken faith with one. I would do neither. In for

a penny, in for a pound.

“But before my God I never meant it to turn out as it did; though I

admit and have always admitted that my moral responsibility is but

little if any the less on that account. Yet I was never a consenting

party to wholesale murder, whatever else I was. The night before I

sailed, Santos and the captain were aboard with me till the small hours.

They promised me that every soul should have every chance; that nothing

but unforeseen accident could prevent the boats from making Ascension

again in a matter of hours; that as long as the gig was supposed to be

lost with all hands, nothing else mattered. So they promised, and that

Harris meant to keep his promise I fully believe. That was not a wanton

ruffian; but the other would spill blood like water, as I told you at

the hall, and as no man now knows better than yourself. He was notorious

even in Portuguese Africa on account of his atrocious treatment of the

blacks. It was a favorite boast of his that he once poisoned a whole

village; and that he himself tampered with the Lady Jermyn's boats you

can take my word, for I have heard him describe how he left it to the

last night, and struck the blows during the applause at the concert on

the quarter-deck. He said it might have come out about the gold in the

gig, during the fire. It was safer to run no risks.

“The same thing came into play aboard the schooner. Never shall I forget

the horror of that voyage after Santos came aboard! I had a crew of

eight hands all told, and two he brought with him in the gig. Of course

they began talking about the gold; they would have their share or split

when they got ashore; and there was mutiny in the air, with the steward

and the quarter-master of the Lady Jermyn for ring-leaders. Santos

nipped it in the bud with a vengeance! He and Harris shot every man

of them dead, and two who were shot through the heart they washed and

dressed and set adrift to rot in the gig with false papers! God knows

how we made Madeira; we painted the old name out and a new name in, on

the way; and we shipped a Portuguese crew, not a man of whom could speak

English. We shipped them aboard the Duque de Mondejo's yacht Braganza;

the schooner Spindrift had disappeared from the face of the waters for

ever. And with the men we took in plenty of sour claret and cigarettes;

and we paid them well; and the Portuguese sailor is not inquisitive

under such conditions.

“And now, honestly, I wished I had put a bullet through my head before

joining in this murderous conspiracy; but retreat was impossible, even

if I had been the man to draw back after going so far; and I had a still

stronger reason for standing by the others to the bitter end. I could

not leave our lady to these ruffians. On the other hand, neither could I

take her from them, for (as you know) she justly regarded me as the most

flagrant ruffian of them all. It was in me and through me that she was

deceived, insulted, humbled, and contaminated; that she should ever have

forgiven me for a moment is more than I can credit or fathom to this

hour... So there we were. She would not look at me. And I would not

leave her until death removed me. Santos had been kind enough to her

hitherto; he had been kind enough (I understand) to her mother before

her. It was only in the execution of his plans that he showed his

Napoleonic disregard for human life; and it was precisely herein that

I began to fear for the girl I still dared to love. She took up an

attitude as dangerous to her safety as to our own. She demanded to be

set free when we came to land. Her demand was refused. God forgive me,

it had no bitterer opponent than myself! And all we did was to harden

her resolution; that mere child threatened us to our faces, never shall

I forget the scene! You know her spirit: if we would not set her free,

she would tell all when we landed. And you remember how Santos used to

shrug? That was all he did then. It was enough for me who knew him. For

days I never left them alone together. Night after night I watched her

cabin door. And she hated me the more for never leaving her alone! I had

to resign myself to that.

“The night we anchored in Falmouth Bay, thinking then of taking our gold

straight to the Bank of England, as eccentric lucky diggers--that night

I thought would be the last for one or other of us. He locked her in

her cabin. He posted himself outside on the settee. I sat watching him

across the table. Each had a hand in his pocket, each had a pistol in

that hand, and there we sat, with our four eyes locked, while Harris

went ashore for papers. He came back in great excitement. What with

stopping at Madeira, and calms, and the very few knots we could knock

out of the schooner at the best of times, we had made a seven or eight

weeks' voyage of it from Ascension--where, by the way, I had arrived

only a couple of days before the Lady Jermyn, though I had nearly a

month's start of her. Well, Harris came back in the highest state of

excitement: and well he might: the papers were full of you, and of the

burning of the Lady Jermyn!

“Now mark what happened. You know, of course, as well as I do; but I

wonder if you can even yet realize what it was to us! Our prisoner

hears that you are alive, and she turns upon Santos and tells him he is

welcome to silence her, but it will do us ne good now, as you know that

the ship was wilfully burned, and with what object. It is the single

blow she can strike in self-defence; but a shrewder one could scarcely

be imagined. She had talked to you, at the very last; and by that time

she did know the truth. What more natural than that she should confide

it to you? She had had time to tell you enough to hang the lot of us;

and you may imagine our consternation on hearing that she had told you

all she knew! From the first we were never quite sure whether to believe

it or not. That the papers breathed no suspicion of foul play was

neither here nor there. Scotland Yard might have seen to that. Then

we read of the morbid reserve which was said to characterize all your

utterances concerning the Lady Jermyn. What were we to do? What we no

longer dared to do was to take our gold-dust straight to the Bank. What

we did, you know.

“We ran round to Morecambe Bay, and landed the gold as we Rattrays had

landed lace and brandy from time immemorial. We left Eva in charge of

Jane Braithwaite, God only knows how much against my will, but we were

in a corner, it was life or death with us, and to find out how much you

knew was a first plain necessity. And the means we took were the only

means in our power; nor shall I say more to you on that subject than I

said five years ago in my poor old house. That is still the one part of

the whole conspiracy of which I myself am most ashamed.

“And now it only remains for me to tell you why I have written all this

to you, at such great length, so long after the event. My wife wished

it. The fact is that she wants you to think better of me than I deserve;

and I--yes--I confess that I should like you not to think quite as ill

of me as you must have done all these years. I was villain enough, but

do not think I am unpunished.

“I am an outlaw from my country. I am morally a transported felon. Only

in this no-man's land am I a free man; let me but step across the border

and I am worth a little fortune to the man who takes me. And we have had

a hard time here, though not so hard as I deserved; and the hardest part

of all...”

But you must guess the hardest part: for the letter ended as it began,

with sudden talk of his inner life, and tentative inquiry after mine. In

its entirety, as I say, I have never shown it to a soul; there was just

a little more that I read to my wife (who could not hear enough about

his); then I folded up the letter, and even she has never seen the

passages to which I allude.

And yet I am not one of those who hold that the previous romances

of married people should be taboo between them in after life. On the

contrary, much mutual amusement, of an innocent character, may be

derived from a fair and free interchange upon the subject; and this is

why we, in our old age (or rather in mine), find a still unfailing topic

in the story of which Eva Denison was wayward heroine and Frank Rattray

the nearest approach to a hero. Sometimes these reminiscences lead to

an argument; for it has been the fate of my life to become attached to

argumentative persons. I suppose because I myself hate arguing. On

the day that I received Rattray's letter we had one of our warmest

discussions. I could repeat every word of it after forty years.

“A good man does not necessarily make a good husband,” I innocently

remarked.

“Why do you say that?” asked my wife, who never would let a

generalization pass unchallenged.

“I was thinking of Rattray,” said I. “The most tolerant of judges could

scarcely have described him as a good man five years ago. Yet I can see

that he has made an admirable husband. On the whole, and if you can't be

both, it is better to be the good husband!”

It was this point that we debated with so much ardor. My wife would take

the opposite side; that is her one grave fault. And I must introduce

personalities; that, of course, is among the least of mine. I compared

myself with Rattray, as a husband, and (with some sincerity) to my own

disparagement. I pointed out that he was an infinitely more fascinating

creature, which was no hard saying, for that epithet at least I have

never earned. And yet it was the word to sting my wife.

“Fascinating, perhaps!” said she. “Yes, that is the very word;

but--fascination is not love!”

And then I went to her, and stroked her hair (for she had hung her head

in deep distress), and kissed the tears from her eyes. And I swore that

her eyes were as lovely as Eva Denison's, that there seemed even more

gold in her glossy brown hair, that she was even younger to look at. And

at the last and craftiest compliment my own love looked at me through

her tears, as though some day or other she might forgive me.

“Then why did you want to give me up to him?” said she.

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