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THE RETURN OF CLUBFOOT

**BY
VALENTINE WILLIAMS**

**AUTHOR OF
"THE MAN WITH THE CLUBFOOT"**

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WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

Whilst spending a holiday in a small Central American Republic, Desmond Okewood, of the Secret Service, learns from a dying beachcomber of a hidden treasure.

With the assistance of a millionaire, he sets out for Cock Island, in the Pacific. To his astonishment he discovers that the Man with the Clubfoot, whom he had regarded as dead, has anticipated him. It is obvious to Okewood that his old enemy is also in search of the hidden gold, and there ensues a thrilling sequence of adventures, in which the millionaire's pretty daughter takes a prominent part.

Okewood has the cipher, and the Man with the Clubfoot determines to secure it, for without that cipher it is impossible to discover the hiding-place of the treasure; but there is something that the Man with the Clubfoot does not know, whereas Okewood does.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE MAN WITH THE CLUBFOOT

THE SECRET HAND

THE YELLOW STREAK

THE ORANGE DIVAN

CLUBFOOT THE AVENGER

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The Return of Clubfoot

CHAPTER 1

DOÑA LUISA

As I was sitting on the verandah of John Bard's bungalow, glancing through a two-month old copy of *The Sketch*, I heard the clang of the iron gate below where I sat. I raised my eyes from the paper and looked down the gardens. At my feet was stretched a dark tangle of palms and luxuriant tropical verdure, beyond them in the distance the glass-like surface of the sea, on which a great lucent moon threw a gleaming path of light.

The night was very tranquil. From the port at the foot of the hill, on which my old friend, John Bard, had built his bungalow in this earthly paradise, the occasional screech of a winch was wafted with astonishing clearness over the warm air. Somewhere in the distance there was the faint monotonous thrumming of guitars. To these night noises of the little Central American port the sea murmured faintly a ceaseless accompaniment.

I heard voices in the garden. Within the house a door swung to with a thud; there was the patter of slippered feet over the matting in the living-room and Akawa, Bard's Japanese servant, was at my elbow. His snow-white drill stood out against the black shadows which the moon cast at the back of the verandah. He did not speak; but his mask-like face waited for me to notice him.

"Well, Akawa?" said I; "what is it?"

"Doña Luisa ask for the Señor Commandante, excuse me!" announced the Jap stolidly.

Comfortably stretched out in a cane chair, a cold drink frosting its long glass in the trough at my side, I turned and stared at the butler. I was undoubtedly the Señor Commandante, for thus, in the course of a lazy, aimless sort of holiday on the shores of the Pacific, had my rank of Major been hispaniolised.

But what lady wanted me? Who could possibly know me here, seeing that only the day before one of John Bard's fruit ships had landed me from San Salvador?

Doña Luisa! The name had an alluring, romantic ring, especially on this gorgeous night, the velvety sky powdered with glittering stars, the air heavy with perfumes exhaled from the scented gardens. That broad strain of romance in me (which makes so much trouble for us Celts) responded strongly to the appeal of my environment. Doña Luisa! The distant strains of music seemed to thum that soft name into my brain.

I swung my feet to the ground, stood up and stretched myself.

"Where is the lady?" I demanded. "In the sitting-room?"

"No, sir," replied the Japanese. "In the garden!"

More and more romantic! Had some lovely señorita, in high comb and mantilla, been inflamed by a chance sight of the Inglez as I had walked through the grass-grown streets of the city with John Bard that morning, and pursued me to my host's gardens to declare her love? The thought amused me and I smiled. Yet I don't mind admitting that, on my way through the sitting-room in Akawa's wake, I glanced at a mirror and noted with satisfaction that my white drill was spotless, and my hair smooth. I adjusted my tie and with that little touch of swagger which the prospect of a romantic rendezvous imparts to the gait of the most modest of us men, I passed out of the room to the corridor which led to the door into the gardens.

The passage was brightly lit so that, on emerging into the darkness again, my eyes were dazzled. At first I could only discern a vast black shape. But presently I made out the generous proportions of an enormously stout, coal-black

negress.

She was wearing a torn and filthy cotton dress and about her head was bound a spotted pink and white handkerchief. With her vast bosom and ample span of hip she looked almost as broad as she was long. On seeing me she bobbed.

"You'm *Señor Commandante*?" she asked in English in her soft negro voice.

"Yes," I replied, rather taken aback by this droll apparition. "What did you want with me?"

"I has a letter for you, suh!"

She plunged a brown hand into the unfathomable depths of her opulent corsage.

"From Doña Luisa?" I asked expectantly.

The negress stopped her groping and grinned up at me with flashing teeth. Her eyeballs glistened white as her face lit up with a broad smile. Then she tapped herself with a grimy paw.

"I is Doña Luisa!" she announced with pride.

I staggered beneath the shock of this revelation. My vision of a sloe-eyed damsel in a mantilla vanished in smoke.

"I has a fine Spanish name," remarked the lady resuming her spasmodic searchings of her person, "but I wus riz in N'Awleens. That's how I talks English so good! Ah!"

With a grunt she fished out a folded sheet of dirty note-paper and handed it to me.

"You're certain this is meant for me?" I asked, racking my brains to recall who was likely to send me messages by such an intermediary and at such an hour.

"I sure is!" responded Doña Luisa with authority.

Stepping back into the lighted corridor I unfolded the note and read:—

"To Major Desmond Okewood, D.S.O.

"Do you remember the beach-comber to whom you did a good turn at San Salvador a few weeks back? I now believe I am in a position to repay it if you will accompany the bearer of this note. I wish to see you *most urgently* but I am too ill to come to you. Don't dismiss this note as merely an ingenious attempt on my part to raise the wind. Perhaps, by the time you have received it, I shall have already escaped from the disgrace and infamy of my present existence. Therefore come at once, I beg you.

"And *make haste*."

The note was written in pencil in rather a shaky hand. There was no signature. But I remembered the writer perfectly and his signature would have availed me nothing; for I never knew his name.

Our meeting happened thus. I was visiting the jail at San Salvador and in the prison-yard I remarked among the shambling gang of prisoners taking exercise a pallid, hollow-eyed creature whose twitching mouth and fluttering hands betrayed the habitual drunkard recovering from a bout. I should have dismissed this scarecrow figure from my mind only that, suddenly evading the little brown warder, he plucked me by the coat and cried:—

"If you're a *sahib*, man, you'll get me out of this hell!"

He spoke in English and there was a refined note in his voice which, coupled with the haggard expression of his face, decided me to inquire into his case. I discovered that the man, as, indeed, he had avowed himself in the letter, was a beach-comber, a drunken wastrel, a dope fiend. In short, he was one of the unemployable, and every Consulate in the Central Americas was closed to him. But he was an Englishman; more, by birth an English gentleman. One of the officials at our Consulate told me that he was, undoubtedly, of good family.

Well, one doesn't like to think of one of one's own kith and kin locked up with a lot of coffee-coloured cut-throats among the cockchafers and less amiable insects of a Dago calaboose. So I interested myself in Friend Beach-comber and he was set free. His incarceration was the result of a tradesman's plaint and a few dollars secured his release. A few more, as it appeared in the upshot, had ensured his lasting gratitude; for I gave him a ten dollar bill to see him on his way, the State stipulating, as a condition of his liberation, that he should leave the city forthwith.

The outcast's letter was in my hand. I looked at Doña Luisa and hesitated. Would it not be simpler to give the woman a couple of dollars and send her about her business? Surely this note was nothing more than a subterfuge to obtain a further "loan" with which to buy drink or drugs—the dividing line between the two is none too clearly defined in the Central Americas.

But I found myself thinking of the beachcomber's eyes. I recalled a certain wistfulness, a sort of lonely dignity, in their mute appeal. I glanced through the note a second time. I rather liked its independent tone. So in the end I bade the woman wait while I fetched my hat. But as I took down my panama from its peg I paused an instant, then, running into my room, picked my old automatic out of my dressing-case and slid it into my jacket pocket. I had long since learnt the lesson of the Secret Service that a man may only once forget to carry arms.

As soon as I stepped out into the gardens the old negress waddled off down the path, her bare feet pattering almost noiselessly on the hard earth. She made no further effort at conversation; but, with a swiftness surprising in one of her prodigious bulk, paddled rapidly through the scented night down the hill towards the winking lights of the port. As we left the pleasant height on which John Bard's bungalow stood, I missed the cooling night breeze off the Pacific. The air grew closer. It was steamy and soon I was drenched in perspiration.

Doña Luisa skirted the quays softly lapped by the sluggish, phosphorescent water, and plunged into a network of small streets fringed by the little yellow houses. Most of them were in darkness; for it was getting late, but here and there a shaft of golden light, shining through a heart-shaped opening cut in the shutters, fell athwart the cobbled roadway. There was something subtly evil, something *louche*, about the quarter. From behind the barred and bolted windows of one such shuttered house came strains of music, fast and furious, endlessly repeated accompanied by the rhythmic stamp of a Spanish dance and the smart click of castanettes. Over the door a red light glowed dully....

But presently we left the purlieus of the port and after passing a long block of warehouses, black and forbidding, came upon a kind of township of tumbledown wooden cabins on the outskirts of the city. The stifling air was now heavy with all manner of evil odours; and heaps of refuse, dumped in the broken roadway, reeked in the hot night. The houses were the merest shanties, most of them in a dilapidated condition.

But the place swarmed with life. Black faces grinned at the unglazed casements; dark figures hurried to and fro; while from many cabins came chattering voices raised high in laughter or dispute. In the distance a native drum throbbed incessantly. To me it was like entering an African village. I knew we were in the negro quarter of the city.

Suddenly Doña Luisa stopped and when I was beside her said in a low voice:—

"We'm mos' there!"—and struck off down a narrow lane.

Somewhere behind one of the shacks, in a full, mellow tenor, a man, hidden by the night, was singing to the soft tinkling accompaniment of a guitar. He sang in Spanish and I caught a snatch of the haunting refrain:—

*"Se murio, y sobre su cara
"Un panuelito le heche...."*

But the next moment the negress, after fumbling with a key, pushed me through a big door and the rest of the song was lost in the slamming of a great beam she fixed across it. The door gave access to a little square yard with adobe walls, an open shed along one side, a low shanty along the other. Doña Luisa pushed at a small wooden door in the wall of the shanty. Instantly a thin, quavering voice called out in English:—

"Have you brought him?"

The woman murmured some inaudible reply and the voice went on:—

"Have you barred the door? Then send him in! And you, get out and leave us alone!"

With a little resigned shrug of the shoulders the negress stepped back into the yard and pushed me into the cabin.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH A GENTLEMAN PAYS HIS DEBT

The first thing I saw on entering the room was my beach-comber. For the rushlight, which was the cabin's sole illuminant, stood on a soap-box beside the couch on which the outcast lay. Dressed in a shrunken and dirty cotton suit, he was propped up against the rough mud wall, a grimy and threadbare wrap thrown across his knees. Despite the awful stuffiness of the place, he shivered beneath this ragged coverlet, although his face and chest glistened with perspiration.

Once upon a time, I judged as I measured him with my eye, he must have been a fine figure of a man. Though now coarse and bloated, with white and flabby flesh, it would easily be seen that he was tall beyond the ordinary with the narrow hips of the athlete. His eyes were deeply sunk in his head; and in them flickered wanly that strange, restless light which one sees so often in the faces of those whom Death is soon to claim. Even amid the ravages which under-nourishment, drink and drugs had made in his features, the influence of gentle birth might yet be marked in the straight, firm pencilling of the eyebrows and the well-shaped aquiline nose. I thought the man looked dreadfully ill and I noted about nose and mouth that pinched look which can never deceive.

The whole shack appeared to consist of the one room in which I found myself. It was pitifully bare. A table on which stood some unappetising remnants of food was set against the wall beneath the unglazed window which faced the sick man's couch. A broken stool and a couple of soap-boxes, one furnished with a tin basin and a petrol can of water, completed the furniture.

"There's a bar to go across the door," said a weak voice from the corner where the sick man lay; "would you be good enough to put it down? I don't want us to be disturbed...."

He cast an apprehensive glance at the window. I fitted the rough beam across the door and approached the couch. It was merely a bed of maize stalks.

"You're very ill, I'm afraid," I said pulling over one of the boxes and seating myself by the Englishman. "Have you seen a doctor?"

The vagrant waved his hand in a deprecatory manner.

"My dear fellow," he said—and again I noted the refinement in his voice,—"no sawbones can help *me*. I never held with them much anyway. Luisa got paid to-day—she washes at Bard's, you know (it was she who told me you were here)—and so I've got some medicine...."—he touched a little pannikin which stood on the floor at his side—"it's all that

keeps me alive now that I can't get the 'snow!'"

I recognised the name which the drug traffic gives to cocaine.

The sick man was rent by a spasm of coughing.

"It's paradoxical," he gasped out presently, "but the more I take of my life-giving elixir here the quicker the end will come. All I live for now, it seems to me, is to shorten as much as possible the intervals between the bouts."

I've seen something in my time of the cynical resignation of your chronic drunkard. So I wasted no good advice on the poor devil, but held my peace while he swallowed a mouthful from the pannikin at his elbow.

"You went out of your way to do me a good turn once, Okewood," he said, setting the vessel down and wiping his mouth on his soiled sleeve. "I know your name, you see. I made some inquiries about you before they ran me out of San Salvador. You got a D.S.O. in the war, I think?"

"They gave away so many!" I said idiotically. But that sort of remark always engenders an idiotic reply.

"No, no," he insisted. "Yours was one of the right ones, Okewood; I can see that by looking at you. You're the real type of British officer. And, although you may not think it to see me now, I know what I'm talking about. You fellows had your chance in the war and by Gad, sir, some of you took it...."

I knew he was an army man and said so.

He nodded.

"Cavalry," he answered. "You might be in the cavalry, too, by your build!"

I told him I was a field-gunner—or used to be, and then I asked him his name.

He smiled wanly at that.

"No names, no court-martials!" he quoted.

He drank from his pannikin again.

"Call me Adams!" he said.

There was a moment's silence. The sick man moved restlessly on his rustling couch and I heard his teeth rattle in his head. Outside, the pulsating life of the negro quarter shattered the brooding stillness of the tropical night. The sound of low, full-throated laughter, mingling with the jangling of guitars, drifted up from the lane.

"Broken as a major," the sick man said abruptly. "A bad business, very. Yes, they jailed me over it. And when I came out it was to find every man's hand against me. It's been against me ever since! Ah, it's a bad thing to make an enemy of England! When I think of the humble pie I've eaten from some of these blasted counter-jumping finnickin' consuls of ours along this coast only to be thrown out of doors at last by their Dago servants! Once go down and out in England, and God help you! You'll never come back! Ah! it's not your own folk who'll lend you a hand then. It's the humble people, like Luisa here on whom I sponge, who keeps me, Okewood, who is proud to keep me...."

His voice quavered and broke. Tears welled up in his sunken eyes. One hates to see a man break down, so I looked away. And the beachcomber went to his pannikin for solace.

"That day at the calaboose at San Salvador," he said presently, "I wanted to tell you who I was. Twenty-five years ago I buried my real name. But what you did for me.... well, it was a white thing to do. I wanted to say to you: 'Race tells, sir! You have helped one of your own breed and upbringing.' It shall be written in our family records that 'Such-a-one (meaning myself) of Blank in the County of So-and-So, being in sore distress in the hands of the foreigner, was succoured by the chivalrous intervention of Major Desmond Okewood.'"

He sighed, then added:—

"But I doubt if you would have understood my meaning!"

I found myself becoming extraordinarily interested in this grotesque wastrel who, though sunk to the lowest depths a man may touch, managed to cling so desperately to his pride of birth.

The outcast spoke again.

"I mustn't waste your time. But it's so rare to find one of my own world to talk to. Listen to me, now! You stood up for me at San Salvador and in return.... You're not a rich man, Okewood?"

I laughed.

"I have to work for my living, Adams," I answered.

"Good, good! Then you will appreciate the more the fortune I am going to put in your way. An Eldorado to make you rich beyond the dreams of...."

He broke off, racked by a terrible fit of coughing. The spasm left him weak and gasping.

His talk about fortunes and the rest made me think he was a trifle light-headed. So I made to rise from my seat.

"You're talking too much," I said soothingly. "I think I'll leave you now and come back another day!"

But the beach-comber thrust out a hand—such a thin and wasted hand!—and clutched my sleeve. He could not speak for the moment, but he cast me a despairing look eloquent in its appeal to me to stay.

"A fortune," he gasped out when his breath began to come back to him. "I'll make you rich! I want to show my gratitude to the man who knows what is due to a.... a.... a gentleman!"

He fell back with livid face. I raised his head and held the pannikin to his lips. It was half full of some terrible-looking, dark-brown liquor. He drank a little, then lay back with closed eyes. He lay so still that, with his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks, you might have taken him for a corpse.

In a little while he was better and spoke again.

"Okewood," he said—and this time his voice was hardly above a whisper, "I believe I know where treasure's hid. For more than a year now I've carried my secret round with me, for the chance to get back there, waiting to find the partner I could trust. And now Fate (with whom I've quarrelled all my life) has played me a dirty trick to finish up. I've found my partner when it's too late for me to share!"

He relapsed into silence again. His head drooped and his eyes were closed so that for the moment, I thought he had fainted. But presently he asked abruptly:—

"Have you ever heard of Cock Island?"

"Cock Island?" I repeated. "No, I don't think so. Where is it?"

"In the Pacific, about 400 miles out at sea. Many months ago—the summer after the Armistice it was—I was serving before the mast in a Dutch schooner—the *Huis-ten-Bosch*, her name was. I signed on at Papeete to run to Callao with a cargo of copra. The crew were all Kanakas, natives, you know, except for one other man who signed on with me—Dutchey, they called him. We were on the beach together in Tahiti...."

His fit of weakness seemed to have passed and his voice grew stronger and his eyes brighter as he proceeded with his tale.

"Well, something went amiss with our fresh water supply," he went on, "so we laid off at Cock Island to replenish our casks. It was a jolly little place—you know the sort of thing, all wavy coconut palms and wooded peaks running up steeply from the fore-shore. And, of course, the very dickens of a surf bar. The skipper sent me and Dutchey with a gang of Kanakas to fill up with water. We found a way in through the bar and having landed, set the Kanakas to work to fill the casks at a fine spring of water, cold and clear, which fell from the hillside. Then Dutchey and I had a look round.

"I had asked our old man—the captain, you know—about Cock Island. He had told me that, according to the Sailing Directions, it was uninhabited. Therefore, as Dutchey and I were pushing our way through the undergrowth to get to the high central upland, we were a bit taken aback to come upon a grave in a clearing.

"It was a regular grave cut out of the rough grass with a mound and a cross all shipshape and proper. The cross, which was merely two bits of stout deal lashed together with wire, was a bit weatherbeaten and polished smooth by the sand blown against it. It had no inscription. Against the cross a small mirror was propped up, while in front of it stood a bottle half embedded in the earth. The bottle contained some writing on a piece of folded oil-silk."

"We used to bury fellows that way in France," I remarked. "One stuck the name and particulars on a piece of paper and shoved it in a bottle until they had time to put a cross up, don't you know?"

"I had no idea what this was," said the beach-comber, "the writing was a fearful scrawl and rather faint at that. I couldn't make head or tail of it. I just slipped it into my pocket, meaning to have a look at it another time. While I had been examining the grave, the fellow with me, the man we called Dutchey, had been rooting about in the clearing. Presently he emerged from behind a bush with a whole collection of junk which he laid on the ground at my feet. There was an old newspaper, a piece of dirty packing paper and a cigar-box.

"He was a queer chap, this Dutchey. We never could quite make him out. Personally, I thought he wasn't all there. He spoke very rarely but, when he opened his lips, he talked some kind of German-American double Dutch. He was very taciturn; the sort of man you know, who gives no confidences and invites none. That was really what attracted him to me when we chummed up on the beach at Papeete. We went through a rough time there together, too!...."

The sick man broke off musingly. Then the cough took him again and it was some minutes before he resumed speaking.

"Dutchey laid all this junk out in front of me rather like a dog bringing you a stick you've thrown it. Then he said:—

"'Dat bunch o' toughs from San Salvador bin here!'

"Dutchey's conversational bursts generally opened enigmatically and I knew from experience that it was no use interrupting him to ask for enlightenment. One could only hope it might come in due course.

"Dutchey lifted up the newspaper.

"'De *Heraldo* of San Salvador of nineteen eighteen—you see de date March Seventeen?'

"He raised up the piece of wrapping paper.

"'You savvy Jose Garcia's store at San Salvador?'

"(I should say I did, Okewood. He was the swine that jugged me over his rotten bill!)

"'Dis from Garcia's store! You see de name printed on it?'

"Finally he picked up the cigar-box and opening it displayed a row of mouldy cigars with a yellow band.

"'Black Pablo!' he said.

"'How do you mean, Dutchey?' I asked.

"Dere ain't but the one man in San Salvador smoke dese ceegyars,' he answered, 'and dat's Black Pablo. Jose Garcia smuggles dem in express for him. Dis sure is fonny!'

"He broke into a fit of laughter, dribbling a good deal.

"Dis um de l'il island!' he exclaimed and went off again.

"But who is Black Pablo?' I demanded. 'Is he the head of this gang?'

"Is he.... hell?' cried Dutchey. 'Dere ain't no one amounts to a row o' beans since El Cojo come along. Black Pablo, Neque, Mahon.... dere's not one of them dawg-gorn four-flushers dare open deir face when El Cojo's round. Dey shoot off deir mouth to me 'bout deir l'il island. Pretty goddam mysterious 'bout it, too. No blab to Dutchey, dey say. El Cojo won't have it. But Dutchey knows. Blarst me sowl....'

"Dutchey had a great flow of language. And he let it rip as he told me the way he meant to crow over El Cojo and his gang when he got back to San Salvador."

Adams had warmed to his story and a little red had crept into his cheeks. He was an excellent *raconteur* and he seemed to enjoy reproducing the extraordinary lingo of his friend Dutchey.

"We rowed over to the ship again," he resumed, "and as soon as I had a moment alone I had another look at the writing on the oilsilk. But I could make nothing of it. I thought I'd keep it, though, just for luck, so I strung it round my neck and forgot all about it until one day in the calaboose at San Salvador I overheard a very curious conversation. Can you reach the pannikin? Thanks!"

The outcast drank and wiped his mouth on the back of his dirty white cuff.

"You know the way they lock one up in these Dago jails—all in a common room together. Well, a day or two after I got in I was sitting on the floor with my back against the wall taking a bit of a siesta when suddenly I heard the name 'Neque.' I recollected at once that Dutchey had spoken of 'Neque' as one of El Cojo's gang because once, years ago, I had a Spanish pal whose nickname was 'Neque'—I used to play polo with him in Madrid—and the name was familiar to me.

"I opened my eyes and saw two of the prisoners sitting on the floor within a yard of me talking together in Spanish. Everybody else was asleep. The one whom I discovered to be Neque was a young fellow of about twenty-five, very slim and wiry. His companion was a dark man with a yellow face, a broken nose, and a patch over one eye. I closed my eyes quickly again and pretended to be asleep.

"Such accursed luck!' the younger man said, 'five hundred thousand dollars in gold and you and I will not be there to share it!'

"*Caraco!*" replied the fat man, 'but who shall say it is there?'

"Imbecile!' exclaimed Neque. 'I was with El Cojo when he examined the Kanaka. Did not this Kanaka sail in the ship which brought the foreigner and the gold to Cock Island? He was one of those, this Kanaka, who survived the influenza sickness that swept the vessel. He told El Cojo—I, Neque, heard it with my own ears—how the foreigner was landed alone with the gold, how he remained by himself on the island for two days and how, when the Kanakas rowed in from the ship to fetch him, they found him with death on his face—the mauve death, you and I have seen it, per Dios, eh? And the boxes of gold gone! The foreigner gave them a bottle with a writing in it, bidding them swear that they would put it on his grave or he would haunt them. Then he died and the Kanakas buried him and having placed this object on the grave as he had ordered, fled from the island in the ship!'

"The fat man spat.

"Who shall believe a Kanaka?' he said contemptuously.

"The foreigner was the only white man with these natives,' argued Neque. 'They feared him and they did as he bade

them lest his spirit should torment them. Besides the grave has been seen on the island since....'

"At that the fat man woke up and became interested.

"Never!" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"And then Neque told him of a conversation El Cojo had had with a 'mad seaman,' in whom it was not difficult to recognise Dutchey, who had landed with a companion from a Dutch schooner and had seen the grave and on it a bottle. The other man, the 'loco' (madman) had said, had taken out of the bottle a piece of writing.

"This other man,' questioned his companion. 'Who was he?'

"An Inglez,' replied Neque, 'but the mad seaman did not know his name and had not seen him since they had landed.'

"At that the fat man spat again.

"Bah!" he said, 'these *locitos* are cunning. There was no *Inglez*. The mad seaman has that writing which tells where the gold lies as sure as men call me Black Pablo....'

"The name brought back to me Cock Island in a flash; I seemed to see Dutchey, with his puzzled, woe-begone expression, holding a handful of mouldy cigars, the cigars that Jose Garcia imported for Black Pablo. And looking at the fellow with his single eye and his hideous twisted nose I couldn't help feeling glad, my friend, that he doubted my existence...."

The beach-comber stopped and looked at me. Then he thrust a lean hand inside the bosom of his ragged jacket.

"You've now heard the tale for what it's worth, Okewood," said he, "and here's that dead man's message! Take good care of it! It may mean a fortune for you!...."

He pulled out a greasy package which hung on a cord round his neck. He unfastened the cord and handed me a flat, narrow parcel. I was going to open it; but he stayed my hand.

"Not here," he enjoined in a low whisper. Then, with a wistful smile, he added:—

"I'm afraid it's a dangerous present I'm making you, old man!"

"Why do you say that?" I demanded.

The sick man turned his head and looked at the unglazed window protected only by a pair of rough-carpen-tered wooden shutters. In the street outside someone was lightly thrumming a guitar. Now and then came the sound of soft laughter. Otherwise the negro village had sunk to rest. All was still without and the plaintive chords resounded distinctly through the hot night.

"A week after I was shipped from San Salvador," he said, "they found Dutchey's body in the dock with a noose round his neck. Poor old Dutchey who never harmed anybody! Listen!"

The rich, full-throated tenor voice, which I had heard as I was following Doña Luisa through the negro quarter, suddenly burst into song quite close at hand. On a sad and plaintive melody it sang with a liquid enunciation which made every chord distinct:—

*"Se murio, y sobre su cara
Un panuelito le heche
For que no toque la tierra
Esa bocca que yo bese!"*

The beach-comber held up his hand as the melody died away on a minor key.

"It is time for you to go!" he whispered. "The door over there, opposite the one by which you came in, leads to the yard at the back. Cross the yard, take the path through the plantation, bear always to the right and you will strike the main road to the docks. Go as quietly as you can and don't dawdle on the way.... Ah!"

Again the singer in the lane sent his plaintive melody soaring to the stars. He chanted his little verse through once more. Feebly, the sick man beat time with his hand.

"He's been singing on and off all the evening, Okewood," he murmured. "Always the same song. I Englished it while I was waiting for you. Listen!"

In a soft, quavering voice he whispered rather than sang:—

*"She died and on her face
I laid a napkin fine
Lest the cold earth should touch
Those lips I pressed to mine...."*

"Ah!" he sighed as the song died away and silence fell on us once more; "when the hour strikes for me, Okewood, there'll be no one, except, maybe, old Mammie Luisa there, to lay a pretty thought like that in my coffin!"

He held out his hand.

"Now go!" he bade me. "And good luck go with you!"

I took his proffered hand.

"I will come again and see you, Adams," said I. "I expect you'll want to hear what I've made of the message!"

He was looking at me whimsically.

"No, Okewood," he said, shaking his head, "I'm thinking we shan't meet again!"

I was thinking the same; for, in truth, the man looked at death's door.

The unseen singer had attacked another verse.

"Mir a si seria bella...."

The opening words came resonantly to me as I quietly stole from the room. At the door I turned for a last look at the beachcomber. The candle was guttering away and its trembling light illuminated only the pinched, worn features and the sombre, suffering eyes. The grossness of that broken body was mercifully swallowed up in the shadows. To and fro across the candle's feeble gleam the hands moved in cadence with the song....

CHAPTER III

THE MESSAGE

I was loth to leave him. What he had told me of the fate of his friend, the man called Dutchey, made me feel a trifle apprehensive of his own safety. And I had had a kind of feeling that, for all his apparent calm, he was frightened. On looking back at my interview that night with the beach-comber in his wretched shack, I realise there must have been something unusually sweet about his personality. Its flavour seemed to linger; for I left him, as I have said, reluctantly, and I have thought of him many times since.

The back door led straight into a kind of open shed which, from the stove and stacked-up wood pile, I judged to be Doña Luisa's cooking-place. The shed gave on a dusty yard, small and narrow, smelling horribly of poultry, with a high mud wall. In this wall I saw—for the moonlight made everything as bright as day—a wooden door. On reaching it I found that it was locked.

For a moment I had a mind to go back to the front and home by the way I had come. But I felt doubtful as to whether I should be able to follow in the opposite direction the intricate route by which Doña Luisa had brought me, and I had no desire to be lost in the negro quarter at night. So without more ado I scaled the mud wall and, dropping to earth on the other side, found myself in the plantation of which the beach-comber had spoken.

Here I was alone with the noises of the tropical night. Of human being there was neither sound nor sign. However, I had Adams's directions firmly in my head; and by following them to the letter came back at last without incident, but very hot and sticky, to John Bard's bungalow.

The verandah was empty, the house very quiet. I looked at my watch. It was half past eleven. Bard had gone down to the club for his usual evening rubber of bridge but I had excused myself for I had meant to write letters. I knew it would be at least an hour before Bard returned; for he was a late bird. So I went through to my room, had a sponge down and changed into pyjamas and made my way to the living-room.

It was a delightfully airy apartment, one side, glazed, opening on to the verandah, the other walls distempered a pale green. There were native mats on the floor and comfortable chairs stood about the room. I went over to the writing desk in the corner, switched on the reading-lamp and lit a cigar. Then I pulled out of my pocket the package which I had received from the beach-comber.

The outer covering was a piece of greasy flannel which looked as if it had been torn off an old shirt. With my knife I slit up the stitches—it had been lightly tacked across with thread—and pulled out a narrow pad of oilskin folded once across. Spread out it made a piece roughly about nine inches long by six wide. Across it stood written some lines hastily scribbled in indelible pencil. The hand was crabbed and irregular, the writing indistinct and, in some places, almost completely effaced. But I could distinguish enough to recognise that both the hand and the words were German.

At this I felt my pulse quicken. A faint instinct of the chase began to stir in my blood. For three long months I had dawdled deliriously; for, in turning my face towards the sunshine of the New World, I had deliberately turned my back on the thrills and disappointments, the dangers and the *ennuis* of the Secret Service. This almost undecipherable scrawl, with here and there a German word clearly protruding itself (I could read "*Kiel*" and "*siehst Du*") and, above all, the indelible pencil, in whose pale mauve character gallant young men wrote the real history of the war, brought back to me with vivid clearness, memorable moments of those half-forgotten campaigning days. I fumbled in a drawer of the desk for Bard's big magnifying glass, drew up my chair and set myself stolidly—as I had so often done in the past!—to the deciphering of what is in all circumstances, easily the most illegible handwriting in the world.

In truth, no writing is harder to read than the German. In his intercourse with the foreigner, the brother Boche, it is true, not infrequently employs the Latin character. But, for communications among themselves, the Germans continue to use their own damnable hieroglyphics. I have often wondered to see how the most unintelligent German will read off with ease a closely written scrawl of German handwriting looking as though a spider, after taking an ink-bath, had jazzed up and down the page.

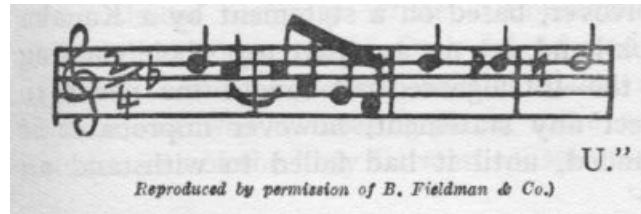
This particular specimen of the Hun fist was a proper Chinese puzzle. Where in places it was beginning to be decipherable, the heavy indelible ink had run (under the influence of damp, I suppose) and where the writing was not a mass of smears it was illegible in a degree to make one despair.

Well, I got down to it properly. My knowledge of German (which I know about as well as English) was a great help. Finally, with the assistance of Bard's magnifying-glass, a deduction here and a guess there, after nearly an hour's hard work, I produced what was, as nearly as I could make it, an accurate version of the original. My greatest triumph lay, I think, in establishing the fact that an unusually baffling row of cryptic signs at the bottom of the thing was, in reality, four bars of music.

But when I had set it all down (on a sheet of John Bard's expensive glazed note-paper), I scratched my head and, despite my aching eyes, took another good look at the original. For I could make no sense of the writing at all.

The message (for such it seemed to be) was signed with the single letter "U." And this is what I got:—

Mittag. 18/11/18.
"Primmer', Simmer' viel
"Die Garnison von Kiel
"Mit Kompass dann am besten
"Denk' an den Ordensfesten
"Am Zuckerhut vorbei
"Siehst Du die Lorelei
"Und magst Du Schätzchen gern.



Blankly I stared at this doggerel. Then I took down from the rack another sheet of paper and jotted down a rough English translation:—

Noon. 18/11/18.
"Flash, flash much
"The garrison of Kiel
"Then with the compass is best
"Think of the Feast of Orders
"Past the Sugar-Loaf
"You'll see the Lorelei
"And if you desire the sweetheart.
U."

Leaning back in my chair, I cast my mind over the strange tale I had heard that night from Adams, the story, whispered in the fierce noonday heat of the calaboose of San Salvador, of the ship which had brought the solitary white man and his gold out of the Unknown to Cock Island, of the Unknown's death and of the message he had left so oddly behind him. And, lest anyone should think that I was paying too much heed to a rambling yarn told me at second-hand by a drunken outcast, a yarn, moreover, based on a statement by a Kanaka deck-hand, let me say that my whole training in the Intelligence had taught me never to reject any statement, however improbable it sounded, until it had failed to withstand an elaborate series of tests. Indeed, the major satisfaction of this poorly paid and sometimes dangerous profession of ours is the rare delight of seeing emerge out of some seemingly impossible tale a solid basis of fact.

And, behind the beach-comber's rambling story, there *were* certain solid facts which, from the moment of discovering that the message was in German, I could not afford to neglect. When William the Second launched the world

war like a big stone dropped in a pond, the ripples reached to the uttermost ends of the earth. In many a lonely island of the Seven Seas there had been, I knew, mysterious comings and goings, connected with gun-running, submarine work and dark conspiracies of all kinds. Did this scrap of stained oilsilk, picked off a lonely grave in the Southern Seas, lead back to a secret adventure of this kind? I decided that it might.

I turned to the message again. It was obviously written *by* a German and *for* a German, it was fair to presume.... for some specific German, furthermore, who would hold the key to the conventional code in which this message was almost certainly written. Consequently, the solitary stranger of Cock Island had expected to meet a German on the island, *ergo*, the island was a meeting-place, some secret rendezvous of the busy German conspirators in the war. This was borne out by the remarkable evidence laid before Adams by Dutchey on their visit to Cock Island to prove that some gang of desperadoes from San Salvador had previously been there. The names mentioned by Dutchey were undoubtedly Spanish—Black Pablo and Neque, for instance—but there might have been Germans with them. El Cojo was also Spanish, to judge by the name; but apparently he had put in an appearance later and had not visited the island.

To what did the message refer? What would the solitary German, with the hand of Death at his throat, wish to tell the man whom he was to have met? Might it not be, as Adams had said, the whereabouts of the gold, brought to the island by the Unknown, which, from the observation of Adams' fellow prisoners at the calaboose, was apparently still on the island? Various geographical indications in the message—the Sugar-Loaf, the Lorelei (the latter the well-known crag on the Rhine) seemed to confirm this.

But the message had remained in its bottle on the grave until, months later, Adams and Dutchey had found it. It was, therefore, to be presumed that the unknown German's friend, probably someone in El Cojo's gang, had not kept the appointment. Why?

I stared in perplexity at the dead man's scrawl. Every one of my deductions, I perceived all too clearly, led to a question to which I was unable to supply an answer. I began to regret that I had not read the message at Adams' hut and cross-examined him on it before I left. But I realised I should never have been able to decipher the scrawl by the flickering light of the oil-lamp in the shack. I resolved to go down to the negro quarter and see Adams again in the morning.

I suddenly began to feel restless and rather unhappy. I knew the symptoms. In me they always presage a burst of activity after a spell of idleness. This infernal riddle had altogether upset me. I had no desire to go to bed; the very idea of sleep was repugnant to me.

I measured myself out a "peg" of whisky and splashed the soda into it. My eyes, roaming round the room, fell on the upright piano in the corner. I crossed to the instrument and opening the lid, put on the music rest the little square of oilsilk. Then, summoning back to my mind with an effort the hazy musical knowledge of my early school days, with considerable deliberation I picked out on the piano the notes indicated in the four bars of music appended to the end of the message.

I got the melody at once, or rather one movement of a melody which was dimly familiar to me. It fitted itself to no words or voice in my mind; but as I hummed it over, a silly little jingle, I suddenly had a mental picture of a cheap German dance-hall such as you find in the northern part of Berlin, with a blaring orchestra and jostling couples redolent of perspiration and beer. I *knew* the tune; but it was, I thought, the words that were wanted to complete the dead man's message. And they came not.

I was laboriously pounding the piano with one finger when I heard Bard's heavy step on the verandah. The next moment he came into the room, a big figure of a man in a tussore silk suit with a panama hat. Somehow the sight of him made me feel easier in my mind. That sublime sense of superiority, which we British suck in with our mother milk, is a heartening thing when you find it in your fellow Britisher abroad, thousands of miles from home. And John Bard, though, with his small pointed beard and rather pallid face, he looked like a Spaniard, was through and through British. Trader, merchant, financier and, on occasion, statesman, his massive body bore scars which told of thrilling years spent among the cannibals and head-hunters of the Pacific islands.

But long years of exile had only served to make John Bard more resolutely British. An uncompromising bachelor,

abstemious in his habits and puritanical in his outlook, his mental attitude towards his fellow-man in this tiny republic of the Spanish Main was exactly what it would have been had he been a London suburbanite suddenly translated from his native Brixton to these distant shores. He was an eminently common-sensible person who was generally reputed to run the miniature republic of Rodriguez in which he had elected to settle down after his adventurous life.

His unshakable phlegm lent him a reposeful air which I believe was the first thing that drew me to him when, a few months before, for the first time for many years, I had met him again in a New York hotel. Six months' leave, unexpectedly offered, found me at a loose end and I gladly accepted his invitation to travel down by one of his ships and visit him in his Central American home. His cheery self-possession, as he stepped through the open doors of the verandah, seemed to put to flight the unpleasant shape which my mind's eye had seen rising from the little piece of oilsilk.

Bard crossed the room without speaking and filled himself a glass of soda-water from a syphon on the side-table. He tossed his soft panama hat on a chair and brushed back his closely cut crop of iron-grey hair from his temples. With his glass in his hand he dropped into a seat at my side.

"There's a yacht in the harbour," he said. "That's what made me late. She's called for some stuff they've got waiting for her at the Consulate. Fordwich—that's the Consul, you know—is down with a go of fever so I went round with his clerk to see about this consignment. Whew! But it's warm walking!"

"What's the yacht?" I asked.

"Name of *Naomi*. She's come through the Canal".... "the Canal" in these parts is, of course, the Panama Canal.... "and is going across to Hawaii, I believe!"

He yawned and stretched his big frame. He drained his glass and stood up.

"Heigho," he said, "it's after two. I'm for bed!"

Now between John Bard and me exists that sort of uncommunicative friendship which is often found between two men who have knocked about the world a good deal. Though I could tell by Bard's elaborate affection of nonchalance that he noticed I was preoccupied, I knew he would never demand the cause of this. If I wanted his advice I should have to ask for it.

"John," said I, "just a minute. Who's El Cojo?"

I pronounced it in the English fashion but Bard gave the word its rasping Spanish aspirate as he repeated it.

"El Cojo?" he queried. "That's a nickname, isn't it? What is he? A bull-fighter, or a cigar?"

"I gather," I remarked, "that he's a gentleman of fortune!"

Bard laughed.

"The production of that type is an old industry in these parts, my boy," he riposted. "And even *I* don't know 'em all. I never heard of your pal. Is he a citizen of this illustrious republic?"

I shook my head.

"I haven't an idea," I answered. "I only know that a man called Black Pablo is mixed up with him..."

John Bard whistled softly.

"*Dime con quien andas, decirte de quien eres*," he quoted. "That is to say, tell me whom you go with and I'll tell you who you are. If your pal is a friend of Black Pablo then he's 'no freend o' mine!'"

"Why?"

"Because," said John Bard slowly, and I noticed that his mocking air had altogether disappeared, "because Black Pablo is the greatest scoundrel on this coast.... and that's going some! During the war, when, after a good deal of pressure, our most illustrious President ultimately kicked out Schwanz, the German Consul, Black Pablo became Germany's unofficial agent. He was mixed up with running guns for the Mexicans to annoy the Yanks, and supplies for the Hun commerce raiders to worry the British and every other kind of dirty work. As long as he was merely a smuggler, a cut-throat and a hired assassin, as he was before the war.... Bien! I had nothing to say to him. But when the fellow had the blasted impudence to come butting into our war on the wrong side, by George! one had to do something. The Americans were devilish decent about it, I must say, and, with their support, we ran the skunk out of here P.D.Q. That was around January, 1918, and I have never heard of our friend since. But I'll give you a word of advice, young fellow my lad. If you come across Black Pablo, give him a wide berth. And mind his left! He keeps his knife in that sleeve!"

I pointed at the open cigar-box.

"Light up, John Bard," said I, "for I want to tell you a story and get your advice!"

So, while, in the garden, trees and bushes stirred lazily to a little breeze before dawn, I told him, as briefly as might be, the story I had heard from Adams. My host never once interrupted me but sat and smoked in silence till my tale was done. Even after I had finished he remained silent for a spell.

At length he said musingly:—

"Cock Island, eh? Yes, it surely would be a good spot for a quiet rendezvous."

"You know it then?" I asked eagerly.

"Aye," he averred. "I know it by name. But I was never there. It lies off the beaten trade routes, you see. But I remember hearing once that it had been a port of call for some of the old buccaneers like Kidd and Roberts who plied their trade in these parts. And so you think there's German gold hidden there, eh?"

"This"—I held up the fragment of oilsilk—"looks as if it might answer that question. If only one could read it," I said. And I spread it out before him. We put our heads together, under the lamp, while I read out my rough translation. Then Bard, shrugging his shoulders, leaned back in his chair and blew out a cloud of smoke.

"What are you going to do about it, Desmond?"

"Well," I said slowly, "if there were any sort of certainty about it not being absolutely a wild goose chase...."

"You'd go after it, eh?"

"It'd be a devilish amusing way of finishing up my leave."

John Bard smiled indulgently.

"It might be more exciting than amusing," he said, "if Black Pablo has anything to do with this affair."

"Do you think there is anything in it?" I asked.

"In the latter stages of the war," my host replied, "I heard vague rumours about some island off the coast where German commerce-raiders used to rendezvous for supplies. But I never heard this island named. It seems to me that the first thing to be done is to see your friend, Adams, again. After all, he's been to the island. He might be able to tell us more about it. Besides...."

He broke off and flicked the ash from his cigar. His manner had suddenly become rather grave.

"Besides what?" I demanded.

"If Black Pablo and his friends are after that plan or whatever it is, Adams is in pretty considerable danger."

"He knows it himself, I believe," I replied. "I didn't like leaving him to-night, and that's a fact. He seemed to be frightened about something. There was a man in the lane outside the hut who was singing and...."

"A man singing?" Bard queried sharply.

"Yes, to a guitar," I answered, surprised by his tone. "He sang very well, too!"

John Bard rose to his feet suddenly. He stepped to the verandah and held up his hand for silence.

"Were you followed when you came back from Adams's?" he asked me.

"No, not as far as I know."

Bard was listening intently. All was quiet in the gardens below, save for the murmurings of the sea breeze in the palms.

"Get into your clothes and come along, Okewood," he said, turning away from the window. "And leave that damned plan behind."

"Why, what...."

"Hurry, man, or we shall be too late."

"But, damn it, John, explain!" I cried in exasperation.

"Black Pablo is renowned all along the coast for his exquisite singing to the guitar. Be quick, be quick, old man, and don't forget your

CHAPTER IV

A FOOTSTEP IN THE LANE

The moon had paled and a greyness in the sky, as we hurried down the hill, betokened the approach of day. At length the city had sunk to rest; the port slumbered and in the red light quarter behind the docks the laughter and the guitars were stilled. How through that maze of mean streets and lanes I found the way back to Doña Luisa's cabin I don't know; but I expect that a kind of instinct for marking a route once traversed, which, with me, is inborn, stood me in good stead.

The negro quarter was wrapped in silence. The swift rustling of a rat, a distant cock-crow from the sleeping city, were the only sounds to break the stillness of the night. At length we reached the narrow lane in which the shanty stood. It was almost dark; for the moon had gone in behind a bank of clouds and the day was not yet come.

The big wooden door stood wide. Across the little yard dimly we saw the dark outline of the shack. The mud surface of the court was wet and sticky and my rubber-soled shoes slipped on it as we crossed the threshold of the enclosure. John Bard touched my arm.

"Man alive," he whispered, "look at your shoes!"

I did as I was bid and recoiled in horror. The white buckskin was deeply smeared with crimson.

We dashed across the yard. The shanty door stood open.

Within, amid a scene of hideous confusion, the body of the beach-comber hung head downwards from the rough couch, the throat cut from ear to ear. And behind the door in another welter of blood lay the corpse of Doña Luisa.

The place was a shambles. The hut had been turned upside-down and the few poor belongings of the outcast were scattered all over the floor. The very maize cane on which his dead body lay had been tossed about. And the blood was smeared everywhere as though the murderer or murderers had brought it in on their boots.

John Bard's face was anxious.

"We'll do well to clear out of here," he said, "before it gets light. They mustn't find us here. Let's go out by the back and return by the way you came...."

I gladly acquiesced in his suggestion. To tell the truth, I was feeling a little sick. The fetid odours of the negro quarter reeked to heaven in the freshening morning air, and mingled with them was a suspicion of some unutterably horrid taint arising from the two corpses which had lain there all through the warm night.

We had reached the threshold of the back door when suddenly a heavy footstep sounded from the front. In the absolute stillness all round the sound rang out clearly. It was as though a heavy man were stumping slowly across the hard pounded earth of the front yard. He came with a step and a stump, a step and a stump, like a lame man walking with a stick or crutches.

John Bard made as though to bolt. But I restrained him. I felt I must see this mysterious visitant. And John Bard, loyal friend as he is, though he had nothing to gain by my rashness, stopped dead in his tracks and with me drew behind the cover of the back door. Through the chink between the door and jamb we surveyed the entrance to the shack.

A huge black shape stood on the threshold. It was too dark within the hut to note the newcomer's features or his dress. One had only the sensation of a great form that bulked largely, immensely, in the doorway.

I turned noiselessly to Bard. He divined the unspoken proposal on my lips for he shook his head curtly and his grip on my sleeve tightened. At the same moment the great form in the doorway moved and the next instant was swallowed up in the shadows of the courtyard. We heard the clip-clop of his limping step as he crossed the enclosure and, little by little, die away as he stumped up the lane.

"Smear some earth over your shoes!"

John Bard was speaking to me. Blindly I did as he bade me and rubbed dust over the damp, dark stains on the white buckskin. Then gripping me by the arm my friend ran me through the backyard and out by the door which now stood open.

In the freshness of the plantation, away from the stench of the village and the nameless taint of that house of slaughter, my senses came back to me and I felt ashamed of my rashness which might have had disastrous consequences for both of us. But, when at length we stood once more in the bungalow and Bard poured me out a stiff dose of brandy, I noticed that, contrary to his invariable rule, he had one himself as well.

"And now," said he, and in his voice was a note of decision, "the sooner you leave Rodriguez, Desmond, the better for you. I don't want to appear inhospitable or I might add, the better for me too. That poor devil, Adams, is dead and you can do nothing for him by staying. You are sufficiently acquainted, I take it, with the mentality of my distinguished fellow-citizens to realise that very little fuss will be made over the untimely demise of Adams and his coloured lady. In the meantime you are in the greatest danger here.

"I don't see why I should worry," I argued. "If they had known of my visit to Adams they would have raided the hut and butchered the three of us to get hold of the document. But they didn't; and they don't even know me by sight...."

"They evidently didn't know of your visit *at the time*," remarked John Bard gravely. "But obviously something

happened after your departure to put them wise. Hence the attack on the house. You were either seen going to the house or Doña Luisa gave you away. It looks to me as though they had only just traced the document to Adams. Black Pablo was set to watch but, after the happy-go-lucky fashion of Latin America, he whiled away the time by serenading some of the dusky belles in the vicinity and failed to observe your arrival."

I recalled the soft laughter I had heard, mingling with the strains of the guitar in the lane, and nodded.

"You think that this fellow Black Pablo was put on guard to see that Adams did not leave the house?...."

"Precisely," agreed my friend, "while El Cojo was sent for.

"El Cojo, the head of the gang?"

"Himself and no other.... the lame man who came to the door of the shack after the crime had been committed. In Spanish 'El Cojo' means 'the lame man,' 'he who goes with a limp'...."

John Bard went on talking but I have no recollection of what he said. For my thoughts had flown back to another "lame man" who had dominated the most thrilling episode in the whole of my life, the giant and ape-like cripple, head of the Kaiser's personal Secret Service in the days of Germany's greatness, who had dogged my brother Francis and myself until he had met his end at our hands in the chateau on the German-Dutch frontier. Old Clubfoot, as men called him in his heyday, had been in his grave these four years past; yet once again I found the path of adventure barred at its outset by a great lame man. I thought of that huge figure blocking up the narrow doorway of the reeking hut and, as so often in the past, I felt welling up within me admiration for the extraordinary ingenuity of old man Destiny....

"....This gang of El Cojo's," John Bard was saying impressively, leaning across the table at me, hands palms downwards before him, "is a tremendous organisation with a network of spies as widespread and efficient as the Camorra and Mafia in Italy or the Carbonados in Portugal and Brazil. I have long suspected that there was at the head of it a man much bigger and abler than that murdering ruffian, Black Pablo, and now we have the proof of it. I know a bit about men, Desmond and that hulking dot-and-carry-one scoundrel we saw to-night gives me a damned unpleasant feeling. You mark my words; whether you were actually spotted or not they'll trace that plan to you and if you stay here, they'll get you! And I *know*!"

He appeared to reflect for a moment whilst I considered him with attention; for I had never before seen old John so worked up. But there is nothing like the Unknown for getting on a fellow's nerves.

Then he drove his fist into his palm as if a sudden idea had struck him.

"The *Naomi*," he said; "the very thing for you!"

"The *Naomi*?" I repeated.

"Yes. The yacht that came in last evening. She's going down to Honolulu. We ought to be able to fix it for you so they'll take you with them...."

"What is this yacht?" I asked.

"She belongs to Sir Alexander Garth. By George! She's a beauty, Desmond! White paint and a gold line, green and white deck awnings, everything slap up. He's a millionaire, they say!"

"I don't know the name."

"We looked him up in the 'Who's Who' at the club to-night. He's a baronet, and a big man in cotton. J.P. and D.L. of the county. What brings him here I don't know, except that cruising to the Southern Seas seems to be a fashionable rest-cure for millionaires whose nerves have been jaded by piling up money during the war."

"But, see here, John," I expostulated, "I can't go butting into a private pleasure cruise like this, I really can't. It isn't

done, you know! And you can't expect these prosaic English folk to swallow a long yarn about my life being in danger!"

"Desmond," said Bard—and now his voice was very stern. "You can take it from me that if you don't clear out at once, you'll get your throat cut and probably mine into the bargain. There won't be a steamer for Colon for at least a fortnight. This yacht is a heaven-sent opportunity for making you lucky. If you wait for the steamer it's a ten to one chance you'll go up the gangway in your coffin neatly packed in ice! Do you get that? For the Lord's sake, burn that damned rigmarole and beat it!"

We Celts have a broad strain of contrariness in our nature which probably accounts for my strong inclination to disregard Bard's advice. But his manner was so impressive for one of his unemotional disposition that I could not but feel convinced.

"Perhaps you're right, old man," I said. "I won't burn the 'rigmarole' as you call it, but otherwise I will follow your suggestion. But it will be on one condition and one condition only. That is, that we part here and now and that, should by any chance, your plan for my forcing my company upon the excellent cotton-spinner and his party fail, you will not associate with me or in any way acknowledge me as long as I am in the city...."

I held out my hand. But Bard laughed and put his two hands on my shoulders.

"No, no," he protested, "it's not so bad as all that. I'm coming down to the harbour to fix it up with Garth for you. He will probably call at the Consulate this morning any way to fetch the stores we are holding for him."

"John," said I, "I've dragged you far enough into this mess. It's early enough yet for me to go down to the harbour and on to that yacht without attracting much attention. So let's part here and ever so many thanks again for all your kindness...."

"Desmond,"—John Bard's voice trembled a little—"I wouldn't hear of it...."

"My dear old man," I said. "I'm in a proper mess and I've no intention of pulling you into it after me. And I'd like to say one thing more. You might have rubbed it in that the whole of this trouble was brought on us by my initial folly in accompanying an unknown messenger to the purlieu of the city in the middle of the night. You have never alluded to it; but I'd like you to know that your forbearance did not escape me...."

I stretched forth my hand again. This time John Bard took it.

"I'll send your things down to the Consulate," he said; "they can go on board with Garth's stores."

And so, in perfect understanding, we settled it. At the verandah door I turned and said:—

"And do you think now that there's anything in Adams' story?"

"Yes," my host replied, "I do!"

Then he added, with his little indulgent smile:—

"Are you going after it?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I might!" said I.

But already fermenting in my brain was the germ of a great idea. The next moment the iron gate of the gardens clanged behind me and I was off at a good pace down the hill.

CHAPTER V

THE GIRL IN THE SMOKE-ROOM

The sun was up; but the air was still delightfully fresh and the verdure yet glistened with the heavy night dews. Beyond the fringe of wavy palms which marked the shore the sea glittered and sparkled, its deep blue melting to a paler shade where on the horizon sea mingled with sky. Past the tangle of white and yellow houses where the city stood, a creamy dead-white edging of foam, like ermine laid on an azure mantle, marked the intricate windings of the coast until once more ocean, shore and sky imperceptibly blended in the glorious blue.

It was a morning on which one was glad to be alive. The champagne-like quality of the air sent a zest for action thrilling through my veins. The world seemed very fair and, as I crossed the market-place, I paused an instant to gaze with utter satisfaction on that brilliant mass of colour, the scarlet umbrellas of the stalls, the country-women with their heads enveloped in kerchiefs of flaming hues, the bold reds and greens and yellows of the masses of fruit and vegetables set forth in magnificent profusion for sale.

I felt that I was standing on the threshold of a great adventure. The strain of romance which Celtic blood bestows leaped to answer its appeal. In my head ran the mysterious jingle in which, as I was now convinced, a treasure lay concealed. So engrossed was I with my thoughts that, on mounting the broad flight of steps which led to the long, cool verandah of the British Consulate, I collided violently with a man who was coming out.

He was a short, stocky fellow, enormously strongly built, so massive in bulk, indeed, that one might almost say of him that he was as broad as he was long. His clean-shaven face, big and smooth and freckled, was tanned a deep brick-red and, especially about the good-natured, firm mouth, was lined with innumerable creases. The hair visible beneath his rather battered yachting-cap was close-cropped and a flaming red tint and his tufted eyebrows were of the same shade. A pair of brave and honest eyes shone very blue out of his sunburnt face. He was wearing a clean but somewhat creased suit of white drill and in his hand he carried a sheaf of papers.

The mere sight of him carried me straight away back to Southsea or Plymouth or one of those queer steep little towns of the Isle of Wight where so many masters of our merchant marine have their homes. From the crown of his head to the sole of his foot he was British, a type that, I imagine, has scarcely changed through the ages.

"Sorry!" he said, as though realising that in the impact it could only be my less substantial frame which could suffer, and, taking a step back, scrutinised me.

"My fault!" said I, rubbing my head, for I felt as if I had butted it against a stone wall.

"If you're going to see the Consul," said the big man—and in his speech was a pleasant touch of the Hampshire burr—"you'll not find him. And the Vice-Consul's not in, either! He don't come to the office before 9 o'clock; leastwise that's what I figured out the Dago within was tryin' to tell me! They don't overwork in the Government offices!"

With the perfect complacency of the Britisher he addressed me in English, probably assuming, were I a foreigner, that I would understand him.

He stood on the steps and mopped his brow.

"I wonder whether you could tell me," I said, "where the steam yacht *Naomi* is lying?"

The big man smiled and crinkled his face into a thousand fresh creases.

"Aye," he replied. "That I can! She's lying about a hundred yards off the Customs House jetty—a white craft flying the Thames Yacht Club burgee. You can't mistake her! Do you know anybody aboard?"

"Not exactly," said I. "But I wanted to call on Sir Alexander Garth, the owner."

"Then you come right along with me," placidly observed the big man. "I'm captain of the *Naomi*—I sail her for Sir Alexander. I've got our mail here and I'm going straight back on board. I left the launch at the steps! And, by the way, my name is Lawless—Harvey Lawless...."

"I should be delighted to come with you," I replied. "My name is Okewood!"

We turned our backs on the Consulate and crossing the Cathedral Square, followed a shabby, grass-grown street which rejoiced in the grandiose name of the Avenida de la Liberacion. As we strolled along in the shade Captain Lawless entertained me to some of his ideas on the shortcomings of the Central American republics and, in particular, of the State whose hospitality we were then enjoying. But with becoming reticence he did not question me as to the object of my desire to call upon his employer nor, on the other hand, did he volunteer any information about that gentleman or his friends.

Presently we emerged into a great white square on the sea, a place of blinding glare and whirling dust. Here at the foot of some white stone steps a trim motor launch was heaving to and fro in the bright green swell under the silent gaze of a knot of loafers. Two men were in the launch, one wearing a white jersey with "S.Y. *Naomi*" embroidered in blue and a round sailor's cap with the yacht's name on the ribbon. The other was in a blue suit and wore a yachting cap.

"You'll want to bring the launch back in a couple of hours' time, Parsons," said the captain, addressing the man in the yachting cap. "The Vice-Consul won't be there till then. You'll have to get a move on him about those fittings. Mr. Mackay will not be very pleased, I'm thinking! He expected me to bring 'em back with me."

I stood a little to one side during the brief dialogue which ensued and feasted my eyes on the picturesque scene. Viewed from the water the city presented a beautiful spectacle. The houses rose in tiers amid masses of greenery which rested the eye from the pitiless glare of the sea. In the distance I noted the pleasant green hill where the long low line of John Bard's bungalow was just discernible among the trees. The square in which we stood was in itself a wonderful picture with its great white warehouses, public buildings and the like built over deep high arcades where with shrill cries newspaper boys and boot-blacks plied their trade and lemonade sellers and beggars drowsed in the cool shadows.

The little knot of spectators fringing the quayside were as picturesque a bunch of picaroons as I have ever set eyes on. Their complexions ran through the whole series of shades from light coffee to Brunswick black. Their attire was as varied as their colour; but for the most part it consisted in a ragged panama hat, a dirty vest and a pair of thin striped cotton trousers.

I noticed one unusually striking figure, a stunted negro with a pock-marked face who wore a gaudy yellow handkerchief bound about his head and heavy gold rings in his ears. I observed this sportsman looking hard at me, and was a little nonplussed to see him ostensibly draw the attention of the man at his side to my appearance. The negro's companion was a swarthy lissom young fellow with handsome features and a pair of bold black eyes. The negro nudged him and broke into a torrent of words. I was not near enough to make out what was said (and, if I had been, I doubt if I should have understood their rapidly-spoken lingo). But I felt tolerably certain that the black man was speaking about me; for twice he nodded his head in my direction. The upshot of it was that the swarthy young man turned and—a remarkable thing in this indolent population—sprinted hard away in the direction of the city.

I must say I felt disquietened. Since I had left John Bard's house that morning, I had kept a careful watch to see if I were followed. But no one had appeared to take any notice of me whatsoever and I felt reasonably sure that I was not shadowed. But now it distinctly looked as though I had been recognised. And in that moment, I believe, there hardened into determination in my mind the great resolve which had come into my head as I was taking leave of John Bard.

But the captain was summoning me to step into the launch. I dropped in, he followed, and in a moment we were "teuf-teufing" through the rolling green swell of the harbour towards the long and graceful shape of the *Naomi* as she tugged at her moorings over against the battered white bulk of the Customs House. It was with feelings of profound satisfaction that I saw the square with its fringe of loafers, the white houses and the tufted palms recede as the natty little boat cleaved a foaming path through the green water. I had got clear away. It was up to me to secure for myself an invitation to join the party on Sir Alexander Garth's yacht.

She was a beautiful craft, with a good turn of speed, to judge by her design. As we drew nearer, I could see, by the many evidences of comfort displayed, that her owner must be a man of wealth. The snowy decks, the burnished brass and copper fittings, the clean, well turned-out sailors who were busy on the deck beneath the striped sun-awnings, the neat gangway let down over the side with its clean white hand-rope—the whole impression given was one of luxury regardless of cost. As we turned to run alongside, I found myself wondering what manner of man this Sir Alexander Garth was. Was he a wealthy industrialist of pre-war England or merely one of the new rich? If the latter he would be less easy to handle than the former, I reflected; besides, I reckoned, a war profiteer would not wear well on a long cruise to the South Seas! The next moment I stood on the deck of the *Naomi* in the modulated light which penetrated through the green-and-white awning.

The captain bade the man he had addressed as Parsons, whom I found to be the head steward, take me to the smoke-room while he asked "Sir Alexander" if he would receive me. Treading almost noiselessly on his rubber soles the steward led me along the deck to the back of the bridge where a door hooked back revealed a glimpse of a long low-ceilinged saloon set about with comfortable settees and club chairs in soft green Morocco leather, the portholes screened against the blinding light from without.

Even below the awning the light outside was so much stronger than the comparative obscurity within the smoke-room that at first I could not distinguish much. Parsons left me at the door and I was about to sit down when I discovered to my surprise that I was not alone. At a desk set in one of the two recesses which flanked the doorway a girl was sitting. She was dressed in a plain white silk tennis shirt and white piqué skirt and her panama hat lay on a chair by her side. She was writing letters. In the stillness of the room I could hear her pen scratching across the paper. So engrossed was she in her writing that she did not turn round.

I felt a little embarrassed. I felt it would be too farcical to cough mildly, in the manner of a stage comedian, in order to announce my presence; while, on the other hand, to make some violent noise like dropping on the floor one of the books which were lying around might, I conceived, unduly frighten the young lady. So I sat where I was, enjoying the pleasant half-light of the room after the heat and glitter outside, and amused myself by guessing at the appearance of the stranger from her back.

She had beautiful hair of a glossy golden brown, "bobbed" after the modern fashion, but so exquisitely brushed and tended that I decided she must have a good maid. Her figure was admirable, her neck very white and slender and matchless in the grace of its poise as she inclined her head to the paper. Her clothes, simple as they were, were faultless both in their cut and the way she wore them. I suppose there are fashions in a tennis blouse and skirt the same as there are in other kinds of women's clothes. At any rate, there was a flawless *chic* about this girl's appearance which told me that she was Paris-clad.

Presently the scratching of the pen stopped. A white hand stole up and patted the golden brown hair.

Then some intuitive sense told me that the girl knew there was someone in the room. It was as though our two minds communed in that still, cool place. At the same moment she swung round on her chair and, seeing me, rose abruptly to her feet.

As she confronted me I realised that I must have divined her beauty; for it came as no surprise to me to find her extremely good-looking. I have met many women in my time and, as is not uncommon in my profession, many were of the "charmer" order.

But the girl who stood facing me, a little perturbed, somewhat nonplussed by the unexpected apparition, had an indefinite quality of beauty which would have made her remarkable in any society. A beautifully shaped head, an oval face, delicately pencilled eyebrows throwing into relief the large grey eyes, a fine white skin and unusually good teeth—all these attributes of beauty she possessed. But with them went a curiously strong attraction, some quality of magnetism, which, to speak quite personally, made me want to see her radiantly happy, to conjure up a smile which I felt must be unusually sweet.

"Oh," she exclaimed and blushed very prettily, "I didn't hear you come in. How do you do? I am Marjorie Garth. Does Daddy know you're here?"

With the *empressement* of the exiled Briton, to whom the vision of a fresh young English girl is as the first violets of spring or the fragrance of the forest after summer rain, I took the slim, cool hand she offered me.

"The steward," I said, "has gone to tell him!"

"I'm afraid," she went on, scrutinising me dispassionately after the manner of the modern young girl, "that you're in for a very slow time. There's nobody but just Daddy and me. Of course, that was the idea of this cruise. Daddy overworked terribly in the war and the doctors told him he'd never get his nerves right unless he dropped business absolutely for a whole year."

I wondered how she had divined the nature of my mission to her father. Perhaps the captain had jumped to conclusions and had imparted them to her. But her next remark puzzled me horribly.

"Of course, I'm perfectly fit," she observed, and smiled with a glint of white teeth. "But Daddy is very difficult to handle. He has cables sent to him at every port, and when we're in harbour his cabin looks like his office at the Manchester Cotton Exchange. You'll have to be very severe with him about it...."

"I don't know really," I replied, very puzzled, "whether I should feel justified...."

"Oh," laughed the girl, "that's no way to handle Daddy. He's from the North, remember! He made his money by knowing when to say 'No'; at least, that's what he says. And *you'll* have to say 'No' to him. And to me, as well. I'm like Daddy. I adore having my own way. And I usually get it...."

"That I'm fully prepared to believe!" I answered, and we both laughed. It was as though we were old friends. Then, growing serious on a sudden, the girl very deliberately started rolling up the left sleeve of her blouse. I gazed at her in bewilderment. What was coming now? I asked myself. With the utmost composure she unbarred to the shoulder a firm, round and very white arm.

"Don't give me away to Daddy," she observed confidentially. "But my idiotic French maid burnt my arm the day before yesterday with the electric tongs and it's rather sore. I wish you would just have a look at it. I haven't said a word to Daddy, for, if he knew, he would insist on dismissing Yvonne. Would you mind....?"

She extended her left arm to me whilst I, like an idiot, blushed furiously in my embarrassment and vainly cudgelled my brains to discover who this charming girl thought I was. And why the devil should I look at the burn on her arm?

A calm voice at the doorway delivered me from my dilemma.

"Sir Alexander will see you, sir!"

The steward, Parsons, was there. Marjorie Garth pulled her sleeve down.

"Don't keep Daddy waiting!" she warned, and added: "You shall dress my arm afterwards!"

I said "Oh, *rather!*" or something equally idiotic and followed the steward out. As I passed the girl, she leant forward and whispered;

"Mind you stand up to him!"

As we crossed the blinding sunshine of the deck and went down a companion-way Parsons confided to me that the owner was at breakfast. My heart sank rather. It is poor tactics to ask a man for favours before noon.

The saloon, which was panelled in some light-coloured wood, maple or birch, resembled, with its little domed skylight, the restaurant of a liner in miniature. It was a small, snug little place with rose-coloured silk curtains and carpet and a profusion of silver and flowers. At the far end was a door which, I imagined, led to the cabins.

At the sound of my entrance Sir Alexander Garth looked up from his egg. As he stood up to greet me, I saw he was a

tall, heavily-built man in the fifties with a heavy iron-grey moustache. He had about him an air I have noticed in other prosperous business people—a sort of "moneyed manner" which reveals itself in a great deal of self-confidence with just a touch of parade. The hard grey eyes and the firm chin denoted the man of action; but the physiognomist in me (which my work has considerably developed) took mental stock of the arched nostril and the downward dip to the corners of the mouth which are the unmistakable signals of a violent temper.

These and other little details I noticed about him as we shook hands and he asked me if I had breakfasted. And because I was really pretty peckish and because I believe one can always do business best over a meal, I accepted his invitation and started in on a luscious grape-fruit. When he had poured out my coffee, pushed the toast-rack at me and generally put me at my ease, Sir Alexander Garth, who had been scrutinising me rather closely, remarked:

"I should never have taken you for a doctor!"

"I'm not a doctor, sir!" I answered.

"I see—not taken your degree, eh? Well, well, I told our New York office in my cable to do the best they could; indeed, I wasn't at all sure that our manager could manage it in the time. But Lowry's a spry chap—he don't come from Bolton for nothing—and he knows that when th'oud man gives an order he expects it to be carried out. Did you meet Lowry, doctor?"

Now I understood Miss Garth's inexplicable and embarrassing desire to show me her burnt arm.

"I'm afraid you've made a mistake, Sir Alexander," I said. "I'm not a doctor...."

"Eh?" ejaculated the baronet, sitting back in his chair and looking at me. "Then who the devil are you?"

"My name is Okewood, Major Desmond Okewood," I replied as boldly as might be, though my host's countenance was hoisting all manner of storm signals in the shape of a reddening of the cheeks and a twitching of the nostrils, "and I have rather a strange request to make...."

But I got no farther for Garth exploded.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed, pounding the table with his big, sun-burnt hand, "I knew it. You're from Allan's. My Manchester office turned their proposition down without reference to me, and as soon as I heard about it, I wrote and confirmed the decision. And they've done nothing but badger me about it ever since. At every port there's been a cable. And now you have the brass to come interfering with my holiday, asking yourself to breakfast under false pretences.... Parsons!"

He yelled for the steward, at the same time putting forth his hand to pound a bell that stood on the table at his side.

"Stop!" I said.

"Will you stop me from ringing for my own servants?" he demanded truculently.

"I'll stop you from making yourself look a fool before your own steward," I retorted, "if you'll quit shouting and listen to me for a minute. I have nothing to do with Allan's or any other business concern...."

At the first glimpse of this resolute-looking cotton-spinner I knew that, to achieve my end, I should have to take him more fully into my confidence than either my inclination allowed or my instructions warranted. I took my letter-case from my pocket and extracting a folded blue paper, laid it before Sir Alexander on the white damask table-cloth. These were my credentials which we are only supposed to show in moments of direst necessity.

"Will you read that?" I said.

The baronet looked questioningly at me, then slowly put on a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles which he took from a case in his pocket. He carefully perused my blue paper and then handed it back to me.

"Eh," he remarked without a trace of apology in his manner, "and we all thought you were the doctor I ordered our New York office to send to join the yacht at Rodriguez. Well, young man, and what can I do for you?"

With the utmost candour I told him. Thereafter, for ten minutes or more, our heads were close together. Then he rang the bell.

"My compliments to Captain Lawless," he said to the steward, "and I should be obliged if he could spare me a few minutes! We will come to him in the chart-house!"

He gave the steward the start of us by lingering to offer me a cigar and to light one for himself. Then we made our way up on deck and presently entered the chart-house, a room abaft the bridge and above the smoke-room. Here the captain, looking very red and shaggy without his cap, awaited us.

"Ah, captain!" said our host, "let me make you acquainted with Major Okewood, who is coming on a cruise with us. I want you to show me on the chart Cock Island in the Eastern Pacific. And let's hear, too, what the 'Sailing Directions' have to say about it!"

Thus I learnt that my pleading had prevailed with him and that, behind a hard and business-like exterior, there flickered a little spark of romance that had burst into flame at the magic tale of treasure trove I had poured into his ears. As the skipper spread out upon the mahogany top of the chart-locker the section in which, amid weird whorls and lines signifying tides and depths, Cock Island figured, I felt once more the strong tug at my heart from that secluded islet whence at the foot of volcanic peaks an enigmatic grave seemed to beckon....

CHAPTER VI

I RECEIVE AN INVITATION

Garth appeared to be a seaman of no mean order. With the charts spread out before them he and the skipper promptly became immersed in a maze of technicalities. My ignorance of matters nautical is abysmal; and I listened in some bewilderment to talk of winds and tides and channels, of soundings and of reefs. I can reconstruct the scene now—the prelude to so many strange adventures!—as the three of us pored over the chart; the long, low chart-house with its clean smell of paint, the holland sun-blinds rattling smartly in the breeze which blew in through the open port-holes, Garth in his loose tussore suit, with his eager face and keen eyes, a fragrant cigar thrust in his mouth, Lawless, rather awed by the other and consequently a trifle formal, stubbing the chart with a huge and podgy thumb.

When they pulled down the big orange-coloured volume of "Sailing Directions" for the Eastern Pacific and opened the page at Cock Island, I could better follow them.

"The island is mountainous," Garth read out in his pleasant, deep voice, "and entirely volcanic, rising to several peaks, of which the highest reaches 2,856 feet. These peaks are probably volcanoes, but the interior is unexplored and almost impenetrable owing to its steep, rugged and often precipitous nature, the many rushing streams and the dense vegetation. There are small areas of comparatively level ground surrounding Sturt and Horseshoe Bays...."

He turned the page and skipped a mass of detail.

"There are only two harbours," he read, "Sturt and Horseshoe Bays. Horseshoe Bay is larger than Sturt Bay but is less sheltered, as it opens to the west and so has a heavy swell during the early months of the year. Moreover, the slopes surrounding the bay are much more abrupt and the area of level land in its neighbourhood is much less considerable."

Adams, I recollected, had spoken of the man Dutchey and himself coming upon the grave in a clearing in the undergrowth close to the shore. He had mentioned, too, that their ship's boat had had to find a way in through the bar. It

looked to me, therefore, as though they had landed in Horseshoe Bay where the upward slopes began closer to the shore than in Sturt Bay.

We read on. The island, it seemed, had never had any permanent population. It was "the resort of buccaneers in the seventeenth century, and later was a watering-place for whalers." It had "little animal life"; but there were wild pigs, descendants of those left by Captain Martin of the frigate *Rover* in 1774, and rats, introduced by calling ships. Mention had been made, we were told, by various explorers of huge carved images reputed to exist in the interior of the island, similar to those for which Easter Island is famous; but there was no certain knowledge of their existence.

There were a lot of particulars about attempts to colonise the island, of stray parties of mariners who had landed, with the intention of settling there; but in a year or two had gone away in a passing ship or died off. And there was a string of names, British and foreign, of naval men or of explorers who, landing to fill up with water or to kill some fresh meat, had jotted down a few observations about the island and then sailed away again across the boundless Pacific.

"And now, Okewood," said Garth pleasantly, "you and I and all of us, you know, are merely passengers on the high seas of Captain Lawless here, and with your permission I propose that we should tell him who you are and what you have just confided to me. You have no objection, I take it?"

"None whatever," said I.

"Then tell him yourself!" urged Garth, dropping on to the leather settee. So, sitting between the two on the softly padded seat, I unfolded my plan while the yacht gently swayed at her moorings, and the awnings without cracked like a whip in the breeze.

When I had finished, Garth said:

"You'll agree, I'm sure, that we can spare a week!"

"I'm entirely in your hands, Sir Alexander!" returned the captain. "But there is one condition I should like to make, and that is that this matter remains strictly between us three. I have a very decent lot of men as crew, Sir Alexander, hard-working, reliable chaps and every one personally known to me for years. I'd go so far as to say you've got the pick of the Solent in the *Naomi*. But this isn't a man-o'-war, gentlemen, nor yet even a merchant vessel. In a pleasure yacht like this there isn't rightly speaking the discipline that you'd find in either, and, to be plain-spoken, I don't want the major here to go upsetting the men with his treasure tales. Lay off at Cock Island, go ashore by all means, and have a 'look see' but don't, for God's sake, blab about it or you'll rot the finest crew that ever shipped! Let's keep this thing to ourselves; indeed, I'll go further than that. Leave me out of it! Then the men, should they hear anything, can't say that I'm in it while they are not! And to tell you the truth, gentlemen, I've had a strict upbringing, my people being chapel-goers, and I was taught to believe that no blessing rests on money that we have not earned with the sweat of our brow and the work of our strong right hand. You two gentlemen take your week ashore and I'll look after the ship!"

Garth turned to me.

"I don't want to leave Captain Lawless out," he said, "but I can't help feeling he's right about the crew!"

"And about everybody else on board, Sir Alexander!" Lawless broke in.

"You mean the women?"

"I mean *everybody* else on board, just as I said, sir!" reiterated the skipper very firmly and with meaning. "What's everybody's secret is nobody's secret! Mum's the word or you'll have trouble! Mum's the word, I say!"

"Well!" said Garth, "so be it! Mum's the word!"

Then came an unlooked-for interruption.

"Why 'mum'? What's the secret?"

A clear young voice rang out from the door. The three of us scrambled hastily to our feet. On the threshold stood the girl of the smoke-room.

"Morning, Marjie!" said Garth.

He wore something of a hang-dog look. So did I, I think, as I did my best to secrete myself behind them. I was wondering what the girl would think of me when she discovered my involuntary deception. Fortunately Lawless's huge frame completely obliterated me.

"What are you two talking secrets about?" she demanded bluntly. "And why 'mum's the word'?"

Garth looked at Lawless and Lawless looked at Garth; but neither answered her question. Then she looked at the skipper. His air reminded me of a pickpocket caught red-handed.

"Good morning, Miss Garth!" he mumbled and made a stiff little bow. That bow was my undoing; for the captain disclosed me behind him.

"Oh!" cried the girl with a little gurgle of amusement, "it's the doctor! Well, did you take my advice?"

"Yes," I answered. Then, taking the plunge, I faltered:

"But I'm not the doctor...."

On that the girl coloured up a little. I knew what she was thinking of and our eyes met. I felt relieved to see the glint of humour creep into them.

Then Garth, who had turned to speak to the captain, broke in.

"I should have introduced you. Major, this is my daughter—Marjie, Major Okewood, who is coming as far as Honolulu with us. Would you see Carstairs about getting a cabin ready for him?"

With a graceful little nod to her father and a smile to me which had its hidden meaning for us two alone, Marjorie Garth went out again on to the sunlit deck. We three men plunged into our deliberations again and when at length the gong sounded for luncheon we had evolved a rough plan of campaign.

I told Garth quite frankly that the message found on the grave at Cock Island was so far unintelligible to me that I had no certainty of ever being able to decipher it. What I proposed to do, was to examine the grave and the island generally to see whether I could find anything on the spot to throw any light on the message. We arranged, therefore, that in reaching Cock Island, Garth and I should take a camping outfit and go ashore for a period not to exceed a week; that if at the end of that time, my investigations had led to no result I should abandon the enterprise and return with him to the yacht.

It was settled that we should sail that night, as soon as ever the spare parts required by Mr. Mackay, the engineer, were aboard; for I informed Garth of Bard's advice to me to make myself scarce without delay. The captain reckoned that, taking things easy, we should make Cock Island on the fifth day out. We finally decided to put ashore at Horseshoe Bay, as both Lawless and Garth agreed with me that this landing tallied best with the beach-comber's description.

As we crossed the deck to go down to the saloon the spare parts were being hoisted into the yacht from a barge. A hard-faced little man with a rasping Scottish accent, whom I took to be Mr. Mackay, the engineer, was in charge of the operation which was accompanied by some fine, full-flavoured swearing in broad Clydebank and a torrent of epileptic Latin American blasphemy from various parties unseen in the lighter. Small boats piled up to their thwarts with poultry, fruit, vegetables and bread, were bobbing about in a wide semi-circle about the yacht and the air rang with the shrill cries of the vendors.

As we passed the engineer the captain said: "You'll let none of this scum aboard, Mr. Mackay!"

"But the steward was wishful...."

"I don't give a hoot for the steward. I'll have none of these Dagoes aboard my ship. Have you got that clear?"

"Verra guid, sir!" replied the Scotsman resignedly.

I appreciated the skipper's motive and looked at him gratefully. I was beginning to have an admiration for Captain Lawless. Besides being a man of character he was plainly a person of quick perception.

It was now very hot. The pitch was soft in the seams of the deck and the broken white line of the port buildings on shore swam in a tremor of heat. It was a relief to escape from the dazzling sunlight into the shaded seclusion of the saloon, where two purring electric fans kept the atmosphere cool and ice tinkled melodiously in crystal jugs of cider cup.

The girl Marjorie was already seated at the table. With her demurely cropped brown hair gleaming golden where the sunshine touched it, her serene beauty and her white dress, she reminded me of some Florentine Madonna, the shining white port-hole like a halo framing her face against a background of deep azure sky.

"Le Medecin malgré Lui!" she exclaimed as I came in, "come and sit by me and tell me how you managed to captivate Daddy so completely! And I promise," she added, smiling up at me deliciously, "that I won't ask you for any more medical advice!"

The girl's attractive presence, the pleasant cool of the saloon, the quiet efficient service made it difficult for me to realise that, only a very few hours before, I had stumbled through blood into a dark and perilous adventure. As I looked into Marjorie Garth's friendly grey eyes, I found the present so attractive that it was no effort to me to thrust into the background the enigma of the future.

My adventure, I decided, was opening under the most pleasant auspices.

CHAPTER VII

THE VICE-CONSUL'S WARNING

The *Naomi* was fitted out with the greatest luxury imaginable. She was not a large vessel, but she was so well designed that every inch of space was utilised. The cabin allotted to me was small but beautifully compact and tastefully furnished. There was a proper brass bedstead, not a bunk; pile carpet, silk curtains, silver-plated toilet fittings and an electric fan. My traps had been unpacked and my clothes stowed away in a cunningly contrived wardrobe. Carstairs, Garth's man, showed me where everything was. He was a nice, fresh-faced young fellow, of smart military appearance. He told me he had served in the war with the Royal Engineers.

Luncheon ended, Marjorie Garth left us to go and write letters to be sent ashore in the launch for posting. I repaired to my cabin to snatch a little sleep in the siesta hour; for I was very tired after our disturbed night. But though the gently whirring fan kept the atmosphere nicely cool and my bed invited repose, I could not sleep. Now that I was alone again, I found my thoughts continually recurring to the slip of oilsilk with its enigmatic message.

I have always found that short commons of sleep is an excellent mental tonic. Though I was physically worn out, my brain was alive and active and, pulling from my pocket the dead man's message (for so I designated it to myself) I fell to studying it with renewed zest.

I had it already by heart even to the bars of music (though for music I have little ear); but I read it over again. What absolute rot it sounded!

"Noon. 18/11/18."

I considered the date for an instant. Why, by November 18th, 1918, the war was over! The Armistice had been signed seven days earlier. And at once a light dawned on me. The dead man, I had surmised, had an appointment with someone at Cock Island, probably with El Cojo's gang. Realising that he was about to die the Unknown had left this message for his friends; but, probably knowing that an occasional ship touched at the island, he had coded his instructions to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands. The date of the message seemed to give the clue as to why his friends had failed to keep their appointment, so that the message had remained on the grave until it was found months later by Adams. The Armistice had been signed; Germany was beaten; and consequently the services of such obliging "neutrals" as El Cojo and Co. had abruptly ceased.

With growing excitement, for I felt certain that, this time, my deductions were not at fault, I read on:—

"Flash, flash, much
"The garrison of Kiel"

This absolutely defeated me and I passed on.

"With the compass is best
"Think of the Feast of Orders"

Der Ordensfest! Unconsciously, as I repeated the words to myself, the clean white panels of the cabin melted away, and there rose before my mind a dim picture, a study in grey, an outdoor scene across which swept the wintry wind with biting blast.... A leaden sky, grey buildings, their roofs deep-thatched with snow, and grey-clad troops, masses of them, set about a vast square. It was a blurred picture with, here and there, a detail clear, the rime glistening on an officer's *pelisse*, the plume of a helmet blown out in the icy breeze.... Ah! I had it! Berlin.... The Feast of Orders, with the annual ceremony of the so-called nailing of the Colours. I had seen it once, that famous winter parade, as a boy when my brother Francis and I had been on a visit to a cousin of ours, who was secretary at the Berlin Embassy....

But what did it mean in this connection? What had the Feast of Orders, the annual bestowal on the old Prussian bureaucracy of thousands of crosses and stars and medals, as an economical substitute for increases in salary, what had it to do with a compass?

Then it came to me with a flash.... A compass argued a compass bearing, and this bearing was there concealed in this phase! "Der Ordensfest!" Stay! The date. What was the date? And that came back to me too.... January 27th, "Kaisers Geburtstag," the Emperor's birthday.

By Jove! At last a beam of light was piercing the darkness.

Those two lines meant indubitably: "Take a compass bearing of 27 degrees!"

The next two lines:—

"Past the Sugar-Loaf
"You'll see the Lorelei"

obviously referred to those "peaks" of which the "Sailing Directions" had spoken.

"If you desire the sweetheart."

Schätzchen was the German word. But, ye gods, *Schatz* of which *Schätzchen* is the diminutive, properly speaking, means "treasure"! By what form of physical and mental blindness had I been smitten to have failed to see this direct reference to treasure in the cipher?

The four bars of music brought me up with a jerk. I hummed the tune which I had strummed out on John Bard's piano. It seemed, as I said, vaguely familiar as a German ditty of the popular sort but what or where.... I....

On this I must have fallen asleep. I awoke with a start, as one does from an afternoon nap, and stared round blankly, trying to recollect where I was. There was a little sidelong motion in the cabin as the yacht rose and fell at anchor to the swell and the electric fan purred gently as it revolved. Someone was tapping at the door.

"Come in!" I cried and Carstairs put his face in.

"Sir Alexander begs pardon for disturbing you, sir," the man said, "but could you make it convenient to go to him at once in his cabin? He said as how it was urgent...."

"Of course. Tell Sir Alexander I'll be with him immediately."

Garth had a little suite at the far end of the saloon consisting of a small state-room, very handsomely furnished, with sleeping apartment and bath off it. I found him seated in a swivel-chair at his desk in conversation with a dark young man, his face yellowed from the tropics, in a creased white duck suit.

"Ah, major," said the baronet, "I'm sorry to have had to spoil your forty winks. But a rather curious thing has happened. They're getting a warrant out against you for murder. The British Vice-Consul here has been good enough to come off and give us the tip...."

"It's a most singular thing," said the Vice-Consul. "Last night a poor white, a drunken Englishman who lived with a negress in the native quarter, had his throat cut. He was a worthless creature, called himself Adams; I knew him well. In fact, it's only about a fortnight ago that we threw him out of the Consulate. Well, an information has been laid against you by two citizens who swear that they saw you leave this man Adams's shack in the early hours of the morning.

"Now in the ordinary way nobody in Rodriguez makes any bones about a plain murder like this. But our friend Adams—or his black lady who, incidentally, was also killed—seemed to have had some amazing political pull. The Procurator-General of the Republic in person came down to the office half an hour ago to see me about it. He seemed scared out of his life, told me he would certainly lose his job unless he could produce you for trial. Now——"—the Vice-Consul cleared his throat and drew hard on the black cigar he was smoking, "I don't know anything about you, major, or your business,"—he looked sharply at me, "and I'm not inquiring. But I do know that, while straightforward murder in Rodriguez is scarcely a penal offence, dabbling in politics is a very serious matter. What I came off to tell you was to beat it while the going's good.... That's all!"

"It's extremely kind of you to have taken the trouble," I replied, "and I highly appreciate your discretion in the matter. But surely, if the warrant is out, it will be served at once. After all, we're within the three-mile limit...."

The Vice-Consul waved his hand.

"In this illustrious Republic," he remarked dryly, "no business of any description is ever done in the siesta hours. Even during our periodical revolutions there's a truce every day between noon and 4 p.m. But you'll want to hurry; for, as soon as it cools off, you'll have a bunch of coffee-coloured dons alongside in the harbour-master's launch!"

"I'll see about getting under way at once!" said Garth, and hastened out.

The Vice-Consul picked up his panama and approached me. He looked cautiously about him and lowered his voice as he spoke.

"I'm risking my job by doing this," he said, "for the Consul's down with fever and I'm acting on my own responsibility. But Bard was telling us about you at the Club, about your D.S.O. and that in the war, and it's the least a fellow can do who didn't fight—I'm rotten through and through with malaria, you know—to help a chap who did. Now, listen! You're in great danger. You've run up against the biggest bunch of crooks in Central America...."

"You mean El Cojo and his gang?"

"Aye...."

"Who is this man, El Cojo?"

"No one knows. No one ever sees him. No one knows where he lives. Some say he is a Mexican. But his power is tremendous and his vengeance swift and terrible. I could tell you stories.... You should be safe on this yacht. But take my advice and don't leave it until you can go ashore under the American or the British flag!"

He gave me his hand.

"I shan't forget this service," I said warmly, "if there's anything I can ever do in return...."

"Well," he answered slowly, "I was recommended for the M.B.E. once. But the F.O. turned it down. If you had any influence...."

"If Sir Robert is still my friend," I assured him, "you shall have it. And perhaps it might be an O.B.E. Write me down your name and address...."

As we emerged on the deck the crew were busy getting the yacht ready for sea. There was a bit of commotion at the gangway. Garth and Captain Lawless stood at the head of the ladder in animated conversation with a very trim young man, beautifully dressed in spotless white drill.

"Hullo," said the Vice-Consul, "it's Custrin, your new doctor!"

"It's no good," Garth was saying as we approached the group, "we'll have to be away in ten minutes, doctor, and there's so much work going forward on deck that your friends would only be in the way...."

"But, sir," the young man urged, "they need only stay for a minute. As distinguished residents of Rodriguez they wished to have the honour of meeting you, of showing you courtesy. They set great store by such things here and if you refuse I'm very much afraid they'll take it amiss...."

I glanced over the side. In a row-boat at the foot of the ladder sat three swarthy gentlemen in frock-coats, their large dark eyes turned appealingly up to the deck of the *Naomi*.

"You'll tell your friends," said the baronet, "how much I appreciate their great attention and how much I regret that circumstances prevent me from receiving their visit on board. Captain Lawless, the Vice-Consul's launch!"

Lawless gave an order and while the doctor descended the ladder and spoke to the party in the boat, the Vice-Consul took his leave and boarded his launch.

Five minutes later the *Naomi*, curtseying to the long green swell, pointed her bows towards the fringed headlands which marked the entrance to the harbour. As we passed out between the bluffs, the dull report of a gun drifted out to us over the freshening breeze. At the same moment, in a smother of spray, a launch came tearing out of the port, a mere speck in the shimmering green sea far astern.

At my side on the bridge, Garth laughed.

"Here comes the warrant!" he said. "Captain, is that launch back yonder going to overhaul us?"

Lawless took his freckled hand off the engine-room telegraph and looked back.

"Huh!" he grunted, "not on this side of hell. Or any other!"

CHAPTER VIII

DR. CUSTRIN

It was not until dinner that evening that I had the opportunity of meeting Dr. Custrin. The *Naomi* was steaming along amid the gorgeous pageantry of sunset and the warm glow of the dying day was warring with the soft lights of the electric candles on the dinner-table when I came in to the saloon. Garth introduced me to the doctor. He was a sleek, smooth young man with hair like black satin and a beautifully trained small black moustache. His hands and feet were small and well-made and there would have been a touch of effeminacy about him but for his otherwise manly bearing, his bold black eyes and pleasant voice. A certain narrowness of the eyes and a curl of the nostrils told me, who have an eye for such things, that, probably, as his name indicated, he was of Jewish extraction. In conversation I elicited that he had been born in Mauritius, educated at Cape Town, and had taken his degree at King's College Hospital in London. Garth's New York office it appeared, had picked him up at Colon where he was studying Colonel Goethals' wonderful arrangements for the extermination of yellow fever and malaria.

Lawless and Mackay, the chief engineer, a sententious Scot, who opened his mouth only to utter a platitude or to put food or drink into it, dined with us. Garth made me sit next to Marjorie who looked ravishing in a white lace evening frock.

"Put the two war veterans together!" the baronet commanded. "My little girl here," he explained to me, "drove a car at the front. She has the Military Medal."

"Daddy!" expostulated Marjorie and a warm flush coloured her cheeks.

"I would never have given my consent," Garth added, "but she just didn't ask me for it!"

"My dear old thing," said the girl. "You make me look ridiculous by bragging about my silly little trips around the bases when I'm sure Dr. Custrin or Major Okewood saw a hundred times more of the war than I ever did!"

"I never got out of the base at the Cape," said the doctor. "The East African campaign kept us too busy for anybody to be spared."

"And I," was my retort, "never went back to France after the Somme!"

"Were you wounded?" asked Garth.

"Badly?" questioned Marjorie in reply to my nod.

"Nothing to write home about," I answered. "When I came out of hospital I went into the Intelligence."

"How fearfully thrilling!" exclaimed the girl. "Wasn't it frightfully exciting?"

"It wasn't the front," I replied.

After dinner on the deck under a vast span of velvet sky spangled with stars I found myself alone with Marjorie Garth. A broad band of yellow light shone out from the smoke-room where the others sat and talked over their coffee. Above us on the bridge the form of the man at the wheel bulked black.

We strolled up and down in silence. For myself I was quite overcome by the majesty of the tropical night at sea.

"The Intelligence," asked Marjorie suddenly, "that's the Secret Service, isn't it?"

"Yes," I agreed.

"You were very modest about it at dinner," she remarked.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"I only stated the plain truth," I returned. "In the fighting troops, remember, every fifth man became a casualty and three months was the average run of the platoon officer!"

"Yet," commented the girl, "you seem like a man who has been in tight places. I shouldn't say to look at you that you've had a placid or easy existence. Like mine, for instance. Sometimes I think it's only men of action like you who know how to grapple with life. Can you imagine me in an emergency for instance?"

"Yes," I said. "I believe I can. You've got a brave eye, Miss Garth. I think one can judge people's temperaments, as one judges horses, by the eye."

She shook her head and laughed.

"What does this sort of life teach anybody? This beautiful ship, these well-trained sailors, the splendid service that Daddy's money can buy? My dear man, it's no good flattering me about my brave eye. Money makes a solid barrier between my life and any really thrilling crisis! I shall be kept in cotton-wool till the end of the chapter."

"What a strange person you are!" I exclaimed. "Girls of your age with your position and your.... your.... attractions don't find time for philosophising as a rule. You ought to be enjoying your youth instead of meditating about life. I don't mean to be inquisitive; but.... are you unhappy?"

We had halted near the rail. We were standing very close together and I felt the touch of her warm young body against my arm.

She turned and looked at me. Again I told myself that this girl was the most beautiful, the most unspoiled creature I had ever met.

"I've only once been thoroughly happy," she answered rather wistfully, "and that was when I was with the army in France. I loved the romance, the adventure of it all, the good comradeship not only between the women but also between the men and the women. Money wasn't everything then. I was an individual with my own personality, my own friends. But what am I now? The daughter of Garth, the millionaire. And they print my picture in the weekly papers because one day I shall have a great deal of money which Daddy has worked all his life to make. I've never had any brothers and sisters and my mother has been dead for years. I've had to live my whole life with money as my companion. And money's not a bit companionable!"

She smiled whimsically at me, then gazed down abstractedly at the phosphorescent water thumping against the side of the ship.

"This yacht!—" she went on. "I have everything a girl could possibly require here—everything except my freedom!"

"Good Lord!" I observed, "you'll have that too, when you marry! You've plenty of time for that!"

Marjorie Garth laughed.

"My dear man," she protested, "don't you know it's easier to marry off a girl with no money than one who will have as much as I shall? To Daddy every young man I meet is a fortune-hunter. If I run a boy home from the golf-club in my car I am cross-questioned regarding his 'intentions'; if a man takes me out dancing in the afternoon there's a scene. And Daddy's taste in men is vile; I'm not alluding to you—I mean at home! But I've no use for the second generation of millionaires and I've told Daddy so. I'd rather marry a beggar than some of the rich men's sons he tries to throw in my way...."

Lucky beggar, I thought.

"I don't know why I've told you all this," the girl concluded. "You seem to draw me out. Or perhaps it's the night.

Oh, look! Wish!"

A star fell gleaming across the sky.

"I have," I said; (it was one of those idle wishes which a poor man must not admit even to himself).

"Was it about your trip to Cock Island?"

"I'll lose my wish if I tell!" I replied. "As a matter of fact it was not!"

Suddenly she put a warm soft hand on mine. Her touch made my heart beat faster.

"Is it a Secret Service mission?" she asked.

Caution is second nature to a man who has served his apprenticeship in the silent corps. In that balmy air, beneath a brilliant moon hanging like some great lamp in the sky, it was hard to refuse a woman's pleading, especially a girl like this, bending forward with sparkling eyes and parted lips so close to me that I could detect the fragrance of her hair. I put my other hand over hers as it rested on mine on the rail.

"You can trust me," she pleaded. "I am sure there is something mysterious about your trip to this tiny island. I know you are not going on Government survey" (this was the pretext which Garth had given out for my visit to Cock Island) "for the Navy always do that sort of work. Tell me your secret!"

I had to catch hold of myself; for she was almost irresistible. I looked away from her, steeling myself to a refusal. What I might have done I cannot say for what man can account for actions performed under the magic of the tropical moon? But at that moment my nose detected the scent of a cigarette quite close.

I glanced quickly round. To all appearances we were alone. Behind us the white smoke stack of the *Naomi* reared itself into the night; on either hand the deck was quite deserted; the only human being visible was the black form of the man at the wheel silhouetted against the faint glow of the binnacle light. But the acrid fragrance of Turkish tobacco stole up my nostrils and the possibility of a listener within earshot brought me swiftly back to earth.

"I'm afraid there's no mystery about my little jaunt," said I, turning to the girl, "you know all there is to know!"

I spoke as nonchalantly as possible. But I would not meet the reproachful gaze she turned upon me. Then she snatched her hand away.

"I'm afraid you must think me horribly inquisitive!" she observed coldly.

There was a footstep on the deck. Dr. Custrin stood behind us. Between his fingers a cigarette sent up a little spiral of blue smoke; across his arm he carried a shining silver wrap.

"Sir Alexander asked me to tell you to put this round your shoulders," he said to Marjorie and unfolded the silver scarf. "The wind is freshening."

The girl drew the wrap about her shoulders. The doctor looked at the two of us.

"What a wonderful night!" he remarked. "In these latitudes the moon seems to exercise a strange influence upon us. For example, your father has been telling me the whole story of his early life, Miss Garth, and I believe I have been unbosoming my aspirations and ambitions to him. But confidences under the moon one is apt to regret in the morning, eh, major?"

He spoke perfectly suavely and with no trace of impertinence in his manner. But there was a hint of double meaning in his words (which clearly indicated that he had overheard at any rate the end of our conversation) that jarred on me.

"You need have no fears about Major Okewood," replied Marjorie with just the faintest touch of scorn in her voice. "I am sure he is the pattern of discretion. I think," she added, "I am feeling the tiniest bit chilly. You promised to play for

me, doctor. Won't you come into the saloon? There is a piano there!"

Her gaze travelled proudly past me as she turned to Custrin. She made it as clear as was compatible with the laws of hospitality that her invitation did not include me. It was her woman's way of getting her own back. I loved her for it; but I took a violent dislike to Custrin.

I mumbled some excuse about having to go to the chart-room and they left me. Presently from the saloon came the rhythmic strains of the *Rosen-Kavalier*, most sensual, most entrancing, of all Strauss's music, played with a master-hand. The *Liebestod*, Grieg, Massenet's *Air des Larmes*, Schumann—Custrin ran from one to the other while the *Naomi* stolidly thumped her way through the hissing sea. And always, curse his impudence! the fellow played love-music....

One by one members of the crew drifted to the head of the companion-way until there was quite a company of them outlined against the yellow light that shone up from the cosy saloon. I remained leaning against the rail, my chin on my chest, my pipe in my mouth, and let my thoughts drift.... Adams coughing over his pannikin, John Bard, his honest face troubled, looking round that house of death, the yellow-faced Vice-Consul pulling on his black cigar.

But always I found my mind harking back to that ungainly silhouette framed in the doorway of the hut and to the sinister echo of his footsteps in the yard as the stranger turned his back on the scene of slaughter which, I doubted not, had been of his contriving. What had the Vice-Consul said? "His power is tremendous, his vengeance swift and terrible!" Who was this lame man whom nobody saw yet whom everybody feared? There was something of the insistence of a nightmare in the way in which the glimpse I had had of him hung in my thoughts, confounding itself with the ineffaceable image of that club-footed man whom I had seen fall lifeless—how many years ago it seemed now!—before my brother's smoking automatic. Well, whoever El Cojo was, Mexican or South American, I was out of his clutches now. The rail of the *Naomi*, quivering beneath my hand to the leap of the seas, gave me confidence. I knocked the ashes out of my pipe and went below.

CHAPTER IX

CONCERNING A LONG DRINK

The weather continued magnificent. The barometer on the chart-house wall was high and steady, the sea like a sheet of painted glass. On board the *Naomi* the perfect luxury, the admirable efficiency of the service might have led one to fancy oneself at Cowes but for the boundless expanse of the Pacific surrounding us. The sun-burnt faces, the natty white caps and the spotless white drill of the crew, the brass-work polished until the blaze of the fierce sun upon it made the eyes ache, the long chairs set out invitingly under the striped deck awnings—it all brought back Regatta Week to me so vividly that I sometimes imagined one had only to look over the ship's side to see the boats setting down the visitors at the Squadron steps.

There were deck quoits, shuffleboard and various other ship's games for our amusement. But it was too hot for violent exercise. The men rigged up a huge canvas bath, contrived out of a mainsail, in the bows forward, and here, each morning before breakfast, Garth, Custrin and I used to disport ourselves like young seals in their tank at the Zoo. For the rest, the day passed very pleasantly with a little gossip, a little music, a little bridge. We three men, following a custom which Garth had established, took our trick at the wheel and when Custrin had finished his watch, Marjorie reported for duty and proved herself the best helmsman of us all.

As a matter of fact, I had no time to be bored. I spent many hours in the chart-house with Garth and Lawless settling the details of our contemplated expedition. There was, in truth, much to plot out and arrange. The captain was more emphatic than ever against the idea of anybody beyond us three being let into the secret of the treasure-hunt. In fact, as our discussions proceeded, he showed himself increasingly reluctant to grant us as long as a week on the island.

"It's asking too much, Sir Alexander," he said, shaking his red head, "to expect the crew to remain cooped up in the

yacht in sight of green land and not a man allowed ashore. I might hold 'em in hand for a couple of days; but after that it will be difficult, very difficult, as well you and the major here must know!"

It was Garth, with his quick business mind, who made the suggestion which solved the problem. Raising his head from the chart which he had been studying while Lawless, in an aggrieved tone, was presenting his case, he said:—

"I've got it. You can maroon us!"

"Maroon you?" repeated the captain in a puzzled voice.

"Aye! Dump us ashore and then take the yacht to Alcedo!"

Alcedo, he explained to us with chart and "Sailing Directions," was an islet lying some ninety miles west of Cock Island, a small, uninhabited rock, the home of seabirds of all kinds.

"You can get some shooting," Sir Alexander added, "and, if the 'Sailing Directions' speak true, good fishing. There's a fair landing on the north face, it says here, and a run ashore will do the men all the good in the world. You won't have above two or three days at the most at the rock before it will be time to put about and sail back and fetch us off!"

Lawless raised various objections, all of which did him the greatest credit. He didn't like leaving us. Suppose something happened to the *Naomi*? But Garth swept all objections aside. Then Lawless played his last trump.

"And what about Miss Garth?" he queried. "How will she like leaving you ashore on an uninhabited island? Or do you propose to take her with you?"

Garth rubbed his nose rather sheepishly.

"H'm," he mused. Then, "Okewood," he remarked, "this will be a little difficult. How about taking Marjie ashore at Cock Island with us?"

But I promptly negatived this idea.

"Out of the question," I retorted. "We're going to rough it, Sir Alexander. And it will be no life for your daughter. Why, we aren't even taking a servant!"

Garth jibbed at that. It would be bad enough leaving Marjie, he grumbled, and how he would face her he didn't know. But he must have his man with him. He must have Carstairs. In that I was inclined to support him. I had taken a fancy to Carstairs. I liked his honest, sensible face; he knew Garth and his ways; besides, he seemed a knowledgeable sort of chap and I had an idea that his experience with the sappers in the war might prove uncommonly useful when we pitched our little camp. It was ultimately decided that Carstairs should accompany us.

Then Garth suggested that we should take Custrin as well.

"Capital fellow, the doctor," he remarked, "what the Americans call a good mixer. I like Custrin. And he'll be useful, you know, Okewood, in the case of snake-bite or anything like that, eh?"

Now, as I have explained, I hadn't particularly cottoned to Custrin. Since that first night out he had made famous progress with Marjorie and while Garth and I were sweltering in the hold, assembling equipment and supplies for our expedition, she and the doctor had sat for hours at the piano in the saloon. I have always tried to be honest with myself and I may as well admit that I was envious of Custrin's delightfully easy manner. He was never gauche or sheepish with Marjorie and I knew what a boor she had set me down in her estimation.

So I demurred from the proposal of Sir Alexander. The party was big enough, I urged; to add another mouth would mean seriously increasing the amount of supplies we should have to take with us.

"But Custrin's a first-class geologist as well," pleaded the baronet, "and his knowledge should prove most valuable

in our quest!"

I felt a very unpleasant suspicion dawn within me. Was it possible that Garth had told Custrin about the grave on the island and the clue that lay in my letter-case?

"Have you told Custrin about the treasure?" I asked bluntly.

Garth looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"The doctor's a most reliable fellow and highly recommended, very highly recommended to me. You can see his references if you wish, major. He is quite one of us, you know, and I did not think there was any harm.... Really, I think he'd be a distinct asset. Besides, he'll be horribly disappointed now if we don't take him!"

Then, of course, I knew that Garth had told Custrin the whole story and had definitely promised him into the bargain that he should join our party. I remembered now that the two had been in the smoke-room alone together for an hour or more after lunch. I breathed a little prayer of thanksgiving that in my almost wholly Irish nature a little store, an isolated stronghold, as it were, of caution, legacy of some unknown ancestor, was included. Throughout my career in the Secret Service I have made it a practice, when disclosure is necessary, to disclose only as much as is absolutely essential to the business in hand. My brother Francis, probably the greatest secret agent our country has ever had, gave me this tip.

Accordingly, I had told Garth nothing of El Cojo, the man of mystery, of his appearance at Adams's hut or of the Vice-Consul's warning. Apart altogether from this cautious instinct of mine, I knew next to nothing of this romantic cut-throat, and until I did I had no intention of jeopardising my chances of sailing with Garth by alarming the owner of the *Naomi*. I now realised that everything I might have told Garth about El Cojo, the baronet would have inevitably passed on to the doctor.

As for Custrin, I had nothing whatever against him. But he was a stranger—and in our job, if we don't necessarily "leave 'arf a brick" at the stranger, we are exceedingly cold to him. Custrin was a perfectly civil, unassuming Englishman; but in my career I have refused confidence to many a fellow-countryman far more patently trustworthy than he. His rather mixed upbringing would, for one thing, have prompted me to wariness and Garth's ready confidence in him really rather horrified me. I was quite determined not to have him on the island with me and I said so as frankly as possible. On that, with rather an ill-grace, Garth capitulated.

The *Naomi* carried a small camp equipment with two light and portable Armstrong huts in sections. There was a fold-up camp bedstead for Garth, while I had my battered old Wolseley valise and my flea-bag from France. In addition to our provisions, such as biscuits, tinned food of all kinds, groceries and a suitable stock of drinks including a case of soda-water, we added, as general stores, some electric torches, a couple of ship's lamps and a good supply of candles, a large picnic basket, some mosquito netting, a medicine chest, a couple of axes, and two spades and two picks which Lawless extracted from the stokehold. There were kitchen utensils for Carstairs, who, it appeared, was an excellent cook. Garth had a pair of shot-guns and a Winchester and the three of us had an automatic pistol apiece. This constituted our armoury. I thought of those "volcanic peaks" of which the "Sailing Directions" spoke and sighed for a box of gun-cotton, a tube of primers and some lengths of fuse such as we used to carry with the battery in France. But well-equipped as she was, the *Naomi* did not run to H.E.

This happened on our third day out of Rodriguez. At dinner that evening the captain announced that, if all went well, we ought to sight Cock Island about dawn two days hence.

* * * * *

In the chart-house that evening Custrin pleaded with me to reconsider my decision not to take him ashore with us. I told him as nicely as possible that all our arrangements were made and could not now be altered. He then asked me to let him see the message. Now I had not shown this to Garth (nor to anybody else except Bard) nor had I vouchsafed to our host any information whatever on the subject. I was still very largely in the dark as to its meaning and I was appreciative of Garth's tact in not pressing me on the subject. So I told Custrin that I was still working on the message and was not showing it to anybody just then.

"I'm sorry," he said at once, "I didn't mean to be tactless, Okewood. But I'm a pretty fair hand at languages, French or Spanish or Dutch or German and that kind of thing, you know. I thought I might be useful. Or perhaps it's in cipher?"

Custrin's affectation of nonchalance was very well done. But I have had so much of this kind of spell-binding tried on me in my time that I detected without difficulty a little note of anxiety in his voice. A very inquisitive young man, was my mental note. But aloud I said:—

"Thanks for the offer, doctor. I'll bear it in mind. When I think two heads are better than one on this thing I'll let you know!"

That was straight enough, one would have thought. But he was a persistent beggar, was Custrin. I'm dashed if he didn't get Garth to tackle me. Our worthy host's rather elephantine attempts at diplomacy, however, were not difficult to counter and I had my way about keeping the message to myself without, I think, offending his *amour propre*. I should have dismissed the incident from my mind but for a strange and rather disquietening event which took place the following night.

I had gone below, preparatory to turning in, after another disastrous encounter with Marjorie. When I came off the bridge after taking my turn at the wheel, I found her standing alone at the rail. Since our little passage at arms the first night out, while she had not ostensibly avoided me, she had not given me the opportunity of another *tête-à-tête*. Her father, it appeared, had told her that she could not go ashore with us on Cock Island and she wanted me, as leader of the expedition, to intercede with him.

We were going to rough it on the island and a woman would have been impossible. And so I told her. I also thought it quite likely that the surf-bar mentioned by Adams (one always finds something of the sort round isolated islets like this) would make landing dangerous and we should be lucky, I surmised, if we escaped with nothing worse than a good soaking.

Marjorie was at first pleading, then indignant and at last angry. There was a good deal of the plethoric temperament of her father in the toss of her head with which, in disgust at my obstinacy, she turned and left me on the deck. And I, feeling the criminal every man feels when he has displeased a charming girl, slunk below to my bunk.

I had changed into pyjamas when Custrin, who had the cabin next to mine, put his head in the door.

"I'm just going up to get a 'peg,'" he said. "You look as though you could do with one yourself. Shall I bring you one down?"

A drink was emphatically what I needed in the frame of mind in which I found myself, so I gratefully accepted his offer.

"And make it a stiff one!" I called out after him. Then Carstairs, who had been working like a Trojan all the evening, packing, oiling guns and greasing boots, fetched me away to the little sort of pantry-place at the end of the flat which was his especial domain, to consult me about the clothes I was taking. When I got back to my cabin my drink in a long glass stood on the chest of drawers. There was no sign of Custrin.

Carstairs, in shirt and trousers, was simply dripping with perspiration. He looked absolutely all in.

"Here," I said, "you seem to be more in need of a 'peg' than I am, Carstairs. Suppose you take hold of that glass and show what you can do with it!"

The offer was scarcely in accordance with the discipline of the *Naomi* and Carstairs glanced cautiously up and down the corridor before he seized the glass and with a whispered "Here's luck, sir!" drained it.

* * * * *

I don't know how long I had been asleep when I awoke with the impression that my cabin door had opened. Then I remembered, with a flash, that on going to lock it as usual before getting into my bunk I had found the key to be missing. I

had searched the floor of the cabin and the corridor for it in vain. Carstairs had turned in and I was loath to disturb him after his heavy day.

There was no moon on this night and my cabin was quite dark. The *Naomi* trembled to the thump of the propeller and at the wash-basin some fitting or other rattled a merry little jig. Otherwise, all was still. I was about to turn over on my side and go to sleep again when a slight noise caught my ear. My hand flashed instantly to the electric switch and the cabin was flooded with light.

Custrin stood in the doorway. He was in his pyjamas, bare-footed. His eyes were closed and one hand rested on the chest of drawers just inside the door. He was muttering to himself. As I sprang out of my bunk he turned round and, still muttering, made his own way back to his room next door.

I dashed after him. The corridor was quite dark and by the time I had found the switch in Custrin's cabin, the doctor was in his berth, to all intents and purposes sleeping peacefully.

"Trust all men; but cut the pack!" is a favourite saying of my brother Francis. With that document in my possession I had no desire to be disturbed by surprise visitors, even though they walked in their sleep. I now blamed myself for my slackness in not making Carstairs find the key of my door. I went straight off to his bunk.

Carstairs was asleep on his back, snoring merrily. I tapped on the side of the bunk and finding that this failed to awaken him, shook him by the arm. He never budged. The snoring stopped; but he slept on.

I shook him violently again. Never had I seen a man sleep like this! I put my two hands under his shoulders, raised him up and jerked him to and fro. But he remained a dead weight in my grip, sunk in deep sleep.

There was a step in the corridor outside. I put my head out. Mackay, the engineer, was there on his way to his bunk.

"Hsst!" I whispered. "Mackay, what do you make of this? I can't wake Carstairs...."

Mackay thrust his grizzled head into the cabin. He bent down over the sleeping man and sniffed audibly.

"The man's drunk!" he remarked casually.

My conscience smote me. But then I reflected. Could one "peg" have reduced the model Carstairs to this state? Unless, of course, he had already been drinking that evening. I had detected no signs of it about him....

"I wonder if I should fetch the doctor...." I began.

"Hoots!" broke in the engineer, "let the man bide. He's a gude lad but, mon, he'll have a sore heid to-morrow! I'm thinkin' Sir Alec wull gie him all the doctorin' he wants!"

"After all," said I, "I don't think we need disturb the doctor!"

Custrin's curiosity about the message, the inexplicable disappearance of my key, the drink the doctor had prepared for me which I had given to Carstairs and the servant's drunken stupor, Custrin's visit to my cabin.... my mind sprang from rung to rung in this ladder of curious happenings. What had John Bard told me about El Cojo's gang?.... "a tremendous organisation with an immense network of spies as widespread and efficient as the Mafia of Italy!"

My hand went instinctively to the inside pocket of my pyjamas, a pocket with a button-up flap specially designed, which has rendered me good service in sleeping-cars and cabins half round the world. I felt beneath my fingers the crackle of the oilskin in its flannel cover.

I held my secret still guarded. I congratulated myself on my firmness in refusing to let this persistent Master Custrin accompany the expedition. But we had not yet reached the island. I must be watchful, watchful....

* * * * *

Half an hour later, as I sat on the edge of my bunk smoking a cigarette, there came a tap at the door. Garth, looking strangely big and unwieldy in his pyjamas, stood outside.

"Come up at once!" he whispered. "Don't trouble to dress. There's no one about!"

He glided away. When I emerged on deck the eastern sky was streaked with light. Lawless was on the bridge, Garth at his side.

Silently the captain pointed to the horizon. Away on the port bow a faint grey blur rested lightly on the straight edge of the ocean like a wisp of mist on a lake at dawn.

"Cock Island!" said the skipper.

CHAPTER X

THE GRAVE IN THE CLEARING

"Till Monday then!" said Garth as Lawless stepped into the launch.

"To-day week it is, sir!" returned the captain as Carstairs cast him the painter.

"You might fire the gun to let us know you're back," cried the baronet.

"Right-o!"

Lawless turned to bend over the engine. Then he looked round quickly and grinned.

"Good luck!" he cried, "and good hunting!" and waved a friendly hand. With that he pushed over the lever and with a mighty flurry of propeller and vast bustle among the sea-birds on the foreshore, the *Naomi's* launch throbbled her way out into the bay towards where, spanning as it seemed the harbour's narrowest part, a creamy band of white spume marked the surf-line. Silently we watched the pretty craft, her paint and brass-work flashing in the morning sun, gliding through the green water. Then Lawless raised an arm in a parting greeting, and the white launch melted into the spume and spray of the open sea.

We stood on a long sloping beach of gleaming white sand shut in on all sides save the sea by lofty grey rocks. Their jagged points out-topped the bright-green fronds of the waving palm-trees which grew almost down to the water's edge. Their column-like appearance, coupled with the singular silence of the island, gave me a sort of solemn feeling, like being in a cathedral.

Some three hundred yards from where the foam-crested rollers beat their thunderous measure on the beach, the ground rose abruptly. The sand ended and became emerged in a tangle of coarse grass. Alternating with a wild and luxuriant undergrowth of a great variety of tree ferns and other plants, it formed a kind of tasselling to a great curtain of greenery which rose, as it seemed, sheer from the sea.

The verdure was so dense that it completely hid the bases of the pointed cliffs which, clustered together like a bundle of faggots, formed the high central part of the island. From some hidden source a clear cold stream of water came plunging down from the cliff, rushing and gurgling until it lost itself in the sea.

It was the first time I had ever set foot on an uninhabited shore. It was a curious sensation. The sea-birds wheeled aloft with their harsh melancholy cries; among the trees above the beach there was sometimes the flash of a brilliantly-plumaged bird and here and there some animal rustled in the undergrowth. But otherwise a deep silence brooded over

the island. There was an atmosphere of expectancy about the place which rather intrigued me.

I lost no time in setting about choosing a site for our camp. The appearance of the foreshore, exposed to the full force of the wind in unfavourable weather, did not impress me favourably, nor, owing to the danger from lightning in the thunderstorms that spring up so suddenly in these climes, did the obvious solution of erecting our huts under the shelter of the trees higher up on the shore commend itself. Moreover, I knew very little about conditions on Cock Island and, were there any wild animals about, it would be as well, I reflected, to pitch our camp in some spot not easily accessible to attack.

After exploring round a bit I came, behind a mantle of hanging creeper, upon the mouth of a cave. Set in the lofty grey rocks dominating the beach, it was well clear of high-tide level and clean and dry into the bargain. The roof sloped somewhat, but there was ample clearance for Garth's six feet when he stood erect and the cave ran back for some twenty feet into the rock.

So we plumped for the cave. Having stripped to vest and trousers, Garth and I started carrying up our stores from where the launch of the *Naomi* had deposited them on the beach. While we stacked the various boxes neatly at the back of the cave, Carstairs was busy fitting up what he called his "field-kitchen." Higher up the rocks, in a little cavity well-sheltered from the wind, he installed his Primus stove, cook-pots and other impedimenta.

It was with the utmost reluctance that I spared the time for this tiring but necessary fatigue. I was on fire to be off into the interior of the island and locate the grave. Garth, too, was as keen as mustard, and fairly jumped at my proposal that, as soon as the stores were stowed away, we should set forth on a voyage of discovery.

It was a long job; for the cases were heavy and the going was bad, but when I stood on the beach below and, with the roar of the ocean in my ears, looked up at our temporary home, I felt rather pleased. Absolutely no trace of our presence was discernible. Though I was aware that perhaps not one vessel in two years called at the island, I have always had a very healthy respect for the long arm of coincidence. I did not wish my investigations at Cock Island to become the mark of prying eyes.

It was past three o'clock and the sun very warm when Garth and I set out. We took with us a flask of cold tea apiece, some biscuits and some dates and a shot-gun each. With a wave of the hand to Carstairs, our guns slung across our backs, we plunged into the tangle of steep woods growing down to the shore.

The climate of the island seemed to be temperate enough. The air was a little steamy but mild and at first there was a pleasant breeze off the sea to cool us. To be equipped for the rocky nature of the island both of us had brought stout hob-nailed boots, and we praised our circumspection when we realised that only by boulder-climbing should we gain access to the higher parts of the island.

The climbing was arduous (for neither of us was in form) but not too difficult. I kept a sharp look-out for any traces of former visitors. Once I found some sheep droppings and again a large bleached bone which looked as if it might have come from a sheep. But of man there was no trace.

The scrub soon gave way to forest and for a good half hour we toiled up the jungle-clad slopes. Great trees formed an almost impenetrable roof over our heads through which the sunshine fell but sparsely. We went forward in a dim and mysterious twilight with no sounds in our ears other than the swift rushing of the stream which gave us our direction, our laboured breathing and the rattle of our nailed boots on the boulders. It was an eerie place which somehow filled me with misgivings.

Suddenly Garth, who was leading, gave a shout. He stood on the flat top of a rock, a dozen feet above my head, and pointed excitedly in front of him. I scrambled to his side.

We were looking down into a deep circular depression shaped like a basin. It reminded me of a quarry, but I imagine it was in reality the crater of some small extinct volcano. What had brought the shout to Garth's lips was the sight of a ruined hut which thrust its broken roof from out of a tangle of gigantic ferns.

So breathless were we with our climb that we were past speech. In silence we slithered and scrambled down into

the hollow, the long tendrils of the plants twisting themselves round our legs and the thorns catching in our coats.

It was a rude timber shack with a door and a window, the interior choked roof-high with growing ferns. The timber flooring had rotted away and through the mouldering planks the jungle had thrust its shoots profusely as though to claim its own. But in one corner, where a roughly-carpen-tered bedstead of timber stood, some attempt had apparently been made to thin out the ferns for a space. On the bed there lay a rotting blanket; on the floor close by some empty canned beef tins red with rust. The blanket practically fell to pieces at the touch. It was not marked and, though we groped pretty thoroughly among the ferns, that was all we found in the hut.

"There's nothing here," I said at last. "Let's have a look round outside. I am wondering...."

The words died away on my lips. I had reached the hut door, my face turned towards the farther edge of the crater, the opposite side from that by which we had descended. A hundred and fifty yards from where I stood a large timber cross was planted in the ground. Between it and the hut lay a great isolated boulder which had probably concealed the cross from our view when we had climbed down into the hollow.

For a moment I could hardly speak. I have seen the proud loneliness of Cecil Rhodes' resting-place in the Matoppos; I have stood (like everybody else) in the amber light that bathes Napoleon's tomb "on the banks of the Seine among this French people I have loved so well." But I have never seen a sight more impressive than that solitary grave on that desert island set down beneath the little round canopy of blue sky which seemed to be borne by the lofty frowning cliffs towering all around. Beneath that plain wooden cross, I told myself, in a silence unbroken by Man, lies the Unknown. It was a mighty impressive thought.

A rudimentary path, still to be discerned through the all-pervading undergrowth, led, round the boulder of which I have spoken, to the cross. The grave lay out in the open in a little patch which had been cleared of ferns. As we came up to it I noted, with an odd little trick of the memory, that the grey and weather-beaten surface of the cross was highly polished, even as the beach-comber had described, by the action of the sand grains blown by the wind from the seashore.

Fashioned out of two baulks of timber wired together and solidly implanted in the ground, the cross stood at the head of a long hillock of earth. On the grave lay, face upwards, a small round mirror and, a little beyond it, an empty bottle, uncorked, which had fallen on its side.

"You see," I remarked to Garth, "it's just as Adams said!"

I stooped to pick up the mirror. Then to my surprise I saw that it was wired to a timber cross-piece which ran out from the cross as a support. It was a little glass set in a metal frame.

"It looks like a shaving-glass!" said Garth.

I did not undeceive him. I am not a secretive person by nature but by training. The very character of Intelligence work—the careful sifting of every apparently insignificant scrap of evidence, the lengthy process of surmise and deduction—tends to make one discreet, even when dealing with one's familiars, until a plain statement of fact can be drawn up. So I did not tell my host that, the moment I saw that the glass was attached to the cross, my brain leaped at the first clear clue to the Unknown's baffling cipher.

For the sight of the mirror, loosely wired so that it faced the foot of the grave, immediately brought into my mind the first line of that bewildering doggerel:

"Flimmer', flimmer' viel."

The reference to flashing surely indicated that the mirror was to be used as a heliograph. The next line—that about "the garrison of Kiel"—still utterly floored me; but, I reflected, since we had a heliograph, the following lines which I surmised to give a compass bearing of 27 degrees ("The Feast of Orders" *i.e.*, Jan. 27), might well furnish the direction in which—for reasons still unknown to me—the sun's rays were to be flashed. The wiring of the mirror to the timber

indicated the direction in which the bearing was to be taken. It looked to me as though the Unknown must have set up his own cross and wired the mirror to it before he died.

I opened the little leathern case which hung at my belt and drew out my prismatic compass, trusty friend of my campaigning days in France. The grave faced practically due north. I laid the compass on the mirror and took a bearing of 27 degrees. The white arrow on the floating centre of the compass swung round. The mark of the 27th degree pointed towards a gaunt and barren pile of rock on the far side of the crater. I took as my line of direction a tall bush aflame with some gorgeous flower on the edge of the clearing.

Some cautious instinct made me detach the mirror. Holes had been bored on either side of the frame through which strands of copper wire were passed and knotted to holes bored in the timber cross-piece. I removed wire and all and slipped the mirror into my pocket. Garth did not notice the action; for he was busy pottering about the clearing. From the luxuriant undergrowth he ultimately collected a cigar box which, I made no doubt, was the identical one from which the man Dutchey had established the fact that Black Pablo and his friends had visited the island. It was curious to find everything in the same state as it had been left more than a year ago. I felt rather like a man must feel who violates a grave.

"There's a path beyond," Garth said, pointing over to the left. "It leads to the spring. I found an old bucket on the bank. But otherwise there's no sign of our Unknown friend here. In fact the whole place looks as if it had been undisturbed since the flood. Whew! but it's hot! Okewood, I believe we're going to have a storm!"

The air was indeed strangely oppressive. The patch of sky which thatched the clearing was now flecked with daubs of white cloud and there was a curiously menacing stillness in the atmosphere. On trees and bushes the leaves hung motionless without a tremor. We sat down to cool off a bit.

"It doesn't look too good to me," I answered. "Garth, I shouldn't wonder if we were in for a soaking to-night!"

Sir Alexander Garth, Bart., who had never slept out in the rain in his life, smiled in rather superior fashion.

"I shouldn't wonder," he returned. "As a matter of fact, I rather like roughing it. It's a devilish healthy life, my boy! What's the next move? Has the grave given you any ideas for the location of the treasure?"

I pointed at the scarlet bush.

"Do you see that plant with the red flowers?" said I. "I have a fancy to take a stroll in that direction and see how far we can get up the cliff."

Garth struck his palm with his clenched fist.

"Okewood!" he exclaimed, "By Jove! I believe you're on to something!"

"I am!" I answered rashly and cursed myself for a babbling fool. For Garth, his curiosity afire, forthwith plied me with questions.

"Don't press me just yet!" I countered. "I'm still groping in the dark. You shall know all in good time!"

But he would not be pacified. Two heads were better than one, he argued, and very often a clear-sighted, shrewd man of business could see a deal farther than an expert.

"Well," I said, "for all that, I think I'll keep my own counsel until we've looked round a bit more!"

At that Garth became huffy. We were partners in this venture, he reminded me, and we must have no secrets. He did not think he should have to recall that fact to my mind.

The stifling heat and the fatigue of our long climb had made us both a bit cross, I suppose. At any rate I was pretty short with him.

"My dear fellow," I said, and rose to my feet by way of putting an end to the conversation, "all in good time. In this sort of work one must work alone, at any rate in the initial stages. Give me a little breathing space!"

Garth followed my example and stood up.

"Shall we go on?" he asked.

He spoke without heat, but there was a look in his face which reminded me that at our first meeting, I had noticed signs of temper about his nose and mouth. Garth was a man who obviously did not like to be thwarted. Now I thought I knew where Marjorie got her proud temper from.

A little puff of hot wind came whirling into the hollow. The trees swayed to it as it rustled through the leaves with a melancholy sound.

"We don't want to go too far," remarked Garth, cocking an eye at the sky, "or we shall have this storm on us before we can get under cover at the camp."

At the first blush the cliff on the far side of the hollow looked perfectly inaccessible. But handy to my bush with the red flowers a succession of flat boulders, like a giant's staircase, enabled us to scramble up until we found ourselves on a plateau of rock dominated on one side by an immense crag which towered above our heads in a succession of shelving ledges. In front of us the ground dropped to a steep nullah from which rose a sheer wall of rock and barred the way.

It was a desolate scene. Neither tree nor shrub nor anything green grew in this barren landscape of grey and friable volcanic rock. The bare and frowning heights oppressed me. I turned to Garth.

"This looks like the end of things," said I, "unless we can find a way up by these terraces. What do you say? Shall we have a try?"

"If we could manage to reach that first shelf," my companion answered, "we could at any rate get a view. There's nothing to be seen from here."

I had to give Garth a back to do it and his sixteen stone I felt convinced, punched a pretty pattern of his hobnails into my skin. However, at the cost of my back and sundry abrasions of his hands and knees, Garth at last gained a footing on the sheer face of the rock and then, giving me a hand, swung me up beside him. After a vertiginous climb, which at one time brought us on to a ledge a hundred feet above the nullah, we struck something like a steep track that eventually landed us on the first terrace.

The view was disappointing. We were still too low to clear the frowning cliffs encircling the nullah and we looked forth on the same gloomy prospect of grey volcanic peaks that had confronted us from below. The shelf on which we stood was only about thirty feet wide and ran for a distance of sixty yards across the face of the cliff and then stopped abruptly. It had obviously been cut by the hand of man out of the friable rock; for a number of caves scooped out of the back wall showed that cave-dwellers must have lived here in that remote period when the island had been inhabited. The ledge was in fact nothing but a street for communication between the different cave-houses. The caves were low-roofed and empty. By craning our necks upward we saw that the whole face of the cliff was thus honeycombed with cave-dwellings in a succession of terraces. At the far end the steep track, by which we had gained access to the first terrace, wound its way upward to the higher levels. There were three terraces in all.

We rested for a while on our rocky shelf and ate some biscuits and chocolate. From our post of vantage we looked down on to the grave in the clearing. The sun had gone in but it was still oppressively sultry. The sky had assumed a forbidding leaden tinge. It looked like some great furnace door radiating a fierce heat from the fire within.

Whilst we ate our frugal lunch we discussed our plans. We decided that, in view of the weather, we would break off our exploration for the day, return to camp and get comfortably installed and make an early start the next morning in order to visit the upper ledges of the rock. Garth had apparently quite recovered his equanimity after our little breeze.

The descent from the rock was a thrilling business. In places the track had crumbled away and more than once we

found ourselves, held only by the nails of our boots, on a slippery slope overhanging a sheer deep drop. I have a poor head for heights and to me it was a nightmare experience. The result was that our progress was slow and it took us a full hour to make the descent. By the time we had reached the rocky plateau the wind was whirling the grey volcanic dust in great pillars about our heads. The sky had grown perceptibly darker with an eerie yellow glow and a few big drops of rain splashed down on the bushes. With startling suddenness a long drawn-out rumble of thunder awakened a thousand echoes as it reverberated among the lonely island peaks.

"By George," said Garth turning up his coat collar, "we're going to catch it, Okewood. We'll have to steer clear of these trees."

"We'd better make a bolt for the hollow," I counselled. "The hut is out in the open. If it stands the wind it will give us some shelter!"

We started to run while the light perceptibly diminished, like a lighting effect on the stage. We were actually crossing the hollow when the storm broke. There was a blinding glare of lightning, a deafening peal of thunder and the light went out while, with a whooshing and rushing and crashing, the rain suddenly descended in what seemed to be a dense sheet of water.

"The hut!" I shouted in Garth's ear.

Well it was that we were just upon it or in that inky darkness we should never have found it. Over the wooden bedstead in the corner the roof was whole and solid and it kept the worst part of the rain off us, though we were splashed by the cataract of water which poured off the roof into the centre of the hut. The air was so highly charged that one could almost smell the electricity in the atmosphere as the lightning rent the sky in blinding flashes which illuminated the whole clearing and the trees and cliffs all round with the brightness of daylight.

The storm was at its height; the thunder was echoing in and out of the rocky hollows of the island and in the moments of stillness the gurgling and splashing of the rain filled our ears. Then came a blinding lightning flash, brighter and more enduring than the rest. It lit up the whole clearing and revealed the cross over the grave of the Unknown standing out hard and black against a fantastic background of bending, straining tree-trunks with branches and leaves blown out in the wind. And by its light, before the brightness died, I saw the figure of a man standing with bowed head at the grave.

CHAPTER XI

A VOICE IN THE FOREST

I saw only him for the fraction of a second, a young man, tall and slim and very blonde, in a shirt open at the neck and riding-breeches, his head bared to the storm. The water streamed off his face and clothing; but he stood perfectly still in an attitude of reverence. In that wild setting of tempest-swept rocks the apparition seemed like some spectre of the Brocken. Or one might have thought that the storm had summoned forth the Unknown himself from his grave.

The vision fairly staggered me; for my mind was imbued with the idea that the island was uninhabited. But my brain keyed up by the events of the day, did not dwell for an instant on any supernatural explanation of the apparition. I promptly asked myself whether, after all, there were people living on the island or whether the man I had seen had, like ourselves, landed from some passing ship.

But then, without warning, there came an ear-shattering metallic crash, as though a big shell had exploded beside us, the earth shook and a perfect tornado of wind and water descended upon the clearing, clawing and tearing at the hut until it seemed as though the beams of the flimsy structure to which we desperately clung would be wrenched from our grasp. The inky-black sky appeared to split across in a jagged band of light which again showed up the clearing as bright as

day. But now the tall wooden cross stood aloft in solitary majesty once more. The figure at the graveside had vanished and the clearing was entirely deserted. I asked myself whether the apparition had not, after all, been the figment of my imagination. Garth had seemingly remarked nothing so I resolved to say nothing about it unless he should ask me.

But now, amid the grumbling and rumbling of the thunder receding into the distance, the storm was passing. The air reeked with the stench of sulphur and I guessed that the appalling crash we had heard had marked the fall of a thunderbolt. Slowly the light was coming back and, though the rain yet descended in torrents, the downpour was much less heavy.

We were in a sorry plight, the pair of us. Our thin garments clung to us like wet swimming suits and our teeth chattered in our heads.

"We appear to have timed things very badly," grumbled Garth, wringing the water out of a corner of his tussore jacket. "We had plenty of warning of this storm. I should have thought we might have managed to have got back to the camp in time to escape it...."

I wiped the water out of my eyes and grinned.

"Oh," I said lightly, "a ducking won't hurt us! Look, the rain's stopping already...."

"I am not complaining about getting wet," observed Garth with an air of dignity which went ill with his bedraggled appearance—he was squatting on his hunkers squeezing out his hat—"I can, I believe, put up with the hardships of an expedition like this as well as any man. But I do think the—er, staff work this afternoon leaves something to be desired. To be wet to the skin an hour's tramp from camp may amuse you, Major Okewood, but the prospect of a heavy chill does not strike *me* as being funny in the least!"

In high dudgeon he placed upon his head the shapeless mass of soggy felt which had once been a hat.

"I vote we make a move for the camp," he proposed. "That is, if anything is left of it. I should not be in the least surprised to find the cave under water, our stores ruined and Carstairs drowned—or struck by lightning, as like as not. I don't wish to seem inquisitive, Major Okewood, but might I inquire what progress this afternoon's unfortunate jaunt has brought to your investigations?"

I was rather nettled by the line he was taking, and the way he manhandled my name irritated me.

"You needn't worry," I retorted curtly. "I'm perfectly satisfied so far!"

"Indeed," replied the baronet—he was struggling to free himself from a giant creeper which had firmly fixed itself about his sodden clothes. "I am sorry I cannot share your optimism. But then I'm wholly in the dark—maybe, it's just as well—about this infernal wild-goose chase. Damn it," he cried suddenly, "can't you lend me a hand to get this blasted root off my legs?"

I hastened to release him, fuming and fretful.

"We shall be home in no time," I said soothingly to humour him, for he was like a spoilt child, "and you'll see what marvels Carstairs has accomplished in the way of making us comfortable. And you needn't worry about the cave. It's splendidly sheltered. Not a drop of water will get in!"

Night was falling by the time we emerged from the steamy atmosphere of the sopping woods and made for the faint glow of light which shone from our cave. Carstairs met us at the entrance. He had fully justified my prophecy to Garth.

Our beds were made up, one on either side of the cave, and our washing and shaving kit laid out on toilet tables improvised out of boxes neatly covered with clean white paper. Hot water steamed in our wash-basins and a dry change of clothing was laid out on the beds. In the centre of the cave, on packing-cases covered by a white damask cloth, the table was set for dinner. A hurricane lamp, placed in the centre, was flanked by enamel cups from the picnic basket filled with bright flowers and on the ground a bottle of Garth's excellent champagne was cooling in a bucket of spring-water.

We lost no time in changing, and within a quarter of an hour were sitting down to what was, in the circumstances, an extraordinarily well-cooked meal. Garth's ill-temper melted perceptibly and it was with the utmost cordiality that he raised his glass and pledged the success of the expedition. The ingenuity of the incomparable Carstairs had so completely reproduced the atmosphere of civilisation that it was difficult to believe we three were dining on a lonely islet in the middle of the Pacific.

After dinner Garth yawned expansively and opined that he would turn in. The unwonted exercise of the afternoon, he declared, had fagged him out. But I had no mind for bed. My brain, stimulated by the unaccustomed environment, was active. The apparition at the graveside during the storm had profoundly disquieted me and I wanted to think. So I strolled outside for a solitary pipe beneath the stars.

On the shore I found Carstairs, pipe in mouth, contemplating the sea. I love the old-time Regular, such as Carstairs, with his twelve years' service in the Sappers, was, his loyalty, his quiet efficiency, his eminent common sense. And as between two professional soldiers a bond of silent sympathy had established itself between Carstairs and me. We had not even discussed the incident of the drink I had given him that night on board the yacht. Having ascertained that Carstairs was practically a total abstainer, I gave Mackay a hint to forget all about his nocturnal diagnosis. I had my own theory about that drink and perhaps Carstairs had his; anyway, we did not discuss it.

"Grand night, sir!" said Carstairs, taking his pipe out of his mouth as I approached over the sand.

"Wonderful!" I commented. "Good spot this, Carstairs!"

The man did not reply. He was sucking on his pipe which did not seem to be drawing well.

"It's a uncanny kind o' place, as you might say, sir!" he remarked presently.

"Well," I observed, "it's a bit lonesome, I suppose. But all desert islands are that!"

"Lonesome?" retorted the man. "I wouldn't have nothing to say agin it if it were lonesome. I'm partial to the moors and such-like places meself. I never was a one for the towns, sir. But I don't like all these tall rocks and all these quiet trees at the back of one. They give me the fair 'ump!"

I laughed.

"You want the desert, Carstairs," I said. "Nothing but sand and then some. No trees looking at you there!"

"It ain't altogether the trees an' the cliffs!"

The man paused and scratched his head with the stem of his pipe.

"There's something sort o' creepy about this place, sir!"

"How do you mean?"

"Well," he said slowly, "it's a funny thing, but all the blessed evening I've had a kind o' feeling as if I was being watched. You know how it was in the war, sir—w'en you was workin' out in No Man's Land on a pitch-black night, scared to death you was walkin' into Fritz's line, tellin' yerself all through 'If you can't see him, he can't see you' but feelin'—well, as though there was nothin' but eyes starin' at you all around!"

He shook himself.

"It fair gives me the creeps!" he finished.

Now Carstairs was a plain honest-to-God Englishman from the New Forest, the very incarnation of the soldier from the English shires whose sheer lack of imagination and consequent inability to accept defeat in any circumstances clear broke the German spirit in the war. There was no associating that good-humoured face, that big mouth and button nose,

with the idle fears of an overheated imagination. There are some people—I am one—who, even though they see nothing, have the faculty of detecting the presence of human beings in their vicinity. I recalled the eerie sensation I myself had had on landing but, of course, above all I thought of that bowed figure which the lightning had shown me standing by the grave in the clearing.

I was filled with the deepest foreboding. If there were people on the island, surely they must have remarked the arrival of the *Naomi*. Would they not have announced themselves to us? What object could they have, supposing Carstairs was not mistaken, in slinking round the camp?

Well, it was no part of my plans as yet to communicate my fears to Carstairs. So I rallied him gently.

But Carstairs stuck to his guns.

"It come over me so strong w'en you and the guv'nor was away this evening," Carstairs said, "that no less than four times I left my cook-pots to have a look round...."

"Well, and did you see anybody?"

"Not a blessed soul!"

"Did you hear anything?"

"No, sir!"

Yet the man was not to be shaken.

"W'en I was servin' dinner jes' now," he persisted, "I was as sure as sure there was a chap watchin' me from just about there,"—he turned and indicated the black shape of a palm on the fringe of the shore,— "not doin' anything but jes' settin' there, spyin'!"

The man knocked out his pipe.

"I'm to call you gentlemen at four, sir. If you didn't mind, I think I'll get down to it!"

This little bit of trench slang (which, being interpreted means to retire for the night), uttered in our romantic surroundings, amused me not a little.

"Good night, Carstairs!"

"Good night, sir!"

He plodded up the beach, his feet making no sound on the soft sand, a white, ghostly figure against the dark foliage. Then he was swallowed up in the mystery and silence of the night.

There was no moon, but in compensation such a prodigious display of stars as only the tropics can show, blazing and twinkling in their myriads till one could almost believe the heavens were in motion. On the open shore there was yet a kind of half-light but beyond, where the woods began, the blackness of the night was Stygian.

Carstairs was right. This island was an eerie place. The absolute stillness of the night, marred only by the mournful rhythm of the waves, seemed to accentuate that air of expectancy about it which I had already remarked. I found myself thinking of the island as of a stage set for the performance of some play.

Here, perhaps, I reflected, the Unknown, destined for that nameless grave I had come to seek, had landed, carried ashore, maybe, by his native crew. I tried to picture him, with death in his face, painfully scrawling the message which had so strangely come into my hands. What manner of man was this Unknown? A German officer, a naval officer probably (as the reference to Kiel seemed to indicate). And for whom did he write? For Germans, for a German. Yet there were no Germans, as far as I knew, in the gang that had taken two men's lives to get the message now reposing in

my pocket. Black Pablo, Neque, El Cojo.... these were Spanish names.

El Cojo? "He who goes with a limp." *Der Stelze*, Clubfoot, had been the nickname of that other cripple, the man of might in that Imperial Germany which sank to destruction in the fire and smoke of the Hindenburg Line, whose ways lay in dark places, whom everybody feared but whom so few had ever seen.... If he could rise from his grave and seek me out on the island, then, indeed, might my imagination, like poor old Carstairs', people these darkling woods with hidden spies!

Sunk in my thoughts I had wandered on heedlessly, going ever deeper into the tangle of the forest. But now the undergrowth, growing thicker, barred my further progress and I came to an abrupt halt with the thick tendril of some creeping plant wound about my body. On it blossomed a gaudy flower with a heavy, musky scent. The touch of the creeper on my bare arm made me shrink.

It was as dark as pitch in that jungle-like forest. A phrase I had read somewhere about "opaque blackness" flashed into my mind. I realised I stood an extremely good chance of being lost, and cursed myself for a dreamy fool. Fortunately, I had the orientation of our camp—I had taken it that afternoon on the beach—and I knew that, by striking west, I should roughly hit Horseshoe Harbour where we had put ashore.

I took out my compass and opening the lid, bent over the luminous needle. I stood absolutely still to allow the pointer to swing to rest. Then, from the black depths of the forest all about me, a gentle droning fell upon my ear. I listened. No mistake was possible. It was undoubtedly a human voice. And it was softly humming, as a man might hum quietly to himself, to pass away the time. I listened again. The voice rose and fell, with now and then a break, but always on a muted note. Suddenly, I caught the melody, a melancholy, haunting refrain with a phrase, as in a folksong, that came again and again. And I felt the perspiration break out on my brow, my heart grow cold within me, as I recognised the air....

*"Se murio, y sobre su cara
"Un panuelito le heche...."*

It was the song of Black Pablo, the singer in the lane.

CHAPTER XII

I MEET AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

I remained rooted to the spot. The droning chant went on. How far the singer was from me, it was impossible to estimate; for a voice carries far at night—he might be anything from twenty to a hundred yards away. There was nothing to do but retire;.... in that clammy, steamy darkness any idea of stalking a man was out of the questions.

All the events of the past week came tumbling into my brain. They had tracked me down, then, and now I was at grips with El Cojo's famous organisation.... But this was no time for speculation or surmise. I could think matters out afterwards; for the moment I must keep my mind clear and concentrate on getting out of this dense jungle quietly and quickly.

Now the humming had ceased. Did it mean that the singer was moving forward? I strained my ears but could catch no sound other than the rustle of the leaves as they dripped moisture. To move in silence through the clinging undergrowth was, I knew, a thing impossible. An old memory of capercaillie shooting in Russia came to my aid. One stalked the male bird perched on a tree-top as he uttered his love-call to the females at the foot. When he called one moved; when he stopped, one halted.

The droning recommenced. Did my ears mislead me? It certainly sounded nearer now. My compass lying flat in my left palm, I moved swiftly forward, heading for the west. When the humming ceased, I stood still and pushed on again as soon as it was resumed.

A horrid thought assailed me. Was the singer the spy whose unseen presence had impressed itself on Carstairs that evening? Or were there others? Had the cordon let me through only to draw in upon me as I returned? I had no weapon; for I had given Carstairs my revolver to clean and oil on our return from camp that evening after our wetting.

The crooning chant had grown much fainter. I must be drawing away from it. I paused an instant to wipe away the sweat which was pouring into my eyes. Then came a sudden crash in the undergrowth close to hand. I steeled myself to the encounter, getting my back to a tree and striving—but how vainly?—to pierce with my eyes that bewildering pall of darkness. Another heavy crash, a frightened squawk, and I breathed again. It was only one of the island pigs whose nocturnal rambles I had disturbed.

And now for full five minutes I had heard the singer no more. The forest was getting lighter, and like blissful music there came to my ears the distant surge of the sea. Presently, without further incident, I stepped out on the beach not more than twenty paces from our cave.

A black shape rose out of the darkness at my feet. It was Carstairs. I put my hand over his mouth and drew him into the cave. The place re-echoed with Garth's rhythmic snoring.

"You were quite right, Carstairs," I whispered. "There is someone in the woods back there! Have you heard or seen anything?"

"No, sir!" the man returned. "But I was that certain sure there was somebody round the place that I nipped in and got a pistol to sit up and wait for you..."

He showed me the automatic in his hand.

"I don't like the look of things at all, Carstairs," said I, "and that's a fact. I'm not getting the wind up over a lot of shadows; but I don't propose to risk having the camp rushed. You've got some bread-bags and the like, haven't you? Well, get one of the shovels and start filling 'em with sand, will you? If we can run up a bit of cover round the entrance to the cave, one man ought to be able to hold it against all-comers. Meanwhile, I'll wake Sir Alexander here!..."

It is a little embarrassing to rouse a man up out of his beauty sleep and tell him you have been keeping essential facts from his knowledge. However, I could at least honestly claim that, until that moment, I had nothing stronger than suspicions to go upon.

Propped up on his elbow, Garth heard my whole tale just as I have set it down here, from the moment that John Bard identified Black Pablo with the man who had kept watch outside Adams' hut down to the strange happening in the woods that night.

"Just what we are up against, Sir Alexander," I concluded, "I don't know. But we're here for a specific purpose and I feel sure you will agree with me that we should not allow a band of filthy cut-throats to deter us from it!"

"Certainly not, my boy, certainly not!" declared the baronet. "As a matter of fact, I cannot really believe that these fellows really intend us any harm. After all, we're British subjects and a little of Britain goes the deuce of a long way in these parts...."

"Very possibly, sir," I replied, "but you must remember we do not know how strong this party is. Force is the ultimate sanction of the law, they say; but on this particular island British prestige is backed up by exactly three very imperfectly armed Britishers...."

"If you'll allow me to say so," Garth broke in pompously, "you go rather fast. From the accident that you overheard on an island which we previously believed to be uninhabited a song you heard sung (in peculiar circumstances, I grant you) at Rodriguez, you appear to assume that the men who murdered Adams have landed on this island. Your song may

be a popular favourite in Rodriguez; everybody may be singing it. Have you thought of that?

"If this figure you saw at the grave and this man whom you heard humming in the forest belong to this mysterious gang led by El What's-his-name, then they must have followed us here. But how did they come? We have seen no steamer. If, on the other hand, the song incident is capable of some simple explanation such as I have suggested, your last valid link of evidence connecting these mysterious visitors of Cock Island with El Thingumybob's gang snaps."

This was very ingenious. But it didn't convince me. The intonation of the singer in the forest was identical with that of the man in the lane. Of that I was sure. Besides, in the back of my mind lurked a half-formed suspicion about Custrin which I had not as yet thought proper to communicate to the worthy cotton-spinner. And, as for having seen no steamer, I recollected that launch which had put out from Rodriguez after us.

"I'll tell you something else," Garth resumed, "that perhaps you don't know, major. Many of these Pacific islands do contain treasure; not doubloons but something almost equally valuable; phosphates. Adventurers are always roaming about the Pacific prospecting for guano deposits and mighty shy they are, many of 'em, of casual visitors. Now you mark my words, these chaps who have been behaving so oddly are in all probability just a band of shysters from Rodriguez—without any concession, of course—dropped here by a ship to look for phosphates. They think we've come to jump their claim...."

I felt very perplexed. Garth was a hard-headed Lancashire business man and there seemed to be a good deal of horse sense in what he said. And yet somehow....

I walked to the entrance of the cave and looked out. In awe-inspiring majesty the sun came rolling up from the east and the glistening beach was dyed in the hues of the morning. A few paces away Carstairs was shovelling sand for dear life. Already he had filled a dozen stout cotton bags.

"You may be right, Sir Alexander," I said at length. "I hope you are. But even if these gentry are concession-hunters we have to bear in mind that they are a cut-throat lot. They are quite capable of shooting first and of asking your name afterwards. I'm going to run up a little sand-bag parapet at the mouth of this cave. It commands a fine field of fire and will allow you or Carstairs to challenge anybody who comes within thirty yards. As soon as we've put the place in a proper state of defence I'm going out to do a little reconnoitring on my own...."

"My dear fellow," remarked Garth, sitting up in bed and nursing his toes, "to hear you talk you'd think the blessed old British Empire had ceased to count in the world. Foreigners can't go about murdering British subjects, you know. They'd have the Foreign Office on them damned quick, send a cruiser and all that sort of thing. However," he finished indulgently, "I'm quite prepared to hold the fort while you have a look round. I'm not sorry to have a lazy morning for, to tell you the truth, I'm so stiff from our climb yesterday that I can scarcely move!"

Rather with the air of Daddy helping his little boy to build sand-castles, Garth assisted me to erect a parapet at the mouth of the cave. There were not many sand-bags, but we helped out with some cases of tinned provisions, putting the sand-bags on top and then a layer of sand scooped out from the foot of our fortification. The screen of creeper across the entrance to the cave, while it obscured the view from outside, was not so dense as to prevent anybody within from commanding the approach to our stronghold.

Carstairs brought coffee and sandwiches and at my request filled my flask with brandy and brought me my automatic pistol and a couple of charges of ammunition. Then, turning my back on the sea, I once more struck out into the woods.

My plan was to make for the grave in the clearing. This should be the test. If our mysterious visitors were after the treasure I made sure I would come upon them in the vicinity of the grave. For, as far as I knew, the grave was the only indication they had to guide them in their hunt. It was still very early, and if I could gain the clearing unobserved, I would post myself at some convenient point, perhaps on the high ground beyond the grave, and await events.

I went forward very cautiously, my pistol cocked in my hand. I stopped repeatedly and listened; but, save for the hubbub of the birds in the trees, all was still around me. The burbling stream that fell from the high ground of the island to the beach gave me my direction.

I had reached a narrow ravine at the end of which was that flat rock whence, on the previous evening, Garth had described the ruined hut. On a slab which formed a convenient step to mount the boulder something white caught my eye as I came down the nullah. To my unbounded surprise it proved to be one of those cheap cigar-holders made of cardboard which so many Germans use.

I stooped to examine it. The holder with its quill mouth-piece, was quite clean and obviously brand-new. Therefore, it was no relic of the former visitors to the island. *And it had not been there yesterday.* I had mounted by this very slab to stand by Garth on the flat rock and if the holder had been there, I could not possibly have failed to see it.

It looked as though it might have dropped out of a man's pocket as he was scrambling up the rock. The name of a popular firm of cigar-merchants, with branches all over Germany, was printed on it. "Loeser und Wolff, Berlin. S.W. Friedrich-Strasse," I read. I knew the shop well. I had bought cigars there scores of times in the past....

A sudden feeling of uneasiness, an acute sense of danger, came over me. To be shadowed is an almost everyday experience on our job and one develops a kind of sixth sense in detecting it. I had the distinct impression that somebody was watching me.

My brain worked swiftly. I was in the open, without cover, liable to be shot down with impunity from the edge of the ravine. To keep perfectly calm, to show no signs of fluster and, above all things, to spot your man without his knowing that he has been seen, is the only safe course in moments like this. My grip tightened on my pistol as, very slowly, I began to raise my head....

The top of the rock above me was level with my eyes. As I lifted them my gaze fell upon a monstrous mis-shapen boot, projecting awkwardly over the edge. For the moment, I had no eyes for the huge figure that stood there resting on the rubber-shod stick. I could only stare, like one transfixed, at that sinister club-foot, as a voice, a well-remembered voice that for months had haunted me in dreams, cried out sharply:

"Stay as you are and raise your hands! Quick! And drop that gun!"

I glanced up and as I lifted my arms, my pistol rattled noisily on the slab below.

Over the barrel of a great automatic clasped in a huge hairy hand, the Man With the Clubfoot was looking at me.

CHAPTER XIII

EL COJO

Well, I was up against it now. In vain my memory protested against the credibility of the evidence which my eyes could not repudiate. Grundt was dead these four years; had I not seen him, dimly through the blue haze of smoke from my brother's automatic, sink back lifeless on the carpet in the billiard-room of that frontier Schloss? Had I not even read his obituary in the German newspapers?

Yet here he stood before me again, the man as I had known him in the past, ruthless-looking, formidable, sinister in his clumsy, ill-fitting suit of black. Again I noted the immense bulk which, with the overlong sinewy arms, the bushy eyebrows and the black-tufted cheek-bones irresistibly suggested some fierce and gigantic man-ape. Beneath the right eye a red and angry scar, a deep indentation in the cheek-bone, solved at a glance the mystery which had almost paralysed my brain. My brother's aim had failed. That hideous cicatrice, accentuating the leer of the bold menacing eyes and of the cruel mouth, told me beyond all possibility of doubt, that, out of the dim, dark past, Clubfoot had again arisen to confront me.

A sort of cold despair settled down upon me. That Clubfoot would, in his good time, shoot and shoot to kill I made

no doubt; for we had been mortal enemies and quarter did not ever come into Grundt's reckoning. All kinds of odd scenes from my crowded life swarmed into my mind; dear old Francis serving in the tennis-court at Prince's; a juggler on the Maidan at Calcutta, when I was a subaltern in India; Doña Luisa, standing in Bard's gardens and rolling her white eyeballs at me....

Then Clubfoot laughed, a dry mirthless chuckle. The sound was forbidding enough but it braced me like a tonic. I had beaten this man before; I would beat him again. I dropped my eyes, seeking to locate my pistol.

"Five paces back, if you please, Herr Major," rang out a commanding voice from the rock. "And, to save misunderstanding, let me say that it would add to the decorum of the proceedings if you renounced any attempt to find your weapon...." He spoke in German in accents of deadly suavité. "On the occasion of our last meeting you—or was it your brother?—showed that your hand is the prompt servant of your brain, an invaluable asset (let me add in parenthesis) to the big-game hunter, but disconcerting in civilised society...."

What a commanding presence this man had! Again I was conscious of it as, before his slow and searching gaze, I fell back as ordered. He seemed to fill that narrow glen. This effect was not produced by his bulk (which was considerable) but by his amazing animal vitality, the mental and physical vigour of some great beast of prey.

Keeping me covered with his pistol, he lowered himself to a sitting position on the rock and with surprising agility in one crippled as he was, dropped heavily on to the slab. In a lightning motion he stooped and whipped up my automatic which, with a whirling motion of the left hand, he sent flying away into the bush.

"Now, Okewood," he remarked, "you can sit down! But be good enough to keep your hands above your head!"

He gave me the lead by seating himself on the rocky slab. I followed his example and dropped on to the ground.

"Would you mind," I asked, "if I clasped my hands behind my head? Otherwise, the position is fatiguing...."

"Not in the least," retorted Clubfoot, baring his teeth with a gleam of gold, "as long as you remember that I shoot quickly—and straight!"

He measured the distance between us with his eye and then, as though in deliberate challenge, laid his pistol down on the rock beside him. He produced a cigar case from his pocket.

"I seem to recollect that you are a cigar-smoker!" he began.

"Thanks," I retorted, remembering the holder I had picked up, "I don't smoke German cigars!"

Clubfoot chuckled amiably.

"Nor do I!" he rejoined. "I believe you will find these as good as any that ever came out of Havana. Not long ago I was a highly respected member of the Club there!"

And he tossed his case across to me, after selecting a cigar for himself. I let it lie. I was not taking favours from this man.

Grundt raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders. But he made no comment on my ungraciousness.

"Herr Major!" he said as he bit off the end of his cigar, "I must once more congratulate you on the supreme excellence of your country's Secret Service! The intelligence system which located this remote island as the hiding-place, real or imaginary, of treasure, is remarkable! The resource you displayed in acquiring the document which now rests in the letter-case in your pocket does credit both to the service and yourself. My congratulations!"

Here he paused to light his cigar from a pocket-lighter and with lips pursed up, noisily exhaled a long puff of smoke, cocking his head to watch the smoke drift aloft. It was nonchalantly done. But I knew that in reality he was watching me.

I felt puzzled. Obviously, he was feeling his way; *ergo*, he was not sure of his ground. And he had no inkling, apparently, of the aimless way in which I had stumbled upon this amazing adventure. He seemed to believe that I was *en service commandé*. Well, I could put up a bit of bluff on that....

"You will at least do us the justice," he resumed, "of not withholding your admiration of the way in which, as the result of careful planning, this pleasant reunion of to-day was achieved. The luck was on your side that night at Rodriguez, Herr Major; if my orders had been carried out, we should have spared ourselves—and you—this cruise in the Pacific...."

"You mean," I retorted, "that, if your spy had done his work properly, he would have cut my throat as well as that other poor fellow's and the woman's...."

"I can honestly say," observed Clubfoot, blinking his eyes benignly at me, "that I should have sincerely deplored such an eventuality...."—he paused and smiled expansively;—"at hands other than my own...."

My brain was working rapidly. Grundt was apparently alone. But, knowing the man, I guessed he had help in the vicinity to summon at need. Therefore, even if I could get past that gun of his, a frontal attack was out of the question. I wondered whether, if my return to camp were over-long delayed, Garth or Carstairs would come out in search of me. At best we were only three. Against how many? So far I only knew of two, the stranger at the graveside and Black Pablo. But to have brought a ship here from Rodriguez argued a crew. In any case we were hopelessly outnumbered....

Curiously enough, Clubfoot himself answered my unspoken question.

"Now, Okewood," he said leaning forward and looking sharply at me, "I don't have to tell a man of your intuition and... and imagination that the game is up. I shall be quite frank with you, *jawohl*. We are fourteen against you and your two companions. I am well acquainted with your movements, you see. And, to remove any misapprehension from your mind, let me say at once that I am not the only German in our company. You are not dealing exclusively with men of the calibre of Black Pablo whose minds are a confusion of murder and the soft allurements of love. You will be wise to capitulate gracefully and hand over that message which, incidentally, was never meant for you. And perhaps, since two heads are better than one—and, I have, as you know, the highest opinion of your intelligence—I might consider allowing you to help in working out the clue...."

Again that note of doubt! Then I realised that I was, after all, the only man, barring Dutchev who was dead, who had spoken to Adams. Apparently Clubfoot believed that I might have information as to the hiding-place of the treasure additional to the indications in the message. Now I began to understand the meaning of his honeyed words, his deadly suavity. And I guessed that he could not *afford* to kill me—at least, not yet.

"Grundt," said I, speaking with all the decision I could command, "if you think I'm going to work in with you, you're making a big mistake. On the contrary, I'm going to show you what it means for a German, after the Armistice, to lay hands on an Allied subject. Your knowledge of our Intelligence service will tell you that it does not leave its agents unprotected...."

I broke off significantly and looked at him. Mine were brave words enough, though, the Lord knows, my heart was in my boots. But bluff, I have often noticed, has a heartening effect upon the bluffer; and I was summoning all my strength to face whatever dark fate was in store for me. For I realised that, whether Grundt and his merry men found the treasure or not, either way my chances at long last of leaving the island alive were of the smallest.

Very coolly Clubfoot flicked the ash off his cigar.

"Quite, quite!" he observed carelessly. "But for the time being, my friend, let us not forget that you have to forgo that protection. An *Engländer* in the hand is worth two light cruisers in the Pacific. You take me?"

With his cigar thrust out at a defiant angle from his mouth, he planked his hairy hands palms downwards on his knees.

"I'll put the situation quite plainly before you!" he said. "You're in grave danger, Okewood. I've a rough lot of

shipmates and they've got the treasure fever in their blood. My German companions have no liking for their dear English cousins. We have some survivors of von Spee's squadron; they are absurdly prejudiced against you and your race. The brother of the gentleman who wrote that message in your pocket is with me. He was an officer of the *Gneisenau* sunk by your Admiral Sturdee at the Falkland Islands...."

There came into my mind the picture of that blonde youth as I had seen him in the storm standing with bowed head at the grave.

"...We have the bo'sun of the *Nürnberg*, her sister vessel, and a couple of *Blaujacken* of the *Dresden* who swam ashore after your Navy destroyed their ship off Juan Fernandez, besides various army veterans from France. And, my dear Okewood, I need scarcely tell you that, after the Somme and the Hindenburg Line, our brave 'eighty-fivers' dislike you British even as much as our sailormen do...."

A little tremor ran through me. My hands were shaking with excitement behind my head.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"You must let me take my hands down, Herr Doktor," I said.

He glanced sharply at me, then picked up his pistol.

"Why?" he demanded fiercely.

"To get out my letter-case!"

Clubfoot nodded sagely.

"So, so!" he murmured, and his fleshy lips bared his yellow teeth in a cunning smile. "You have taken my advice. *Gut, gut!*"

But then he flashed at me a look full of suspicion and menace.

"No tricks!" he warned in a harsh voice of command. "*Himmelkreuzsakrament nochmal!* If you play me false, you dog, I'll blow your brains all over the ravine! Now, bring your hands slowly down and remember, one suspicious gesture will cost you your life!"

"Calm yourself, Herr Doktor!" I rejoined. "I know when I am beaten!"

And I made to pitch the letter-case on to the slab at his side.

Ah, but he was the cautious one, was old Clubfoot.... cautious with that deadly thoroughness of the Germans that gave a fellow who fell into their hands in the war such a very slender chance. He was taking no risks. With an imperious gesture he stopped me and made me take out the message from the case myself.

"Now throw it on the ground in front of you and turn about!"

I dropped the little flannel-encased package at his feet and swung round. I heard the cripple grunt with excitement as he stooped; I could picture to myself the eagerness with which he snatched up the message. A moment's silence;—then he bade me face him again.

"I think you acted wisely," he said with his slow smile. "Bah! You hadn't a dog's chance. See....!"

He blew three short blasts on a silver whistle he drew from his waistcoat pocket. Immediately a little cloud of men broke out from the cover of the trees at his back.

There were, perhaps, half-a-dozen of them. They were a villainous-looking lot with the exception of a fresh-faced, clean-cut young man whose pink-and-white complexion and fair hair were in striking contrast with the swarthy features

and stubby chins of his companions. I knew him again for the man at the graveside. Another I particularly noticed was a squat, obese fellow with a patch over one eye, the other dull and malevolent. On his yellow jaundiced face a mass of blue-black stubble extended from the cheek-bones down to the loose folds of his double chin, while a twisted and flattened nose, which looked as though a heavy hand had tweaked it, lent a crowning touch of distortion to a face which was, I think, the vilest I have ever seen. From Adams's description I recognised Black Pablo.

Grundt halted them with an imperious gesture.

"Herr Major," he remarked sleekly, "I need not detain you further. A word of advice to you, however, the counsel of a friend. Now that you will have the leisure to devote yourself to that Government survey work on which, of course, you came to Cock Island, I would suggest that you confine your activities to the shores of.... let me see, what was the name?.... ah yes, of Horseshoe Bay. The interior of this delightful island, so they tell me, is most unhealthy and I should be desolated were any accident to befall you."

He paused and meditatively fingered his heavy chin.

"*Noch eins!* If you should be tempted by some slight feeling of irritation at anything I have said or done to contemplate reprisals or anything calculated to interfere with the.... er, research work of myself and my companions, let me warn you that I have the means of very quickly bringing you...."—he stopped and added significantly,—"*and* your friend to your senses! *Kinder!*"

His voice rang triumphantly as he turned to his companions.

"*Ich hab's!*"

With a whoop of excitement the ragged band gathered about him. They had forgotten all about me, seemingly. I had a last glimpse of Grundt, leaning heavily on his stick, holding aloft in one great hairy paw the little square of oilsilk.

Dejectedly I slunk away.

CHAPTER XIV

"DIE FÜNF-UND-ACHTZIGER"

My back view, head sunk forward, shoulders humped up, gave, I believe, a convincing picture of utter abasement as I slowly retraced my steps down the ravine. But the moment I was out of sight of the ill-favoured group about the rock, I darted into the thickest part of the jungle and, after dragging myself painfully through the undergrowth for about a hundred yards, sank down hot and breathless.

I did not care whether I was followed or not. I wanted to be alone to compose my thoughts, to think. My brain was still reeling beneath the shock of my stupendous good fortune. Five minutes since I would scarcely have given a sixpence for my chances of life. Yet here I had regained my freedom of action, had lulled old Clubfoot, by giving him an easy victory, into a false sense of security and, at the same time, had obtained the solution of the knottiest point of the whole cipher message. At the thought that it was Grundt himself who had given me the clue which, till then, I had vainly sought, I leant back and laughed.

"After the Somme and the Hindenburg Line," he had said, "our brave 'eighty-fivers' dislike you British even as much as our sailor-men do...."

"*Unsere braven Fünf-und-Achtziger*" he had used the German phrase and in a flash brought back to my mind a bit of German naval slang which I had heard so long ago that I had forgotten it! "*Die Fünf-und-Achtziger!*" What

memories of pre-war days the phrase awakened! Dinner at Kiel in the ward-room of the German flagship, the tables ablaze with blue and gold uniforms sparkling with decorations, guest night in the mess of the Kaiser Franz Hussars at Stettin.... and always army and navy "shop" the staple theme of our table talk. To the Imperial Navy the German Army was (slightly superciliously, for the rivalry between the two was intense) "*die Fünf-und-Achtziger*" because the 85th Infantry Regiment composed the garrison of Kiel, Germany's premier war-harbour.

The garrison of Kiel! Clubfoot, like all his master's *entourage*, was in closest touch with the Fleet, the Kaiser's own creation. That scrap of navy slang came naturally to his lips and in uttering it, he had sent with a flash the cipher to my mind.

"Flimmer', flimmer' viel"
"Die Garnison von Kiel"

The garrison of Kiel represented the figure "85." How, then, did the cipher run *en clair*?

Heliograph
85
Compass bearing of 27 degrees.

Eighty-five, I realised at once, was the angle for the heliograph. The message, therefore, read:—

"Turn the heliograph at an angle of 85 degrees (*i.e.*, from the horizontal since it had been wired so as only to be raised or lowered) on a compass bearing of 27 degrees...."

The weight of the little mirror in my jacket pocket heartened me immensely. Clubfoot, I knew, would see the figure "85" in the allusion to the Kiel garrison. But the mirror was the starting-point for the whole cipher. *And he had never known that a mirror was on the grave!* The mirror, fixed in position as I had found it, made the first half of the message as clear as day. Without this essential pointer the cipher itself would be useless to Clubfoot. Even if his remarkably astute brain should divine the allusion to a heliograph in that first line, he would not have the mirror....

In any case, his investigations would be delayed. And I was playing for time. Six days must elapse, I reflected, before the yacht could return. For how many of these would I continue to enjoy my liberty? For as soon as Clubfoot realised that he had been fooled, I knew that he would once again stretch out that long arm of his to seize me. I should have to find a secure hiding-place—I thought of the high ground of the island, somewhere among those lofty volcanic peaks, in this connection—but the present need was for action. In the light of the fresh clue I had obtained, I must push on with my investigation at the grave itself and that without a moment's delay. For the rest of the cipher, notably those baffling bars of music, which were firmly fixed in my mind,—well, sufficient for the day is the evil thereof!

I looked at my watch. It was twenty minutes past eleven. "Mittag"—noon—the message was dated, clearly an indication of the time at which the experiment with the heliograph was to be made. If I were to act, I must act at once. Fortunately, the grave could not be far from where I lay. But what of Clubfoot?

The sound of voices came as if in answer to my query—of voices close at hand. Parting the foliage in front of me, I saw a file of men winding their way through the forest not twenty paces away. They appeared to be following some kind of path; for they marched steadily, one behind the other.

I pressed myself flat behind my protecting bush, only my head raised to observe the men as they went by. Now scraps of German came to my ears. There was talk of someone they called "Red Itzig," a Jew, who was to read the cipher for them. Itzig was apparently ill for there was some chaff about "the Jew" being cured as soon as he could hear that the treasure was within their grasp.

Did this mean that they were going back to their camp? And that the coast was clear for that pressing work I had to

do. Five minutes, I calculated, would suffice for my purpose.

I kept a sharp eye open for Clubfoot. Here he came, the eighth in the party, hobbling along in the rear, with set face, grim and silent. The line halted for a moment. The man in front of Clubfoot, a small, dark man, doffed his panama to sponge his face. To my amazement it was Custrin.... Custrin, whom I had last seen, at the side of Marjorie Garth, standing at the head of the *Naomi's* ladder waving us farewell as the launch took us ashore....

Now I had the solution of something that had greatly puzzled me—Clubfoot's exact knowledge of where I kept the cipher message, his allusion to my "Government survey work" on Cock Island. Then Custrin was one of El Cojo's spies! With a little shiver I thought of that hocused drink. What would have been my fate that night but for the merciful intervention of Providence? I could make a pretty shrewd guess. They would have found me insensible in my berth and Custrin gone in the morning—in one of the ship's boats. I wondered vaguely what had become of the doctor whose papers he must have appropriated....

The voices had died away now and Clubfoot, the last of the line, had disappeared from my sight. I had counted eight in the party. All, therefore, seemed to have passed. Softly I began to wriggle myself forward....

I reached the path which the party had followed. It was a well-marked track through the forest. The trees were not so dense here, and above my head I caught at intervals a glimpse of dazzling blue sky. The sun was very hot.

Quietly and quickly I went down the track, heading for the direction from which Clubfoot and his men had come. I went warily, bitterly conscious of my defenceless state. But I met no one and presently I stood on the edge of the clearing, the grave of the Unknown below me.

The clearing was all a-quiver with heat; gorgeous-hued butterflies danced from bush to bush amid flaming flowers; the drone of insects was in the air. I skirted the edge of the basin, then silently dropped down to the grave.

I took out the little mirror and gave it a good rub-up with my handkerchief. Then, going down on my knees, I laid it on the grave as I had originally found it—face upwards with the holes in the frame aligned with the holes in the timber baulk beneath. With my compass I took my bearing of 27 degrees, adjusted the mirror's position to the line it gave and then raised the glass on its base until it stood, as far as one might reckon by the eye, at an angle of 85 degrees from the horizontal.

I looked at my watch. It marked five minutes to twelve.

A gleaming speck of light flamed on the mirror's polished surface as it caught the sun, danced on fern and bush and boulder as I raised the glass and then, as I steadied it, came tremulously to rest on the topmost pinnacle of that terraced rock which Garth and I had climbed on the previous afternoon.

From where I stood I could see the edges of the three shelves which had been cut by some forgotten generation of cave-dwellers out of the friable volcanic rock. The speck of light trembled on the crag on a level with the topmost terrace. It rested on a tall, flat stone which stood out from the rest of the weather-beaten face of the rock because its surface was smooth while all the rest was jagged and serrated. Only the upper part of this pillar-like stone was visible to me; for the projecting edge of the terrace cut off the rest from my sight. As far as I could judge the pillar must have been hewn out of the face of the rock on the highest shelf.

The stone was easy to identify. I felt a little thrill of excitement. What should I find on scaling the rock? From the first terrace on which Garth and I had rested before the thunderstorm there had been, I now recalled, a little winding path leading aloft. What did the cipher say?

"Past the Sugar-Loaf you see the Lorelei
"And if you want the little treasure"

I quoted to myself and realised, with a pang, that I was still without the key to the riddle of those four bars of music. Well, the next thing to do was to climb to that topmost shelf....

Suddenly Garth and Carstairs came into my mind. With a little twinge of conscience I became aware that, in the excitement of the morning's events, I had completely forgotten them. I was sorely tempted to push on with my quest. But I thrust the temptation aside. My encounter with Clubfoot had put an entirely new complexion on the situation. I should have to consider seriously with my companions what we were going to do. After all it was I who had brought Garth into this business.... With a last regretful glance at that terraced crag where all my hopes were centred, I turned my back on the grave and set my face for the shore. When I emerged at the top of the beach, the first thing I saw was the *Naomi's* launch drawn up on the shining white sand.

Garth, followed by Carstairs, tumbled out of the cave at my approach.

"Okewood," cried the baronet and his face was very grave, "what does this mean?"

He pointed at the launch.

"It means," said I, "that Dr. Custrin fooled us, Sir Alexander. You say he presented letters of recommendation?"

"Certainly. From my New York manager!"

"Well, they were stolen. I have just seen Custrin in the forest. He obviously took the yacht's launch to come ashore and join his employer...."

"His employer?"

"El Cojo!"

Then I told him about my meeting with Grundt and of the previous history of the man, of Custrin's attempts to get me to show him the message and of the opiate he had put in my drink. Garth listened without interruption but his eyes began to bulge and his cheeks to redden in an ominous way.

"Dang it!" he burst out at length, and the northern burr crept into his speech as it did when he got angry, "I'll see this club-footed man and learn him to send his spies on to my yacht. A German, too! I'll talk to him. I'll...."

I observed that they were fourteen to three.

"It will be at least six days before the *Naomi* calls for us," I pointed out, "and for that time we are practically at their mercy...."

"And to think that those damned doctors wouldn't let me have the wireless on the yacht!" exclaimed the baronet. "Wait till I get a cable-instrument. If I don't have a warship here within a week...."

"We've got to do something *now*, Sir Alexander!" I broke in. "If Grundt realises that he has been tricked before we are out of his clutches all a British warship can do is to give us a military funeral. Do you understand me? Now I had thought of withdrawing our guns and stores to the upper part of the island and trying to find a safe hiding-place there until the *Naomi* comes back. But the sight of the launch has given me a better idea than that. By the way, where did you find her?"

"About half a mile down the coast, under some branches she was!" said Carstairs. "I was having a bit of a look round and I came upon her. She'd had a rough time, by the look of her. There was a lot of water in her afore I baled her out. I brought her round and beached her...."

"Is there any petrol in her?" I asked him.

"She always carries a reserve of forty gallons," Garth replied. "And that's intact. And her tank's half full!"

"Then," said I broaching my idea, "why shouldn't you and Carstairs take her and fetch the *Naomi* back? Alcedo is only a matter of a hundred miles or so. You could be back here with the yacht to-morrow or the next day. You've got the

chart, haven't you?"

"Aye," rejoined Garth slowly, "I've got the chart and a compass. But we're not leaving you here?"

"Yes," I said, "you are."

And I drew him aside.

"With luck," I told him, "I may have twenty-four hours—not more—in which to work undisturbed on the clearing-up of the cipher. I have no right to throw this chance away. If I were to go with you and to find, on our return, that Clubfoot and his gang had stolen a march of us and found the treasure, I should never forgive myself.... And there's another thing! I've brought you into this mess, Garth, and, believe me, I take it very kindly of you that you have never once reproached me, as was your right, with my responsibility in the matter. Knowing that you are out of the island I shall have my mind easy on that score. Besides, I shall be able to reckon on your being back within forty-eight hours and can lay my plans accordingly!"

I had a lot of trouble to overcome his resistance; for he was a stout-hearted fellow. But my mind was made up. All my life I have played a lone hand and I knew that I should face the future with greater confidence by myself. In the end I had my way and the three of us immediately set about filling up the launch with stores and water.

In half an hour all was ready. We pushed the launch down into the water and shook hands all round.

"If I don't show up when you land," was my parting injunction to Garth, "occupy the beach here and wait for me. I shall always have the cave to come back to. And fire a gun, when you sight the island, to let me know you're here!"

With that Carstairs started the engine and churning up the green water, the launch glided out into the harbour. I did not wait to see her fade out of sight in the spray of the surf-bar for I had not a moment to lose. I made at once for the cave to collect a few provisions for my change of camp.

* * * * *

I had filled a knapsack and was strapping it when a sudden sound brought me hastily to the mouth of the cave. The launch had disappeared and the bay lay deserted before me.

Somewhere in the woods behind me I had heard a woman scream.

CHAPTER XV

MARJORIE'S ADVENTURE

It was the high-pitched cry of a woman in terror. It rang out sharply over the ominous silence, resting on that quiet island. And it was not far away. Clapping my hand to my pocket to make sure I had the automatic pistol which Carstairs had pressed upon me before he left, I dropped the knapsack and darted from the cave.

I had no clear purpose in my mind, I think. Did not Edmund Burke tell us that the age of chivalry is dead? But half the battle in this curious work of ours is knowing what the other fellow is up to and I have never been able to sit down quietly under uncertainty.

Swiftly I mounted the rocky slope from the shore. Behind me the gulls uttered their mournful cries as they hung above the placid sea and in the woods around me there was the loud chatter of birds. But there was no sound of human voice.

Then suddenly I came upon Marjorie Garth in a little open space between two moss-grown boulders. Though I could hardly believe my own eyes there was no mistake about it; for her face was turned towards me. And she was struggling in the arms of Custrin. Her face was very pale and in her grey eyes was a look of despair which I shall not easily forget. She was wearing no hat and her gold-brown hair tossed to and fro as with one hand thrust in her opponent's face, she fought desperately to keep him off.

It all happened in a flash. The next thing I knew, I felt the bite of my knuckles in Custrin's damp neck as, my hand firmly clutching his collar, I tore him backwards. All my resentment against this false, sleek, smooth-spoken creature welled up within me and I exulted to feel him stagger and wilt, then crumple up in a grasp which I willed to be as violent and brutal as mind and muscle could make it.

Caught unawares he reeled backwards inert, for a fraction of a second a dead weight in my hold. But then he reacted. I felt his wiry frame stiffen as he struggled to elude me. But I held fast and swinging him round, gave him my fist in his face.

It was the force of my own blow that sent him from my hands,—staggering against a rock which brought him up standing. A single word he spoke.

"*Herr!*" he cried and the word burst in a kind of sob from his throat. In the crisis his native tongue came to his lips and in that moment I knew Dr. Custrin for a German.

There was murder in his quick, black eyes. His hand clawed for his hip-pocket but I was at him at once, driving for his face again. This time he dodged the blow and I felt my wrist rasp on the rough boulder behind him. For all his pretty drawing-room ways he was game enough, and with outstretched hands made at my throat.

But I drew back swiftly and as he came at me, let fly with my left to the point of the chin. He stopped dead, his eyes goggling, his head sagging on his shoulders. Then he crumpled up in a mass at my feet.

I turned to Marjorie. She stood, where I had found her, against the other boulder, dabbing at her lips with her handkerchief, her breath coming and going in quick gasps.

"The beast!" she said and her voice broke. "The beast!"

Then, plaintively like a little child, she cried:—

"Where is Daddy? Oh, please, will you take me to him..."

"Your father has gone to fetch the yacht," I answered and broke off in sheer perplexity. Where *was* the *Naomi*? The unexplained appearance of Marjorie on the island complicated matters horribly. Alone I was content to face the prospect of eluding Clubfoot and the vengeance he would surely try to wreak on me. But with a woman....!

There was nothing for it but to put into execution the plan I had already formed. I must find—and that without an instant's delay—a hiding-place and withdraw there with the girl. That must be my first care. The future must look after itself.

And the cipher? My intention had been to scale the terraced rock to follow up the next clue. There were caves there in which we could shelter and the topmost terrace would surely afford a view over the sea and enable us to sight the *Naomi* as soon as she appeared off the island.

We would make for the terraces and lie, snugly hidden there, until the yacht came back. And in this way I might also continue to follow up the clue to the treasure. But we must have food and arms. We should have to go back to the cave on the shore.

I looked at Custrin. He lay like a log.

"Come," I said to Marjorie, who was now looking at me curiously.

I glanced down at my clothes and realised that my appearance must be nothing less than forbidding—my face grimy and unshaven, my white drill torn and stained and my boots all soggy with sea-water.

"You look so tired.... and so grave," she said. "What can have happened?"

"Let us go back to the camp," I rejoined, "and I'll tell you as we go."

"What about.... him?" she asked and looked at the prone form of the doctor.

"He'll sleep it off!" said I, "and the longer his slumbers last the better I shall be pleased!"

"But we can't go away and leave him like this!" she expostulated.

"When you have heard my story," I rejoined, "you will think as I do. He'll be all right. He's stirring already. Come! Let's go back to the shore!"

As we turned in the direction of the beach, I said:—

"But how on earth did you come to be here? What has happened to the *Naomi*?"

A little red crept into the girl's cheeks and she bit her lip.

"I wasn't going to be left behind. I told Captain Lawless so. I insisted on joining Daddy on shore. There was an awful row, but"—triumphantly—"I had my own way in the end. It was really Dr. Custrin who managed it for me. He said he would take the responsibility of explaining to Daddy that I *would* come. And, as the captain was anxious to be off, he said he would let us keep the launch. The *Naomi* went on to Alcedo...."

"But," I said, "where have you been since yesterday?"

Marjorie laughed mischievously.

"Daddy will be out of his mind when I tell him," she replied. "I spent the night at a prospector's camp. Dr. Custrin found that he knew some of the men there."

I stared at her in astonishment.

"Was the leader a club-footed man?" I asked.

"Yes!" rejoined the girl in a bubble of laughter. "Such a funny old thing.... a German. There were lots of Germans there. It was quite extraordinary.... like a dream!"

"But," I protested, "why didn't you land on our beach? Why was it necessary to spend the night with these people? A girl like you, alone!"

"Oh," she laughed back at me, "you needn't be so scandalised. I can take care of myself. I meant to bring Yvonne, my maid, you know, with me, but the silly creature lost her courage when it came to dropping into the launch and she wouldn't come. Just as we were through the surf-bar we were caught in that tremendous thunderstorm and we had to run straight for the shore. We tied up the launch and started to walk through the woods. Then we came upon this party of prospectors. Dr. Custrin seemed very surprised to find them there. He said it would be impossible to locate your camp in the dark and we should have to stay the night. They were all very nice to me and I had a room in a sort of wooden hut just above the beach."

Mentally, I took off my hat to Custrin. Not only had he contrived to get ashore without arousing suspicions but he had brought with him a most valuable hostage. Grundt had spoken of having the means of bringing us to our senses. Now I knew what he had had in mind....

"When I woke up this morning," Marjorie continued, "I found that everybody, including Dr. Custrin, had gone. A

hideous-looking negro was left in charge. There was some man ill, too, in one of the huts. The negro seemed to be watching me all the time and I got horribly frightened. So, after waiting a long time for the doctor to come back, I decided to start off and find Daddy and you for myself. The sick man called the negro into the hut for a moment and I got away. Then I met Dr. Custrin in the woods and he tried to stop me. He wanted to kiss me, too...."

She paused and looked at me curiously.

"You hit him very hard, didn't you?" she remarked.

"I'd have twisted his neck clean off," I answered savagely, "If I'd known then what I know now!"

"I thought you were going to kill him," said the girl. "You must have a very bad temper, Major Okewood," she added sedately.

After what I had already gone through that day, it galled me to think of the two of us chatting away as inconsequently as though we were on the lawns at Ascot. No man, I grant you, could have had a more charming companion than Marjorie Garth and she was as pretty as a picture in the plain tussore riding costume she wore with a rakish little brown felt hat.

But I was in no mood for badinage. I was haunted by the imminent peril of our position and weighed down by my responsibility for the safety of this girl. So bluntly, for my nerves were on edge and every flowering bush seemed to conceal an enemy, I told her how things stood. She listened very quietly but when I had finished I noticed that her little air of raillery had gone.

"If you only knew," I concluded, "how bitterly I reproach myself for bringing you into this...."

"When you came on board the *Naomi*," Marjorie said gently, "you could not tell that you would be followed to the island."

"That," I rejoined rather forlornly, "is my only excuse."

We halted in the woods on coming in sight of the sea. The beach was deserted, as we had left it, with the sea-birds wheeling ceaselessly over the bay and the tide lapping gently on the white sand.

The light was mellowing. My watch showed it to be five o'clock.

"We shall have to hurry," I warned, "for we must be in our new retreat before it is dark."

I bade her wait there while I fetched from the cave the knapsack I had packed and the Winchester.

I advanced cautiously down the shore. I wondered what Grundt was doing. How oppressive the island silence was! It unsettled me. I thought of the strange unnatural hush which is said to precede an earthquake.

I bent down and lifted the pall of creeper screening the mouth of the cave. As I entered a bulky form rose up from one of the beds. There was no mistaking that massive figure, its slow, deliberate movement. I sprang back but the creeper hampered my movements and before I could gain the open, my shoulders were firmly grasped, my arms pinioned. I sought to twist myself free but I was held by those who must have held a man before and I could barely struggle in that iron grip. As I thus stood helpless I heard Marjorie cry out.

CHAPTER XVI

BLACK PABLO MAKES HIS PREPARATIONS

They pushed me into the cool dimness of the cave. An odour of unwashed humanity, which blended gratefully with a searching smell of garlic, hung about my unseen captors.

"Herrgott!" cried Grundt, "it's as dark as pitch in this hole. Cut away this cursed plant, some of you, and let's have some light!"

The creeper fell away. The golden sunlight that flooded the cave showed me Clubfoot, his black-tufted hands folded across the crutch handle of his heavy stick, grim and lowering.

Black Pablo and a regular Hercules of a man, a broad-chested, yellow-bearded giant, a good type of the German bluejacket from the Frisian seaboard, were holding me. Grundt made a quick gesture of the hand.

"Take away his gun!" he ordered.

The fair young man I had seen at the graveside stepped forward. Roughly, vindictively, he ran his hands over me. He found Carstairs' automatic in my side pocket and transferred it to his own.

"You see these men," said Clubfoot, bending his bushy eyebrows at me. "Their orders are to shoot to kill in the event of any attempt on your part to escape. And whatever your private views on suicide may be you will probably bear in mind that Miss Garth—the charming Miss Garth—will, in any case, be left to mourn you...."

This allusion to Marjorie frightened me. There was no suavity about Clubfoot now. He was in his blackest, most menacing mood. His face was positively baleful; and there was a twitching of his black-bristled nostrils which warned me that he was on the verge of a paroxysm of fury.

"Leave me alone with him!" he commanded brusquely—his voice was harsh and snarling—"but remain outside within call!"

I felt the blood rush back into my numbed arms as the men relaxed their grip and withdrew.

Nervously Grundt's great fist beat a little tattoo on his open palm. He appeared to be making an effort to control himself.

"You would play a double game with me, would you?" he said. "No man has ever double-crossed me and got away with it, do you hear? My master may be in exile, my country fallen from greatness; but *I* am king here. Do you understand that?"

His pale lips trembled and he stuttered as he strove to master his rising passion.

"This cipher message is useless, as well you know. Without the preliminary indication, it is unintelligible. So Itzig, who in his day was the greatest cipher expert the Russian Okhrana ever had, has reported to me. And you knew it, you... you...."

He pawed the air with his huge hand, the fingers outstretched.

"They have examined his grave again. There are signs that something was attached to the timber-work. What that was the drunken Englishman who first visited the grave must have known. And he confided it to you. 'I know when I'm beaten, Herr Doktor'; and 'I'll give you the cipher,' say you! You thought you were too clever for old Clubfoot, the cripple, the beaten Hun. But I'm master here, Herr Major, and you shall do my bidding!...."

"You are misinformed, Herr Doktor!" I said, trying to speak calmly. My lips were dry and my heart-beats thumped in my ears. But I was not thinking of myself. I was tormented with anxiety for Marjorie—Marjorie in the hands of those men.

"Don't answer hastily!" counselled Grundt changing to a tone of deadly calm that struck chill on my heart. "Ulrich von Hagel, who wrote that message, left it for one who should come after him, who would be a naval officer like

himself. He wrote it so that it should be unintelligible to the casual person into whose hands it might fall, yet as clear as day to one of his own caste. And you would tell me that the message as it stands is all he left behind! *Nein, nein, Herr Major, es geht nicht!* I know that you have this information"—he crashed his fist into his open hand—"and you are going to give it to me!"

I shrugged my shoulders. I would not speak yet. Sooner or later, I knew, they would use Marjorie to break my silence. Then it would be time to speak. Till then I must await developments. After all, time was on my side.

My gesture seemed to rekindle all Grundt's rage. Slowly the colour faded out of his face, leaving it livid save where that hideous scar beneath the cheek-bone made an angry patch of red. His bushy eyebrows drew together and his mouth trembled.

"So you'd still play with me, would you, you scum?" he shouted, his voice rising to a roar. "You'd pit your wits against mine, would you? *Herrgott*, I have an account to settle with you and that brother of yours, and, by God! I'm going to settle it! And you shall pay double for the pair of you! Do you know...."—his voice dropped to a savage whisper—"that these German seamen of mine would cheerfully abandon all claim to the treasure for the pleasure of taking vengeance on you for all your country has made them suffer in these long years, hunted, degraded, outcast?"

"Do you realise that I have but to raise my hand and you're a doomed man, and not the whole might of the British Empire could save you? But we shall take our time. You will not die too soon, my friend. First you shall speak! And if you remain obstinate, there is always the charming English girl...."

He clapped his hands. On a sudden the cave seemed filled with angry, shouting men. My head swam for I was worn out with want of sleep and faint with hunger. Something struck me on the back of the neck a violent blow. I felt myself falling, falling....

* * * * *

How long I remained unconscious I don't know. When I regained my senses it was to find myself in semi-darkness in a long, low-roofed shed. It was dimly lit by a ruddy light which fell through some kind of grating in the roof. I could see no windows. The atmosphere was stifling and the floor and walls fairly swarmed with enormous cockroaches.

They had laid me down on a pile of sail-cloth in a corner. My head was splitting and I had a raging thirst. My pockets had been rifled and my brandy-flask was gone. I leaned back on my hard couch, my head against the rough wall of planks, and idly watched the flickering reddish light that filtered through the grating. I was vaguely aware of some unpleasant news that lurked, like a robber in ambush, in some unfrequented corner of my brain ready to pounce out upon my first conscious thought....

Somewhere outside a guitar was thrumming random passages of Spanish dances, punctuated, now and then, by a little burst of castanets. The soft murmur of voices became audible every time the guitar stopped, with here a laugh and there an exclamation. Presently a voice called "Pablo!": the lilting rhythm of a dance theme stopped—suddenly in the middle of a bar—and the click of the castanets was stilled. Then, to soft, plaintive chords heavily stressed, an exquisite liquid tenor voice began to sing.

"Se murio, y sobre su cara"

"Un panuelito le heche...."

"Por que no toque la tierra...."

"Esa bocca que yo bese!...."

The chords broke off abruptly on a single string that sung reverberatingly. There was laughter, applause, the confusion of men speaking together. Then a voice said distinctly in German:

"He hadn't come round when I looked in ten minutes ago. Karl knows how to send them to sleep with that blow of his...."

"He'll come out of dreamland quick enough when *der Stelze* gives Black Pablo the word!" another voice replied.

"O Pablo," cried one in Spanish, "O Pablo! You shall try your little persuasions on the Señor!"

"*Si, si,*" came from many throats.

"*Madre de Dios,*" answered a voice in guttural Spanish. "He shall speak for me, *muchachos!* And if he will not speak, then, *caramba!* maybe he'll sing for us and for the lovely *Señorita* as well!"

Then followed a roar of acclamation. Then Black Pablo said:

"Patience a little while, *amigos,* until the chief comes. I go to make ready the fire!...."

I sprang to my feet. I heard no more of the talk outside, the cries, the laughter, the chaff. The time had come for action. I must decide at once between complete capitulation to Grundt or one last bid for liberty.

But what guarantees had I that Grundt, with the heliograph in his possession, would respect any promise he might give me as the price of surrender? None. I could not trust him and, as he had told me, he had an old score to pay off. And if anything should happen to me before the yacht returned what would become of Marjorie? Free I might help her; therefore any risk was justifiable to secure my escape.

Escape? But how?

The shed was solidly built of heavy logs, the door the only visible means of egress. The grating which admitted the air was a steel-bound frame too narrow, as I could see at a glance, to admit the passage of my body. I scrutinised the floor. It was of planking, well-made and seemingly in good condition. It struck hollow to the foot and I surmised that, as is generally the case with sheds of this kind, the structure was laid on a concrete foundation.

In the course of my examination of the boarding I moved the pile of sail-cloth. Beneath it was a plank in which an iron ring was sunk. The sheer unexpectedness of my discovery, the prospect of escape it opened to me, left me with brain numbed, irresolute. The talk and laughter had died down outside, but, from time to time, my ear caught a measured foot-tread as though a guard were walking up and down before the shed....

The plank came up easily enough. My heart sank within me. It revealed merely a shallow trough about three feet deep going down to the foundations of the shed which, as I had guessed, were set in concrete.

I got down into the hole and crawled in under the floor. It was pitch-dark and abominably hot down there under the boards with a strong smell of rats. Face downwards, my head frequently scraping the planks above me, I crawled along the concrete bed, hoping against hope that I might find some hole, where the outer wall of the shed rested on the concrete base, which would enable me to scramble through to freedom.

But I was doomed to disappointment. Here and there I found a cranny wide enough for the flat of my hand to pass. But nowhere was there an opening large enough to take anything bigger than a cat. I could only conclude that the trap I had found was made for the purpose of allowing repairs to be effected to the lower woodwork of the shed.

Half-suffocated with the heat and almost blinded with dust, I was painfully crawling back to my trap when my head hit a plank along the wall with more than usual violence. The beam, seemingly rotten underneath, eaten perhaps by ants, splintered like touch-wood and my head came up through the floor. I found myself looking into the shed.

Then germinated in my mind the seed of a great idea. The next best thing to escaping is to give the appearance of having escaped, a theory which many of our war prisoners in Germany turned to good account. If my captors were not acquainted with the construction of the shed, if, as I calculated, they would, from the discovery of a large hole in the floor, jump to the conclusion, without further investigation, that I had burrowed my way out under the floor, the guard over the shed would be relaxed and I should, at any rate, have a little breathing-space in which to think out the next move. There were a lot of "ifs" about my plan. But it was the only one I could think of for the moment and I set about putting it into operation at once.

Where the rotten plank had given way I enlarged the hole as much as possible. Then I climbed back through it into the shed, replaced the plank with the ring and covered it up again with the pile of sail-cloth, and without further delay dived down again through the hole I had made under the floor. I crawled away among the beams and joists as far as I could go in the direction of the other side of the shed and then lay still.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ESCAPE

Good fortune, I have always contended, comes to those who make ready to receive it. I can well imagine the Foolish Virgins of the parable spending the rest of their lives lamenting their hard fate and attributing their wise sisters' preparedness not to prevision but to good luck. Throughout my life I have always tried to leave nothing to chance but the *dénouement*. It is in the *dénouement* that Fate lies in ambush, waiting to slay or to spare....

I had done what I could, I reflected as I lay up in my stuffy hole. Now Fate must take a hand. I had no settled plan. In course of time they would come to look for me and if they did not drag me forth by the heels from my hiding-place, I should watch for the best opportunity that presented itself for my dash into liberty....

I think I may have dozed off; for I did not hear the shed door above me open. What brought me to my senses with a shock and set my nerves a-tingling was the stump of a heavy footstep, a well-remembered halting step, that made my heart stand still.

Then came the hubbub of excited voices, the glare of torch-light filtering through the interstices of the floor and the roar of Clubfoot's voice shouting orders. A long beam of white light clove the darkness of my lair. Someone had climbed down into the hole. I held my breath and wondered whether against the white concrete on which I lay my drill suit might escape notice.

Heavy feet trampled above my head; a door slammed violently and a whistle shrilled thrice. Again there came that clumping tread, shaking the very fabric of the hut. Then silence fell and I breathed again.

Suddenly a voice spoke, almost in my ear, as it seemed, from outside the shed.

"He may have tunnelled," the speaker said in German.

"If he has," replied a voice in the same language, "he can't have gone far. He hadn't time!"

The voices moved away.

The speakers were obviously going to make the round of the shed on the outside to see where I had escaped. They would find no opening and I should be caught like a rat in a trap. If I were to make a bolt for it, it must be now or never. I began to shuffle my way backwards towards the hole in the floor....

The shed was empty and, oh! thank God! the door stood wide. Beyond it I had a glimpse of an open space surrounded by half a dozen wooden huts, a fire burning low in the centre. I tiptoed to the door.

The night was very dark. I could hear men crashing about on the outskirts of the camp. One of them carried a torch and its red and smoky glare flickered over the trees and bushes. But the little clear space between the huts was deserted. Once I could get away from the light thrown by the fire....

Now I was through the door. I could hear them on the far side of the shed. In three silent bounds I was past the fire and across the open. Then I was brought up short by a low building lying directly in my path. As I halted, nonplussed for

the instant, a door facing me opened and a mulatto poked his head out. He recognised me for a stranger at once. He rolled his eyes at me in surprise and would have cried out.

But I leapt at him, my fingers at his throat, and as he toppled over backwards across the threshold of the door, I tightened my grip until I felt the breath choking out of him. However, having got him down, I released my hold and ran my hands over his filthy clothes.

In the hip-pocket of his striped cotton trousers I found a Browning and a large key. I thrilled at the touch of the pistol in my hand. After successfully travelling the first stage on the road to freedom I had now a weapon to help me over the next! Surely things were coming my way!

The mulatto, upon whose chest my knee pressed hard, was grey with fear. He was a picturesque-looking ruffian with rings in his ears and a gaudy bandana handkerchief bound about his brows. I tore off his head-dress and unceremoniously crammed it into his mouth. There seemed to be about three yards of it and it was far from clean. But the yellow-boy gobbled it down and by the time I had pushed the end of it past his thick lips he appeared to be very effectively gagged. Then I strapped his hands together behind his back with his own belt and tethered his legs with an end of rope which I found in a corner. He made no attempt at resistance.

This job satisfactorily accomplished, I rose to my feet and looked about me. Where was Marjorie? Had any harm befallen her? In my mind's eye there arose the picture of her as I had left her standing on the fringe of the forest, a slim, girlish figure, a little thrilled but making such a brave show of calm. What had they done with her? In which of these squalid huts was she confined?

The room in which I found myself, dimly lit by a single candle stuck in a bottle, was obviously the cook's galley. There was a stove in one corner and remnants of food on the table. The mulatto, of course, would be the cook. Then there crept into my memory something Marjorie had said about a hideous negro in whose custody she had been left before I met her with Custrin in the forest. And I turned over in my hand the key which I had taken from the mulatto's pocket.

At the back of the kitchen was a door. It was locked but that key fitted it. As I softly turned the lock and swung the door back, there was a little cry, a flutter of something white, and Marjorie stood in the pool of yellow light thrown by the guttering candle across the threshold. I beckoned to her and put my finger to my lips.

She was very pale and her face looked as though she had been crying. But her splendid courage never failed her. She seemed to take in at a glance the disordered room and the yellow-skinned mulatto trussed up on the floor.

"My dear!" she whispered softly as she came out and stood by my side as though awaiting orders.

The galley door gaped wide as I had left it. The open space about the fire was still deserted; but I yet heard the sound of voices and the crash of feet in the undergrowth beyond the circle of light flung by the dying embers. And I noticed with growing anxiety that the eastern sky was growing light.

"We can't afford to wait!" I whispered to the girl. "We shall have to run for it. If only we can make our way in the dark to the grave! I can find myself to rights after that...."

"There's a path through the forest to the grave," rejoined Marjorie. "I followed it this morning. I can show you where it is."

I made her drink a cup of rum from a wicker-bound jar that stood on the floor and took a dram myself. It was wicked stuff, raw and almost proof, but I felt a great deal the better for it. I also pocketed some cold meat and bread. Famished as I was, I would not stop to eat; but I meant us to make a meal at the first opportunity.

Suddenly, from somewhere quite close at hand, voices reached my ear. Swiftly I drew the galley door towards me and peeped through the crack. Silhouetted against the firelight two figures were striding rapidly towards the hut. One of them, a great black shape, went with a limp.

In a flash, without a noise, I pulled the door to and flattening my palm on the candle, extinguished it, plunging the

galley into darkness.

"We must get out by the back," I whispered to Marjorie at my side.

"There is no way!" she replied. "There is not even a window in the back room!"

"Then stay here behind the door!" I told her. "And, whatever happens.... whatever happens, do you understand?.... don't make a sound but leave things to me. And when I say 'Run,' run!...."

In a bound I was at the mulatto's side and had dragged him by the feet into the inner room. It was a fetid, black hole. I felt the outline of a truckle bed against the farther wall. I flung the cook down on it and spread a blanket over him. I was back in the galley at Marjorie's side just as a heavy footstep rang on the hard earth without.

Then the hut door was violently flung open.

"Pizarro!" called a thick voice in Spanish. "Pizarro! *Nombre de Dios!* Is the man deaf?"

We pressed ourselves flat against the wall as the door swung inwards. A white gleam of light pierced the darkness of the room and showed up clearly the rough panels of the door at the other end.

"Well!" said the thick voice, in German this time, "the door's shut anyway!"

The hut shook to his heavy tread as he stumped in, the fair young German, the brother of the Unknown, at his heels. Noiselessly I slipped out behind them.

They stopped suddenly. Clubfoot was at the door. If they turned round now, I should have to fight for it....

"*Na nu!*" ejaculated Grundt, without looking back. "The key's in the door. Show a light, Ferdinand!"

I heard the door creak on its hinges, saw the flash-light pick out the vague shape beneath the coverlet on the bed. And then the full force of my error broke upon me. I had left the mulatto's head exposed and, instead of Monica's soft golden-brown hair, Ferdinand's lamp showed us a coal-black woolly thatch.

Clubfoot, half across the threshold, swung round to the young German who was close behind him. But, before he could speak, I pitched myself with every ounce of weight I could command at Ferdinand's back and propelled him and Clubfoot violently into the inner room. I heard the loud crash as they fell in a heap on the floor and a smothered screech from the bed as I slammed the door and locked it.

"Now," I cried to Marjorie, "run!...."

CHAPTER XVIII

A FACE AMONG THE FERNS

In my ears rang angry shouting, the sound of heavy blows rained upon that inner door, as I dashed out of the hut. Marjorie flashed by the front of the sheds and took a rocky path which led off steeply to the left. As I tore after her a man stepped out quickly from the angle of the hut to bar my passage. But without faltering in my stride I drove my elbow into his face and he slipped backwards, striking his head against the split log facing of the shed with a horrid crack. I did not stop to see what became of him but ran on, congratulating myself that I had laid him out without using the pistol which my right hand clutched in my pocket. For I knew that the sound of a shot would bring the whole horde buzzing about our ears.

Daylight was coming now with great strides. The morning mists clung sluggishly about the lower part of the steep

incline leading up from the hollow where the camp was situated. As we topped the path we came into view of the shores of a little cove and glimpsed a long, grey motor-launch that lay at anchor. This, as Marjorie told me afterwards, was Sturt Bay which, I remembered, the "Sailing Directions" had mentioned as the only practicable landing-place other than Horseshoe Bay on the island. In that deep hollow the sheds must have been invisible both from the land and the sea side. When, later on, Marjorie told me that Clubfoot's men, in their talk among themselves, always referred to the huts as "The Petrol Store," I thought I understood why such care had been taken to conceal the camp from prying eyes.

Now we were in the forest following a winding track. Though, on looking back, it seems to have been the height of foolhardiness, I do not think we could have acted otherwise. For it was essential that we should reach the high ground undiscovered before it was fully light and we might have wasted hours trying to find the way through these dense woods where, though day was at hand, the shadows of the night yet lingered.

The noises I had heard on the outskirts of the camp had ceased. The silence made me uneasy. We relaxed our pace to a walk and went along swiftly and softly, our feet making no sound on the spongy ground. Suddenly, from a clump of rich green ferns, not a pace away from me, a man's head arose. I did not require to see the heavily bruised features to recognise Custrin. If ever the intent to kill peered out of a man's face, it did from the quick, black eyes of the doctor of the *Naomi*.

It happened far quicker than it takes to write it down. I could not see his hands; but there was a warning rustle of the ferns, a sudden change in the face, which told me he was going to shoot. The index finger of my right hand was crooked round the trigger of my pistol as it lay in the side pocket of my jacket....

We fired together. Something "whooshed" by my ear. In accents of shrill surprise Custrin cried out: "Oh!" stared at me stupidly for the fraction of a second through the blue haze that drifted on the air between us, then pitched forward on his face into the clump of ferns. There was a horrid gush—a convulsive movement of the hands—and the body lay still. The woods seemed to ring with the report, and there was a smell of singed cloth in the air. The pocket of my jacket was smouldering....

Now silence descended once more upon the forest, broken only by a faintly audible drip! drip! from the drooping head at my feet. Then suddenly a distant hallo went echoing through the woods; another shout, much nearer at hand, answered it and was answered by another until the whole forest rang again.

I turned to Marjorie. White to the lips, she stood with her face averted from that limp form sprawling in the ferns.

"We must make a dash for it, partner!" said I.

Docilely, like a little child, she thrust her hand in mine.

"Don't go too fast!" she pleaded, "I'm—I'm—afraid of being left behind...."

Hand-in-hand, like the Babes in the Wood, we set off again through the forest, pelting headlong down the track. Unmolested we reached the lip of the clearing and dropped down into the hollow where the grave lay bathed in the lemon-coloured light of the new day. In front of us towered the rugged mass of rock for which we were making and my eye sought on the topmost terrace that pillar of dressed stone which held, as I firmly hoped, the secret of the treasure.

Panting we scrambled up the shelving slabs of stone which led to the foot of the crag. In order to reach the first shelf I had given Garth a back; but I guessed that the track I had seen winding aloft from the first terrace must, somehow, find its way to the ground.

We followed the base of the rock round till, presently, we came upon a tiny, zigzag foot-path, crumbling and precipitate, leading upwards. By this we were out of sight of the clearing, but the sounds of pursuit drifted across to us more plainly every minute.... the noisy passage of men through the undergrowth, raucous shouts. They seemed to be beating the jungle, keeping in touch with each other by calling.

The attack, when it came, would come from the rear. Therefore, I made Marjorie go first up the path. I looked at her anxiously. She was game all through, this girl; but her eyes were wistful and her mouth drooped pathetically. The path,

winding its way across the face of the rock, brought us on to the first shelf and thence, from the far end, pursued its course aloft. As we stepped out on the terrace a shout rang out from below and at the same moment a bullet hit the rock with a rebounding thwack right next to my ear while another whined shrilly over our heads.

"Go on, go on!" I cried to Marjorie. Together we dashed across the terrace and then the winding of the path brought us under cover again. We toiled on, the path growing steeper and steeper. I kept looking round to see if we were followed; but the grey path below us remained deserted.

As we mounted higher I noticed that the shelves cut out of the rock face grew narrower. The second terrace was scarcely more than twelve feet wide. Since we had left the first terrace we had looked out over a stern landscape of barren rock and lonely crag without a vestige of green. But, when we were within measurable distance of the third and topmost terrace, the path suddenly bent to the left and a magnificent panorama of land and sea burst upon our gaze.

Far below us the belt of green jungle was spread out at our feet; the waving green trees sloped down to the cliff-sheltered anchorage where the white wings of sea-birds flashed in the sun; a broad belt of deep blue sea ran out to the horizon all round. In the foreground our narrow path zigzagged to and fro, like a fluffy grey ribbon gummed to the rock. Just beyond we looked into the cup-shaped hollow with the grave. Tiny figures, every detail clear-cut and distinct in that limpid air, were dotted about the clearing. One leant heavily upon a stick which, as we stood and gazed upon the view, he raised and with it pointed aloft.

"Hurry, hurry!" I cried to Marjorie, but almost before I spoke a rifle again rang out in the hollow below and the dust spurted at my feet. It was some thirty yards to where the path, turning once more, would bring us out of sight and we scrambled forward with the bullets "zipping" angrily in the dust or noisily flattening themselves out on the rock. Several of the men in the clearing seemed to be firing, for the bullets came pretty fast.

It was a harrowing experience to be shot at at that height, perched on a precipitate path like flies on a ceiling. I plunged forward, my heart in my mouth. Now Marjorie had reached the bend and having rounded it into cover, had halted, waiting for me to draw level. A bullet struck the ground between us splashing the grey volcanic dust knee-high and the next moment I had scrambled into safety. Then I saw that the topmost terrace was only a few yards from us.

I turned to the girl. She had gone very white and she seemed to be leaning for support on the rocky wall at her side. Before I could speak she heaved a little sigh and pitched forward. I caught her in my arms.

CHAPTER XIX

WHICH PROVES THAT TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

I don't think she fainted. It was just that her forces had failed her. She lay quite motionless in my arms, her red-brown hair a splash of colour against the white sleeve of my coat. But a few yards, as I have said, separated us from the shelf, so I lifted her up. I felt a soft arm steal round my neck as she steadied herself. I glanced at her face. Her eyes were open.

"Hold tight," I bade her, "and whatever you do don't look down!"—for at that height the clear drop down the side of the cliff was enough to make an Alpine guide dizzy. Looking steadfastly ahead and fighting down a horrible feeling of giddiness I carried the girl up the path and at length stood upon the ledge.

It curved round the face of the rock, a mere shelf not more than two paces wide but slanting inwards, which improved one's foothold. From it the face of the cliff dropped sheerly to the nullah hundreds of feet below. I ventured a peep over the side and my brain fairly swam; for I am no hand at heights. From somewhere above us a great bird suddenly went up with a vast flutter and, with a few strokes of its powerful wings, propelled itself through the air until level with us it hovered motionless at an immense height above the stony valley.

"I'm going to set you down now," I said to the girl. "Lie quite still and don't move until I come back. I'm going along the ledge a bit to see if it broadens out at all or if there's a cave."

As gently as I could I put her down. The wind blew invigoratingly on the pinnacle of the crag and I hoped it would revive her. I stood and listened. No sound came from below. But I knew that until I found a spot from which we could survey the ascent we should not be safe.

I edged my way along the shelf as it curved round the rock. A few steps brought me in sight of its termination. It ended in nothing; but what caught my eyes was the tall pillar chiselled out of the rock upon which the flash from my mirror had rested. Beside it was a low opening in the back wall of the cliff.

The pillar was merely a high expanse of "dressed" stone, as the masons say, which had been carved out of the soft surface of the peak. From pictures I had seen of the images on Easter Island I knew it to be the first state of one of those uncouth effigies, relics of a departed era, which are found in more than one island of the Southern Seas. The pillar was not inscribed or carved in any way. It stood just as some native mason had left it waiting for the sculptor's hand.

A touch on my shoulder; Marjorie stood at my side.

"I'm a poor kind of soldier, partner," she said, "to fail you at the critical moment. I was at the last gasp when you picked me up. How ever did you manage to bring me up here?"

"Don't ask me," I laughed. "I was terrified for fear you'd look over and get scared...."

"I don't mind heights," the girl rejoined simply, "we live a great part of the year in our place in Wales, you know, and I've done quite a lot of climbing in my time. Oh! Look! Did you ever see anything so wonderful?"

We were side by side on the ledge with our backs to the pillar and as she spoke she stretched forth her hand and pointed across the valley. Above the jagged crests of various isolated peaks in the foreground a gigantic solitary image raised its tall black form against the deep azure of the ocean which was spread out to the horizon. Its back set to the sea, its features, stern and enigmatic in expression, turned towards us, and clearly visible in that transparent atmosphere, it dominated the little rocky plateau on which it stood, dwarfing the tremendous blocks of stone strewn about its base. Before it, as if from a sacrificial altar, a thin spiral of black smoke slowly mounted aloft against the blue sky. It seemed to rise from the ground at the foot of the effigy.

It was, in truth, a wonderful sight, a spectacle of sheer majesty. That lonely Colossus with its cruel face seemed to embody the suggestion of sinister mystery which, I had felt from the first, brooded over Cock Island....

Marjorie gave a little shudder.

"This island frightens me!" she said. "To think of that awful-looking image standing there gazing out across the valley for all these hundreds of years as if it were waiting for something. Somehow it reminds me of that club-footed man, so hard, so ruthless, so.... *patient!* Grundt makes my blood run cold!...."

He had not molested her, it appeared. When I had left her to enter our cave on the beach, men had suddenly surrounded her and carried her away to the sheds. There she had been handed to the custody of the mulatto who had locked her in the room behind the galley where I had found her.

"At meal-times," she added, "they brought me out to their open-air mess in the space between the huts. No one spoke to me. But they eyed me silently, especially Dr. Grundt. He always seems to be thinking, that man, and I'm sure his thoughts are wicked. And the man they call Black Pablo! He kept edging towards me and leering with his one eye. Oh! It was horrible...." She had seen nothing of Custrin since her encounter with him in the forest.

Clubfoot, she told me, had had some trouble with his men. They were grumbling at him for having let me go. The Germans, especially the blonde young officer, were particularly bitter. But Clubfoot had rounded on them and said that, as long as there were trees on the island to hang mutineers on, he would have no questioning of his authority.

Somewhere in the green tangle of woods far below us a single shot rang out sharply. The report went reverberating down the valley and from the tree-tops a cloud of birds swooped up affrighted. I did not hear the flight of the bullet so I could not see that the shot was meant for us. Yet there were only Clubfoot's men on the island now. Was Grundt asserting his authority?

The girl had dropped to her knees, and now seated herself cross-legged on the ground.

"If you and I are partners," said she, "don't you think the time has come to take me into your confidence?"

She invited me with a gesture to seat myself by her side. I glanced down at the valley. Below us and to the left the ascending path twice wound into view. From our coign of vantage one might infallibly pick off anyone who tried to push our position from the path. Though I was inclined to think that the gang had had their fill of fighting for the day, I was glad to be in a position from which their next move must be unerringly revealed to me.

I followed the girl's invitation; for I was very weary. To tell the truth, I welcomed the chance of resting quietly for a spell. I needed to think out the grave difficulties besetting us. It was clear that we could not stay where we were, for I had only five rounds of ammunition left. And Marjorie, who sat by my side, her rich brown hair blowing out in the wind, her eyes fixed dreamily on the hideous image staring sardonically across the valley at us; I had to think of her. Henceforth, any risk I took must inevitably imperil her safety.... it was a horrid thought.

When would the *Naomi* come back? And could we risk holding out till the promised gun announced her return? She could not arrive at the earliest before the evening, I calculated.

I brought out the meat and bread I had taken from the galley and we ate it together, side by side. Although the sun had not long risen, there was already a heat in its rays which warned me of what its noon-day fierceness would be. And I was keenly alive to the fact that we had no water.

"I can see by your face," said Marjorie suddenly, "that you are worrying about me. And I want to be a help, not an impediment. I made you an offer of partnership once before!"

"I know," I rejoined, "but I didn't know you then...."

"I was so anxious to help," she said. "And you would tell me nothing!"

"I'm afraid I don't know much about women," I said.

"Major Okewood," exclaimed the girl, turning round and looking me full in the face, "you surprise me!"

"It's true...." I began.

But Marjorie laughed merrily.

"You're too delightful for words," she said. "Why, my dear man, if you understood women you'd have...."

She broke off hastily and added:

"There are only two kinds of men: those who say they do understand women and don't and those who admit they don't and don't. But all the same don't you think it's rather insulting to one's intelligence to find a man locking up his secrets in his heart simply because he's read or heard somewhere that a woman is not to be trusted?"

I looked at her with interest. This young girl, with her ridiculous clump of reddish brown hair, her slim straight limbs, her calm child-like eyes, made me feel like a naughty little boy being reprimanded by his mummy.

"Yes," I said limply. "I suppose it is!"

For a minute her eyes encountered mine, and in them I read her reproach. She dropped them almost at once and a sort of embarrassment silenced us. Then it suddenly occurred to me that she and I were alone; I wondered to find that

neither the prospect of spending the night, maybe several nights, in the company of a man of whom she knew next to nothing, nor the danger to which she was exposed, had shaken her out of her serenity. This girl was full of character. My wish, that poor man's wish which I had hardly dared to admit to myself on board the *Naomi*, rose to my mind with such force that I felt the blood mount to my face.

But Marjorie took my hand and patted it as she might have patted a child's.

"Tell me about your mission!" she said.

I kept her hand and seated at her side in the shade of that ancient pillar, with the fresh breeze caressing our faces, I told her how Fate had put into my hands the message left by Ulrich von Hagel for Clubfoot and his gang. I described to her my efforts to unravel the cipher which I repeated to her.

"How does it go in German?" she asked; for I had given her the English version.

"You know German?" said I.

She nodded.

"I used to have a German Fräulein," she answered. "She was a dear old thing and as a small girl I often went over to Boppard to stay with her people. I knew German rather well."

"Well," said I, "here goes!"

And I repeated the rhyme which had hammered its jingling measure into my brain:

"Flimmer', flimmer' viel
"Die Garnison von Kiel
"Mit Kompass dann am besten
"Denk' an den Ordensfesten
"Am Zuckerhut vorbei
"Siehst Du die Lorelei...."

I broke off suddenly.

"By Jove!" I exclaimed. "By—Jove!"

I have spoken of the peaks which stood up in the valley between us and the stone image. The words of von Hagel's doggerel sent my gaze roving interrogatively across the open space and presently it fell upon a tall slender rock with a smoothly rounded crest which raised itself erect in the foreground. And it dawned upon me that there was The Sugar Loaf of which von Hagel spoke.

I glanced across the valley from right to left, past the image frowning through the wisp of smoke at its foot, to where other peaks raised their crests aloft to the blue sky.

Suddenly I turned to Marjorie.

"If you've been to Boppard," I said, "you must know the Lorelei. Look where I am pointing and tell me if you see any rock which resembles it!"

Leaning over until her hair brushed my cheek the girl followed my pointing finger.

"Why, yes!" she exclaimed, "that square grey rock leaning over is rather like the Lorelei...."

At last I felt that I was within measurable distance of the end of my quest. But between me and my goal was

interposed that unsurmountable four-barred obstacle, those enigmatical notes of music.

I had identified the peaks, but what did they signify? What bearing had they on the hiding place of the treasure? I felt utterly nonplussed and, for the first time, discouraged.

"What does it mean?" asked Marjorie at my elbow. "What has the Lorelei to do with the treasure?"

I laughed rather bitterly.

"If I were a musician," I answered, "I should probably be able to tell you. As I am not...."

"Please don't be mysterious," the girl bade me. "Tell me what you mean."

I told her of the four bars of music.

"They're part of some German tune or other," I told her. "It's vaguely familiar to me, but I'm blessed if I can put any words to it. And I take it that the words are the thing!"

"Can you hum the melody over to me?" asked Marjorie.

Singing is not my forte. A combination of bashfulness and a cigarette-smoker's throat produce from my larynx when I attempt to sing sounds which I have always felt must be acutely distressing to my hearers. But Marjorie listening gravely with her head on one side, made me repeat my performance.

Then she said:

"But do you know you're trying to sing a song that was all the rage in Germany when I was there just before the war. Listen! I'll sing it to you!"

And in a clear young voice she sang:

"Püppchen, Du bist mein Augensterne
"Püppchen, hab' Dich zum Essen gern."

Then she checked herself suddenly and clutched my arm. "'Püppchen!'" she said. "Oh, partner, don't you see?"

"No!" I replied dejectedly. "I confess I don't! I know that 'püppchen' means a 'doll' or a 'little doll' but I really don't see...."

Marjorie raised her hand and pointed a slender finger at the saturnine image on the opposite side of the valley, seen between the Lorelei on the left and the Sugar Loaf on the right.

"There's your doll!" she said.

And I knew at last that the riddle was read.

CHAPTER XX

THE BURIAL CHAMBER

Much good the discovery did us, I reflected bitterly. A thousand, two, three thousand yards—in that thin atmosphere it was impossible to gauge distances accurately—of pathless mountain lay between us and the idol. Indeed, I hardly gave the solving of the riddle more than a passing thought now; for my mind was engaged in the more urgent problem of how to extricate Marjorie in safety from the perilous pass to which I had brought her.

We could not remain on the rock indefinitely; that much was clear to me. Already, under the influence of the sun's rays beating down ever more fiercely on that exposed ledge, the pangs of thirst were making themselves felt. It was Marjorie who mentioned it first. She asked if we could find water anywhere. At our level I thought it was doubtful and told her so. Marjorie Garth, I discovered, was a girl who liked to be told the truth.

"What about that cave beyond the pillar?" she asked, leaning across me to point at the low opening I had remarked in the back wall of our ledge.

"While it's light," I answered, "one of us must remain and guard the path. I don't know what their inaction means.... but we must be prepared for anything. Why don't you have a look at the cave? But go carefully; the roof seems very low."

I gave her my hand and helped her up. She stepped across me, turned round and gave me a little smile, then bending down disappeared into the cave opening. And I, with my automatic in my hand, while I keenly watched the two little ribands of path below me, racked my brains to find a way out of our impasse.

I would try and hold out till dark. If, by then, the *Naomi* had not come, we would endeavour, under cover of the night, to reach our cave on the shore and wait for her. If, in the meantime, we were overpowered, I would capitulate and tell Clubfoot all I knew. In the meantime, I should have to abandon my hunt for the treasure.

A faint sound behind me made me start. It was shrill but distant. I listened. I heard it again and this time I recognised the call.

"Coo.... eee!"

It was Marjorie calling from the interior of the cave. With a quick glance at the path below, I scrambled to my feet. The entrance to the cave was not more than four feet high and I had to bend almost double to enter. Within, for a few feet from the opening there was enough light to see that the floor, brittle and crumbly, sloped down into a dark void. I felt my way cautiously along the side of the cave foot by foot, stooping low to avoid the roof and seeing nothing. Then from somewhere far below, as it seemed at my very feet, the girl's cry went forth again:

"Coo.... eee!"

I stopped.

"Right!" I shouted. "Where are you?"

From far below the cry came up, faint and a little quavery.

"Down here in the dark and I don't like it! But I've found water! There are some steps cut in the rock!"

The lure of the water was irresistible. I glanced at the path, above which hung a trembling curtain of heat. It was still deserted. I judged that I might safely risk a quick dash into the cave to quench my burning thirst.

The cave narrowed as it receded into the rock, and presently my foot shot out into space. I groped a bit and struck a shallow step. Then I suddenly remembered that I had a stump of candle in my pocket. I had picked it up on the previous evening when we had been loading the launch. An old campaigner never leaves candle ends lying about. They are apt to come in useful—as witness this case.

So I struck a match and lit my bit of candle and peered down. The feeble ray only illuminated a black void, a dark narrow shaft; but I saw that the steps descended almost sheer down one side. I was now able to stand erect, so clutching the side of the rock with one hand and bearing my lighted candle in the other, I started the descent. And I counted as I

went.

I had counted fourteen steps when suddenly the ground appeared to give way beneath my feet. I clutched wildly at the side of the rock, my hand slipped over the smooth surface, and with a soft rumble the whole of the steps seemed to slide away. My light was extinguished and in a shower of crumbling rock and a cloud of acrid dust, I slithered headlong into the black shaft.

Well, I was blown sky-high once by a shell in France and I remember struggling madly with mind and body, as it seemed when I looked back on the incident afterwards, against the invincible force which bore me upwards until I gave up the struggle.... and never even remembered the subsequent bump. But in this case, though I fought all the way to check my headlong fall, I never lost consciousness, and I felt in every bone of my body the terrific jar I received on landing on my back on a hard, rocky floor.

Some lingering echo told me that the girl had screamed, though I don't think I really heard her voice. But the next thing I was aware of was a little whimpering sound. Then from the darkness the girl's voice said:

"Oh, Desmond!"

And I heard a little sob.

I felt dazed and shaken, but I staggered to my feet.

"Marjorie!" I called, "where are you? I'm all right. There's no damage done...."

I heard a footstep, then a hand was thrust into mine, a small warm hand that entwined its fingers in mine and wrung them hard. Then, scarcely realising what I was doing or why I did it, I drew her to me and put my arms about her, felt the caress of her soft hair against my cheek as her head rested on my shoulder. And so we remained a minute or more in that inky darkness because we were glad to have found one another again.

By some miracle I had kept the candle in my hand all through my fall. When presently Marjorie drew away from me, I fished out my matches and rekindled the stump.

We found ourselves standing in a long, narrow chamber with a roof which, low to start with, sloped down until it stood not more than four feet from the floor. The place smelt damp and musty and here and there the walls gleamed wet where the light of the candle struck them. Along one side of the cave was a kind of stone slab.

Just behind where we stood was the narrow shaft by which we had descended, at its foot a jumble of débris. I raised the candle aloft and strained my eyes to see up the shaft. I stared into blackness; but I noted that where the stairs had been cut there now remained nothing but the sheer overhanging wall of rock. I took Marjorie's arm and pointed to the wet glistening on the walls.

"Let's drink first!" I said.

My voice sounded strangely hollow in the vaulted place. I turned and led her to the rock. The water was dead cold and delightfully fresh to the touch. The girl put her lips to the wall and drank. I followed her example. She finished before I was through; for it seemed to me that the sun on that ledge outside had drained every drop of moisture out of my system and I drank and drank again. But suddenly she plucked my sleeve and whispered in an awed voice:

"What.... What is that?"

She pointed at the stone slab of which I have spoken. It resembled a rough altar built up of big stones laid together like an Irish wall. And on it lay three or four long and shrunken-looking packets. The rays of my candle picked out a round substance that gleamed brightly through the wrappings of the nearest of these objects.

Even before I stepped up to the stone table to get a closer inspection I knew what they were. Here lay the bones of that forgotten race which had once inhabited Cock Island, the sculptors of the idol which had frowned at us across the

valley. We had blundered into one of the island burial-places scooped out of the heart of the rock. The high light which my candle had caught up came from a hip-bone which had worn its way through the bark envelope. The girl saw it, recognised it for what it was, and shrank away.

"Let's get away quickly from here!" said Marjorie, nervously. "These.... these mummies frighten me dreadfully. Desmond, take me out into the sunshine again."

Her voice pleaded piteously and it went to my heart. For I was wondering....

"Good Lord!" I said, "they're naught but a handful of dust. There's nothing to be frightened of! Come and sit at the bottom of the shaft while I see about finding a way up!"

I sat her down on a pile of débris and gave her the candle to hold while, mounting as high as I could on the heaped-up rubbish, I sought for a means of scaling the shaft. But the face of the rock, from which the stairs had broken away under my weight, was now overhanging and so high that I could not see the top. The rest of the shaft was smooth and hard, and try as I would I could not get hand or foot-hold anywhere.

My initial surmise had proved all too correct. To return by the way we had come was impossible. To reach the top we should require to be hauled up by a rope. But, in order not to frighten the girl, I kept on trying to find a way to clamber aloft. And all the time I was thinking that, failing any other egress, those blackened mummies were to be our companions until....

At last, with torn hands and slashed boots, I climbed down again to where she sat.

"No good," I said.

She stared at me in a dazed sort of way.

"Oh," she exclaimed wearily, "there must be a way up! We can't stay here!"

She sprang to her feet and clambered up on the débris, peering aloft. I reached up and took her hand.

"We'll explore the cave and see if there's another way out," I said soothingly.

Marjorie turned and looked down on me.

"And if there isn't...." she began. "Oh," she added hastily, "don't think me a coward, but I have such a horror of shut-in places. And you've altered so much since we came down here, your voice is so grave, it scares me. Oh, Desmond, we're not caught here for good....!"

I smiled up at her.

"How you run on!" I said as cheerfully as I could. "God bless my soul, we're not at the end of our tether yet. There's certain to be another exit at the far end of the cave...."

There was an opening of sorts; for one of the first things I had done on landing in the subterranean chamber was to see what means of escape it afforded other than that by which we had entered. But it was a slit, a mere air-hole in the living rock which, to judge by a cursory examination, would scarcely afford passage for a dog.

I have been in some tight corners in my time and it has always seemed to me that the most frightening thing about death is not the prospect of death itself, but rather the realisation—and it usually comes upon one suddenly and without warning—of the inexorability of fate, the utter impotence of man to escape his destiny. And very soon after crashing down into the cave I had understood that our chances of escape were reduced almost to the vanishing-point.

We had no food, only water and air. Death by slow starvation awaited us unless we could attract attention and secure help. Clubfoot and his people might be willing enough, in their own interest, to rescue us. But what chance had

we, immured in the bowels of the earth as we were, of letting him know where we were? And how was Garth to find us when the *Naomi* came back?

Marjorie had risen to her feet. Her face was a little flushed and there was a glitter of excitement in her eyes.

"That's it!" she cried, "there must, of course, be another way out!"

And picking up the candle-end she darted across the cave.

I hadn't the heart to follow her. Better, I thought, that she should realise for herself our true situation. Sooner or later she must understand. I saw the yellow glimmer of light at the end of the rock chamber and watched great shadows flicker across the roof as she moved the candle to and fro. Then she was beside me again, the candle between us, and I knew by the convulsive movement of her shoulders that she was weeping.

What could I do? What hope had I to offer? I stretched out my hand and she clasped it. Then, to spare our sole illuminant I put out the candle. I had thirty-four wax matches left.

Thus hand-in-hand we sat for some time in silence. The darkness was thick and clammy like a black velvet pall, the sort of darkness of which the city-dweller has no experience. Presently the girl grew calmer, and with one or two shuddering sighs her sobs ceased.

"My dear," said I, "I want you to have faith in me. I have been up against it so often; yet always in the end I have come out all right...."

I broke off; it was hard to speak with conviction.

"I am afraid," the girl moaned, "so terribly afraid. At the front I used to be proud of having less nerves than the other girls. But to sit still, in the dark, and wait for death.... I never imagined anything so terrible. Do.... do you know that I have to keep a tight hold on myself to keep myself from screaming?"

"Yes," I said, "and I want to tell you, Marjorie, that I think it's wonderful how well you take it. I've seen men get hysterical with much less reason!"

"And you?" asked Marjorie, "aren't you afraid of death?"

"When it comes, yes," I answered. "But this job of ours, my dear, teaches us to live for the present and let the future take care of itself. At the front the worst part of a push was the waiting for it; when the whistles went and the barrage lifted one forgot all one's doubts and fears. And the only way to get through that bad afternoon before zero hour was to live for the moment, concentrate on the petty fatigues and annoyances of humdrum life and to decline to cross one's bridges until one came to them...."

"But aren't you fond of life?"

"It's no good being fond of anything on this earth," I told her, "because you're irredeemably compelled to lose it in the end...."

The girl was silent. Somewhere in the cave there echoed the melancholy drip of water.

"Have you ever been in love?" she asked suddenly.

Of course I have, the same as everybody else. But she was not content with generalities. I had to tell her about a girl at Darjeeling, when I was a young sub., whose abrupt change of mind had once and for all put all idea of matrimonial bliss out of my head.

"Have *you* ever been in love?" I challenged by way of changing the conversation. But she evaded the question.

"You'd marry if you met the ideal woman?" she queried.

"Perhaps circumstances would prevent it again!" said I.

"What is your ideal woman like?"

Again I heard that sad splash of water from the darkness and it brought me back with a pang to our position. I smiled to think of us two, imprisoned in this death-chamber of the Southern Seas, calmly discussing the eternal question of life.

"She's tall and slim and clean in mind and body," said I; "she must trust me and be a companion as well as a lover!"

"Have you ever met her.... since the girl at Darjeeling?"

"My dear," I said, "the girl at Darjeeling is now a stout *divorcée*, who, as the price of her husband's freedom from her shocking temper, retains the custody of the children whom she neglects disgracefully...."

The girl laughed a low little laugh.

"How severe you are!" she commented. Then she asked:

"But have you met your ideal since?"

"Yes," said I, knowing full well whither the conversation was drifting.

"Then why don't you marry her?"

"I haven't asked her," I said.

"But why not, if she is your ideal?"

"Because," I replied, throwing caution to the winds—and, after all, what was convention to us in our circumstances?—"she is too rich!"

"You don't ask *me*," said the girl after a pause, "whether I have an ideal?"

"Naturally," I retorted, "since you evaded answering my question when I asked you if you had ever been in love...."

"The man I marry," she said in a low voice, "must make me feel such confidence in him that even in the hour of death I shall not be afraid...."

I dropped her hand and stood up. It's all very well to be philosophical about meeting death when you have no attachment on earth; but this slim, proud girl with the grey eyes and the clustering brown hair was stimulating in me the desire to live.

I struck a match and lit the candle.

"It's now a quarter to four in the afternoon," I said. "In order to spare our forces as much as possible, we will shout once in turn every quarter of an hour in case there should be anybody above on the shelf. I'll start now!"

And raising my head up the shaft I halloed. My voice started the echoes ringing through the cave but no human voice responded.

"And now," I said, "I believe we'll have another look at that air-hole. Some of this volcanic rock is very brittle, and we might be able to enlarge the opening...."

We crossed the cave together, bending as the roof sloped down towards the farther end. The opening was a long narrow slit, not two feet deep, the top-side jagged with snags of rock. The candle guttered as I held it in the orifice, and I

felt the cool air on my face.

It was undoubtedly an outlet into the fresh air; but how could one hope to worm one's way through that narrow vent? I thrust my hand with the candle into the opening and my arm went in up to the shoulder. It seemed to be a passage; for my hand encountered no resistance and the roof, if it did not get any higher, was not any lower. The rock was hard and solid.

I drew back and scanned the opening. It reminded me of the entrance of some caves where we used to scramble at school. "Cox's Hole" had just such a narrow squeeze at the entrance which, however, opened up into quite a stately grotto beyond. I peeled off my jacket, then took off my collar and tie.

"Where I can go," I said to Marjorie, "you can! I'm going to have a shot to get through!"

The girl made no comment. She knelt on the hard floor of the cavern, her hands clasped in front of her. But she smiled as though to encourage me.

I didn't get far. My head went through all right; but a jutting edge of rock hanging down caught my shoulders and pinned me tight. Wriggle and thrust as I would I could make no progress at all and at length, in order not to stick inextricably, I had to give it up.

As I turned and looked at her an idea struck me. Marjorie Garth was slim and very supple, and but for her softly rounded throat and the gentle swell of her bosom one might have taken her for a boy.

"My dear," said I, "you must have a try. It's only my breadth of shoulders that prevents me from getting through. I believe you'll manage all right...."

The girl looked at me open-eyed.

"And leave you here?" was all she said.

I took her hand.

"Listen to me! The yacht must be back very soon. You can hide somewhere near the shore and when you hear the gun, make your way to our cave on the beach and wait for the *Naomi's* launch. You run the risk, I know, of falling into Clubfoot's hands again. But you have a sporting chance. Believe me, if you stay here, you haven't even that...."

With a quick gesture the girl sank her face in her hands.

"No!" she exclaimed. "No, no! I can't do it! I can't leave you like this!"

Gently I drew her hands away from her tear-stained face.

"Fate has sent us this chance," I reminded her, "and we must take it. I told you I always come out on top in the end and this is our opportunity. Isn't it better to have a run for your life than to stay here and die like a rat in a hole? If there should prove to be a way out you can always come back to the air-hole and report to me. If there isn't we can be together again...."

Marjorie nodded silently.

"If Grundt," she said presently, "should capture me again, he may cross-examine me about the cipher...."

"Tell him nothing!" I answered promptly.

"But if he makes it a condition for rescuing you...."

"Then I have told you nothing. That is my secret, Marjorie. If Clubfoot is to be told, I shall tell him myself. We are so near the end of our adventures that I'm willing to risk everything till the yacht appears.

"Clubfoot will never guess that you know unless you tell him. Remember he is a German and therefore has no opinion of women. He would never imagine that I have told you anything about the hiding-place of the treasure. Trust me, my dear! Our luck is in again! If you get out, I shall, too, somehow—depend on me!"

Then while she took off her shoes I divided the candle in two. I thrust her shoes, together with her half of the candle, as far as I could reach into the opening. I gave her half of my store of matches. Then I turned and we faced one another in the darkness.

"Good luck, partner," I said, "we shall meet again soon!"

"I feel that I am abandoning you," she answered in a low voice. "Supposing I should fail!"

"You'll have made me very happy in the knowledge that you've escaped!"

With a little catch in her voice she demanded:

"Don't you think of yourself at all?"

"It's more pleasant to think of you!"

She made a little pause. Then she softly whispered:

"Money doesn't count down here!" And lifted her face to mine.

I took her in my arms and kissed her whilst she clung to me in the darkness. Then she dropped to her knees and crawled into the opening. For a few instants the yellow glimmer of the candle was obscured and I heard her breathing hard. Then the faint glimmer of light reappeared and I heard her voice from the other side.

"There's a winding passage and the air is quite fresh. The wind is blowing in my face. Good-bye, Desmond dear!"

"Au revoir, my dear!" I cried out of the darkness and silence fell again.

I stood there listening for a spell, then, following the advice of the French sage who said that he who sleeps dines, I stretched myself out on the rocky floor and soon fell into a heavy slumber.

* * * * *

When I awoke I relit my stump of candle. My watch had stopped. In that clammy darkness it was impossible to tell whether it was night or day. I sat up and stretched myself with no other sensation save that I was ravenously hungry. The silence was oppressive. I lay back against the rocky wall and waited....

CHAPTER XXI

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS AND WHAT CAME OF IT

As I learned from Marjorie later, the slit extended for only a few feet. Then the roof sloped up again. Marjorie found herself in a narrow passage with the fresh breeze blowing on her face. In fact, the draught was so great that the candle went out directly and she had to put on her shoes and grope her way forward in pitch darkness.

Her great fear was that the passage might lead to others and that before she knew it, she would be involved in a maze of subterranean galleries and, if the worst came to the worst, not even be able to rejoin me. She tried to maintain her direction by keeping always close to the right-hand wall and by counting her steps. But the gallery was so dark and it

twisted so frequently that she soon lost count. At last she went blindly along, stopping at intervals to satisfy herself that she still felt the wind on her cheek.

She had halted irresolute and was thinking about turning back when, out of the darkness in front of her, a little glow appeared. At first a mere suggestion of light, it grew to a steady yellow radiance that lit up, though but dimly, the rocky roof of the corridor. The light itself appeared to be concealed by a bend in the gallery.

Marjorie remained perfectly still, her heart beating fast. Foot-steps were approaching; then the murmur of voices reached her ear. Her first instinct was to turn tail and flee; but then the foot-steps stopped and the light stood still.

"Four and twenty hours already are they away," said a deep rumbling voice in German, "and not back yet! Der Stelze is too confident, Herr Leutnant...."

"Yet the doctor described exactly where he tied up the launch," answered another voice, hard and metallic, with a more refined enunciation. "Do you know what I think, Schröder? This English nobleman and his orderly have seized the launch——"

"*Aber nein*, Herr Leutnant?"

"And gone off to fetch their yacht back. She only went to Alcedo, at least so the doctor told us...."

"Then the yacht may be back quite soon, Herr Leutnant?"

"Certainly! That's my conviction. And to think that Grundt had this cursed *Engländer* in his power and let him go!"

"Bah!" said Schröder, "he grows old, *der Stelze*! Here three days are gone and not a trace of the treasure. In a little while, who knows? these damned *Engländer* will be here and our chance of making our fortunes will be gone for ever...."

"You speak true, Schröder! If only I had any support I would depose Grundt and take charge myself. But with these filthy Spanish monkeys...."

"Speak softly, Herr Leutnant...."

Intent as she was upon this conversation, Marjorie did not notice the light advancing until it was too late. Round the bend in the passage came a big, yellow-bearded German sailor swinging a ship's lantern, the blonde young German officer, Ferdinand von Hagel, at his heels. In an instant they were on her and gripping her by the wrists dragged her down the gallery in the direction from which they had come. In silence they hustled her along for some hundred paces, then stopped at a bend.

"Wait here!" whispered the officer to Schröder, an evil smile on his face, "I go to reconnoitre. This will be a pleasant surprise for our comrades...."

He tip-toed away. Suddenly, from without, a harsh voice cried loudly:—

"You idle rascals, the launch must be there!"

There was a confused murmur and the voice spoke again:—

"Then the English yacht may be back at any time now...."

Von Hagel appeared in the gallery.

"Bring her along!" he ordered softly, beckoning with his hand.

The harsh voice shouted:—

"Well, we shall have to fight for it yet!"

"No, Herr Doktor!" said von Hagel at the mouth of the gallery, "No! There need be no fight!"

They had emerged into a rocky hollow, flooded with brilliant sunshine which almost blinded Marjorie coming from the dank, dark recesses of the cliff. An arm of vivid green tree hung across the opening of the passage and beyond it there was a glimpse of gorgeous-hued bushes, over which the painted butterflies hovered, of bright blue sky and, in the distance, sparkling green sea. And across the scene the keen sea-breeze romped, blowing the hair about the girl's eyes, a breath of life after the clammy atmosphere of the cave.

His back to a tree, a ragged blanket cast across his knees, the Man with the Clubfoot lay. His face was pallid and his huge body shook with ague. Before him stood two uncouth figures, each with a rifle and blanket slung, poncho-fashion, across him, the centre of an excited, gesticulating group.

"Sir Garth," the German lieutenant added, bringing Marjorie forward, "will surely listen to reason when he hears that his charming daughter is the guest of Herr Dr. Grundt! And, maybe, even the spy, Okewood, will come to terms...."

"So, so!"

Clubfoot's thick lips bared his yellow teeth in a grim smile.

"Das ist ja hoechst interessant! Jawohl!"

He raised his eyes to the girl, dark eyes that burnt with fever beetling from under the enormously bushy eyebrows, eyes that gleamed hard and menacing.

But now the crowd, which had fallen back at von Hagel's dramatic interruption, surged about him and Marjorie, shouting and gesticulating. The hollow rang with German and Spanish.

"Where is the Englishman?" they yelled. "Grundt, what of the treasure you promised us? The girl knows! Make the girl tell!...."

Grundt raised a great hand and, for the moment, the hubbub was stilled.

"Old Clubfoot is not at the end of his resources. *Kinder*, we have a hostage, a hostage we mean to keep. Let the yacht return; as long as the gnädiges Fräulein is our guest, we shall have no trouble from the stupid Englishmen. And as for our clever young friend, Okewood.... Herr Leutnant!"

"Herr Doktor?"

"The *Engländer* was last seen in company with the girl. Take two men and search the gallery!"

Von Hagel coloured up at the brusqueness of Grundt's tone.

"Schröder here," he said without a shred of respect in his manner, "has explored the gallery. It leads to a small air-hole through which he believes the girl crawled. No man, he says, could possibly get through...."

"Then," said Clubfoot, "the *Engländer* will be in one of the caves on the topmost terrace. Unless he has escaped?...."

And he shot a quick glance at the officer.

"Impossible," replied the other. "There is only the one practicable descent and it is guarded...."

Clubfoot nodded. Then he raised his hand.

"Go now," he said, "and leave me with the girl!"

On that von Hagel bent down and spoke softly in his ear. He seemed to be urging something with great insistence. Suddenly one of the Spaniards—a short man with a fat grey face covered with blue stubble and little pig eyes—danced to the front of the group. He burst into a torrent of voluble Spanish, shaking his fist repeatedly at Clubfoot. The latter did not move a muscle but looked at the speaker with contempt in every line of his face.

It was not until some of the Germans broke in, that Marjorie could understand what the scene was about.

"We're sick of being fooled," cried the big seaman they called Schröder. "The Kaiser's deposed, d'ye hear, and we're all equal! You've bungled things long enough, Grundt. You let the cursed English spy slip through your fingers with the hiding-place of the treasure in his head! You're past your work, Grundt! You've botched our business long enough!"

"*Ganz recht!*" ejaculated another German. "And poor Neque got a bullet in the guts for saying as much to you in the woods yesterday!"

This explained the single shot we had heard in the forest when we were on the rock.

"And the doctor murdered by this *verdammte Engländer!*" shouted a voice from the rear.

"Three days we've waited here and not a sign of the treasure," said von Hagel, looking round the group. "What have you to say to that, Grundt?"

Clubfoot, who had remained impassive under all this abuse, now staggered to his feet. No man lent a hand to help him. He stood and faced them, towering above them all. Ill though he was, his personality dominated every man in that place. A flame of colour mounted in his haggard face; two veins stood out like knots in his temples and his eyes blazed. His two hands, crossed on the crutch of his stick shook.

"Are you a candidate for my succession, Herr Leutnant?"

He addressed himself to von Hagel alone and his voice was calm and steady. But then his feelings seemed to overcome him and with a roar he shouted:—

"You insubordinate rascal! I can afford to let these curs yelp but when the whipper-in joins them, it's time for the master to use the lash!"

With that he raised his heavy stick and struck the other full across the face. With a scarlet weal barring his pink-and-white cheek von Hagel sprang at his aggressor, but a big automatic which Grundt had plucked from his pocket brought him up short.

"I used only one bullet on Neque," Clubfoot warned him in a quiet, grim voice. "There's one left for you, Herr Leutnant, aye, and more to spare for other mutinous blackguards like you...."

Von Hagel stepped back, broken, cowed. And Clubfoot cried:—

"While this puppy wastes our time, the man we want, the man who can lead us to the five hundred thousand dollars in gold, is skulking trapped in a cave not a thousand yards away. Fools that you are, don't you understand that you have but to let him know that the English girl is in our hands and he will throw up the sponge? Otherwise...."

He paused deliberately and looked at Marjorie from under his heavy brows. The crowd shouted back at him in German the word on which he had rested.

"*Sonst?*"

"Otherwise he must know that I shall hand this delicate English lady to the tender mercies of any of our brave companions who has fallen a victim to her beauty—Black Pablo, for instance, or our handsome steward, Pizarro...."

At that the crowd roared approval. Black Pablo, his guitar slung across his back, a squat, toad-like creature, obese

and disgusting, slouched over to the girl. He contrived to summon up from the depths of his single dull and fish-like eye an expression which made her shrink back in horror. Then, amid a burst of laughter, "handsome" Pizarro, the stunted mulatto cook, was pushed out of the grass. He shambled towards Marjorie, his eyeballs flashing white in his yellow pock-marked face.

"Go, children!" cried Clubfoot. "Drag this spy from his hole and bring him to me. This time he shall speak, by God!—or we shall finish with it once and for all!"

Again he looked at Marjorie. The gold in his teeth flashed as he smiled with cruel malice. Then, as though overcome by the demand he had made on his strength, he dropped back on his blankets once more.

The hollow was all astir as the men set out. They had camped at the foot of the terraced rock on the high ground overlooking the clearing with the grave, beyond it the broad sweep of Horseshoe Bay between the curved arms of land enclosing the lagoon.

"Take ropes!" counselled Clubfoot from his bed beneath the tree. "You may have to descend into the caves...."

The seaman, Schröder, brought out some lengths of rope and hurried after the string of men, who, in Indian file, streamed out of the hollow, talking and laughing like a pack of schoolboys. Not a man remained behind. Even Pizarro, the coloured cook, went along. Black Pablo, the leader of the party, who was the last to go, wanted to leave a guard over Marjorie. But Clubfoot would not hear of it.

"*Amigo mio*," he said. "El Cojo is not so old as that young jackanapes would make out. I cannot climb while this cursed fever is on me. But I can look after myself—and anybody else who does me the honour of spending this pleasant afternoon in company...."

Black Pablo laughed stridently. They heard his feet ring sharply on the rocky ground. The next moment he was gone, and the peace of a summer afternoon descended upon the hollow, the soothing quiet of droning insects, of a little breeze stirring gently in the thick foliage, the distant drumming of the sea.

Clubfoot began to speak to Marjorie.

CHAPTER XXII

I INTERRUPT A TÊTE-À-TÊTE

"An unpleasant scene of violence, mein liebes Fräulein," he remarked, dabbing his forehead with a red handkerchief, "which might so easily have been avoided. But, when men take passion instead of reason for guide—*was wollen Sie?* The war destroyed logical thinking. To-day it is rare to find anyone capable of taking a perfectly dispassionate view of life. *Jawohl!....*"

Marjorie wondered vaguely what he meant. His manner was ingratiating; but she was conscious that he was watching her closely to mark the effect of his words.

"We Germans lost the war. Therefore, a man like your friend Okewood believes that everywhere and in all circumstances, the German must be in a state of inferiority. How short-sighted, meine Gnädige! And what a blemish this want of logic signifies in an otherwise remarkable character! To go no farther a-field in search of an illustration than this delightful island;—war or no war, the fact remains that the strength of my little party puts the Herr Major in an inferiority of thirteen to one. How much wiser on his part it would have been to have recognised this fact yesterday! Let us hope that you will not be so ill-advised as to ignore it! You take my meaning? How quick you are!...."

For a minute his thick fingers drummed on the blanket thrown across him.

"Your Herr father has gone to fetch the yacht, *nicht wahr?*"

"It is no use asking me," replied Marjorie. "I have not seen my father since I landed on the island...."

"*So, so!*" placidly observed Grundt, "another question for friend Okewood presently. But perhaps you can tell me what has become of Herr Okewood? Where exactly did you leave him?"

Marjorie was thinking desperately. It was merely a matter of time, probably of minutes now, she reflected, before I should be captured and dragged out of the cave. But some instinct prompted her, as she told me afterwards, to give no information about me until she had actually seen me once more in Grundt's power. So she simply shrugged her shoulders.

"I trust that this gesture does not imply," said Clubfoot, "that you do not know where you left Major Okewood, for that would be acting a lie. And lying, *meine Gnädige*, would do you no good in your present predicament. You must not take advantage of our good nature, *o, nein!* Do not forget that on a desert island man is apt to sink back into his primitive state...."

His voice was gentle and caressing; but the implication in his words was horrible.

"You come to us unbidden. You throw yourself upon our chivalry. *Ja!* that is all very well. But have you made sure that the conventions of civilised life obtain in this little island republic of which I am president? *Hein, hein*, had you thought of that? But won't you please sit down?"

"I prefer to stand," replied the girl shortly.

"You make me do discredit to our old German courtesy, *liebes Fräulein*. I cannot sit while you remain standing, and in this hot sun *bitte!*"

With his spade-like hand he smoothed out a place on the grass under the shade of his tree. Dully, almost against her will, Marjorie sank down.

A gleam awoke in the cripple's eyes as he pawed the girl's bare arm.

"Listen!" he said, lowering his voice confidentially and leaning towards her. "The Spaniards of my party come without exception from the lowest scum of the Central American sea-board. Their table-talk is enlivened with anecdotes of their—shall we say conquests?—which fill even me with disgust and dismay. And my Germans, yes,—I, a good German, must admit it—they, too, have forgotten something of the conventions of civilised life. For five years or more they have been outlaws, dirty Boches, the rejected of mankind—they who are of that race,"—his voice rang out triumphant but then trembled and broke—"Gott! that is the salt of the earth!"

For an instant he seemed to be genuinely moved. Bitter memories kindled a spark of anger in his fierce, dark eyes. But the mood passed swiftly and his voice was gentle, his manner sleek as before when he resumed.

"You make it difficult, very difficult for me. You come here, a delicate, fair young maid and you expect to live unscathed in a camp of rough men; for I do not conceal from you the fact, Miss Garth, that unless your father is reasonable you may be with us for many days...."

He broke off suggestively. The girl dared not look at him for fear of the thought unspoken she might read in his leering eyes.

"Would you be surprised to learn? it is always best to be frank, *nicht wahr?*—that it will require an armed guard to keep these men away from you at night?...."

At that Marjorie revolted. She sprang to her feet and walked away, sickened at the picture he had suggested to her by every word. Grundt made no attempt to follow her.

"I am sure you will be reasonable," he murmured.

A man burst turbulently into the hollow. It was von Hagel. He was smeared all over with grey dust and his heavy boots showed white gashes where the rocks had cut them. He was pale and the livid weal across his right cheek seemed to distort his features.

"Well?" said Grundt sternly.

The young man made a helpless gesture of the hands. Slowly Clubfoot sat up erect and a heavy scowl drew his eyebrows together. One could almost see the young German quake as he stood before his leader, dumb, confused, aimlessly moving his hands. At last he faltered out:—

"He is not there!"

A convulsion of anger seemed to shake the huge cripple. The close-shaven hair of his scalp moved, his heavy nostrils twitched as solidly, viciously, his great jowl set.

"Not there!" he ejaculated hoarsely, his voice strangling with anger. "What do you mean 'not there'? Black Pablo's orders were to bring him down to me. Why has he not done so? Himmelkreuzdonnerwetter!"—his hairy hands beat on his knee with rage—"why don't you answer me?"

"We.... we.... gained the top shelf unobserved," stammered out von Hagel. "It was deserted. There is only one cave.... with a clear drop down. The steps appear to have quite recently broken away. Pablo, Schröder and I went with torches—they let us down with ropes. We came to a lower chamber where some native dead are buried. At the end was the narrow air-slit through which the girl escaped...."

"And the *Engländer* was not there, you say?"

"No!"

"*Schafskopf!* He was never there!"

"We saw him enter it. Besides, we found burnt matches on the ground and the ashes of his pipe...."

"Then he went out by the air-hole...."

"It is too narrow. Ramon, who is slightly built, could not get through...."

"And there is no other cave?"

"No!"

"Evidently he left by the way he entered, and escaped under the noses of your sentries...."

"Impossible, Herr Doktor! By the way he went in, without ropes, both ascent and descent are out of the question! And since early morning the path, which is the only means of access to the cliff, has been guarded...."

Shaking with ague, Clubfoot was struggling to regain his self-control.

"*Erlauben Sie!*" he said in a voice half-suffocated with rage, "let us get this right. I do not admit miracles. We know that the *Engländer* and the girl took refuge in this cave. *Gut!* The girl, we know, came out through the air-hole. Where is then the man?"

Von Hagel looked at Marjorie.

"Why not ask the girl?" he suggested.

"You've heard what he said," screamed Clubfoot, whipping round and shaking his finger at Marjorie. "Where did you leave this man?"

Then Marjorie told them she had left me in the cave.

"*Sehen Sie?*" roared Clubfoot. "He's escaped under your very snouts, *schweinhunde* that you are! He's in that cave yet! Get out of my sight, you dog! And send Black Pablo here! Tell him he has to reckon with me now! And by God if I have to go to him myself——"

Von Hagel had turned and fled. The cripple had risen to his knees. The perspiration poured off his face as, with trembling limbs, he vainly strove to overcome the weakness that mastered him, while he mouthed and mumbled a stream of threats.

Then from the sea a gun spoke, a single report that broke the brooding silence of the island and went echoing and clanging among the tall, grave rocks. Clubfoot's babble ceased on the instant. He desisted from his attempt to rise to his feet and remained immobile save for the trembling of his great torso. Slowly he turned his head and looked at Marjorie who, transfixed with fear, was watching him.

Thus I found them as, a moment later, I stepped into the hollow.

"Sit down, Grundt!" I said.

CHAPTER XXIII

CAPITULATION

Racked with fever though he was, his presence of mind did not forsake him. In a flash his whistle was at his lips and three shrill blasts rang piercingly among the rocks. With the other hand he snatched up his automatic.

It was done with such lightning speed that he had me at a disadvantage. Though I had my pistol in my hand when I challenged Grundt, I was completely thrown off my balance by the glimpse I had of Marjorie who, with the blood drained from her face, stood swaying against a boulder as if about to faint. For a fraction of a second I took my eyes off the cripple and in that instant he had me covered.

"Move and you're dead!" he snarled at me. "Drop that gun! Drop it, d'ye hear?"

"You're welcome to it," I said as I pitched it on a tussock between us. "I've come to capitulate, Grundt! You win!"

"Very clever! Oh, very clever, indeed!" he sneered. "You imagine, I suppose, that Clubfoot, the stupid old Boche, did not hear that gun from the sea just now? Your friends may have arrived back, Herr Major. But little good they'll do you. I am going to kill you!"

Even as he spoke, into the turquoise horseshoe of sea at his back the *Naomi* came steaming, the sun flaming here and there on her polished brass-work, a glittering white ship as snowy as the spume that creamed in her wake. So clear was the atmosphere that I could see the white-clad figures running about her decks. I strained my ears to catch if I might the clang of her engine-room telegraph ringing her down to "slow." But the wind was off the land and no sound came from the *Naomi*. She might have been a phantom ship, such a spectre as, they say, visits a man in the hour of death.

And, in truth, it seemed as though for me the hour of death were at hand. Grundt's evil eyes and grim mouth set above the gleaming blue barrel of the great automatic were ample evidence that his words were no idle threat. He shifted his grip to get a better aim and I looked away, away from that sinister face, away from the *Naomi* and her promise of

home, away from the glistening sea and the swaying green palms, to Marjorie. She stood like a white marble statue. Only her eyes seemed yet to live and they were wide with terror.

Again Clubfoot's whistle rang out. I turned to see his forehead puckered in a questioning frown. I shrugged my shoulders.

"What chance has the *Naomi* against you and your men, Grundt?" I asked. "A pleasure yacht is not equipped to send off cutting-out expeditions, you know! You are fully armed and well-entrenched in the island! It seems to me that your fears are exaggerated!...."

"Fine words, fine words!" he muttered. "Nevertheless in a minute you are going to die!...."

He took out his watch and laid it on the blanket before him.

"When I told you I had come to capitulate," I rejoined. "I spoke the truth. I have found the treasure. And there is proof!"

I opened my left hand and flung at his feet a handful of gold. Twenty-mark pieces, they dropped softly on the blankets and lay there gleaming in the sunshine, the Kaiser's head and the Imperial Eagle plain for him to see.

I had shaken him. I knew it at a glance. He looked down at the gold, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

"*Also doch!*" he murmured—that conveniently elastic German phrase which means "By Jove, he's done it!" or, "Well, I never!" or "I'd never have thought it!" or anything, more or less along these lines, you care to fit to it.

"Let Miss Garth and me go free to rejoin the yacht," I said, "and I'll tell you where the treasure's hid!"

He stiffened up at once.

"It is not for you to dictate to me, you scum," he cried. "Unconditional surrender is the only kind of surrender I understand. Say what you have to say and I will then decide what I shall do with you...."

I glanced seaward. And my heart stood still. The *Naomi* had vanished. Had it been but a vision after all?

"Come on!" urged Grundt, scowling. "I have given you a respite. But I now grow impatient...."

I noticed that the ague had taken him again and that, do what he might, he was trembling violently all over.

"If you will allow me to put my left hand in my jacket pocket," I said, "I can show you something that will explain everything."

"*Bitte sehr!* But remember that I can stretch you dead before you will have time to shoot, even through your pocket...."

From my jacket I produced the little mirror. The sun caught its polished surface as I brought it out and it flashed and flashed again.

Between the curving arms of Horseshoe Bay the launch of the *Naomi* came flying. I could see the white spray thrown up in two curving sheets as her bows cut the green water. To my ears stole faintly the quick chug-chug of her propeller. I wondered if Grundt had heard it. But he was staring fixedly at the little mirror which I kept turning over in my hands so that it flashed and flashed....

"This was wired to the grave, Grundt," said I. "It was what failed you to read the cipher. You remember the line 'Flimmer', flimmer' viel'? That was the indication to throw a spot-light thus!"—I caught the sun's rays in the glass and flashed it seaward to the bay—"from the mirror set at an angle of 85 degrees; 'the garrison of Kiel,' 'die Fünf-und-Achtziger', you know, Herr Doktor! Incidentally it was you yourself who were good enough to recall the allusion to my mind!...."

And I reminded him of our talk in the ravine in the forest.

Savagely he bit his lip.

"So that was what made you willing to hand me the message," he commented. "I wondered what it was. But continue! We waste valuable time!...."

"The compass bearing indicated by 'the Feast of Orders' was, of course, 27, from January 27th, the date of the celebration, as you probably guessed for yourself. The spotlight thrown along this line fell upon a peculiar pillar in the topmost terrace which your men are now searching. From this pillar, between two crags, the Sugar Loaf and the Lorelei, both quite easily identified. I saw the great image indicated by 'Püppchen' in the message. I don't know whether you know the song 'Püppchen, Du bist mein Augensterne?'"

"*Augensterne*—star of my eyes—refers to the idol. It has one eye hollow. By mounting from the hill-side at the back you can look through the eye and see the little cairn of stones which Ulrich von Hagel, with the hand of death upon him, built to mark the hiding place of the gold. At the foot of the image the treasure lies buried. From a box at the surface I took this handful of gold. I could not move the rest for I had neither pick nor spade and the ground is hard and rocky. And that, I think, is all!"

For the first time Grundt relaxed his forbidding expression.

"Your story sounds plausible, Herr Major," he said. "This time, I believe, you are telling the truth...."

I gazed out into the bay. The launch had disappeared. She must have gone in under the cliffs out of sight.

"In any case," Clubfoot was saying, "I propose to risk it. Being a practical man you will realise that I cannot afford to chance the valuable information you have acquired falling into the possession of your friends. Furthermore, I bear you a grudge, Okewood. It has been the rule of my life that no man shall beat me and live. Therefore, I am going to shoot you now...."

A little cry and even as I turned Marjorie pitched forward and fell prone on the grass between Grundt and me.

"Bah!" said Clubfoot, "let her lie! She will...."

He never finished the sentence. Quick as thought the girl half raised herself, two deafening reports rang out all but simultaneously, then, with a snarling cry, Grundt snatched at his wrist.

The next moment Garth and Lawless burst into the hollow. But I was staring at Marjorie who had fallen motionless on her face.

CHAPTER XXIV

ULRICH VON HAGEL'S TREASURE

For me in that moment the world seemed to end. I had plucked this girl from a placid, unruffled existence and plunged her into a vortex of adventure. Was she to leave her life, laid down for mine, in this desolate island while I, the author of all the mischief, was to escape unharmed?

Lawless was at Clubfoot's throat, worrying him like a terrier with a rat. Then, of a sudden, Carstairs and Mackay were there, twisting together with a leathern thong those great hairy wrists, one of which dripped blood. I stood helpless,

watching, as in a dream, Garth raise up his daughter and rock her still form in his arms. In her right hand she still clasped my automatic with which she had saved my life.

There was a shrill cry from the entrance of the hollow. With skirts flying Yvonne, Marjorie's French maid, darted in. "O, ma chérie! Ma chérie!" she moaned as with tears rolling down her face, she dropped to her knees by the girl's side. Now Garth was holding a flask to his daughter's lips. Presently to my unspeakable relief, she stirred slightly, then opened her eyes.

"I'm all right," she murmured, "quite all right really! Ah! Yvonne!"

And she closed her eyes again.

Garth stood up, a tall and commanding figure of a man in his spotless white drill, and looked at me, tattered and filthy as I was, with a four days' growth of beard and unkempt hair, my clothes torn and stained, my boots gashed almost to ribbons by those cruel rocks.

"Is she.... is she.... wounded?" I faltered.

The baronet shook his head and gulped.

"She's only fainted," he replied. "My poor, poor lass...."

Then, swallowing his feelings, he demanded fiercely:

"Where is this man Custrin?"

"Dead," I answered. "I shot him...."

What had happened in the forest had seemed natural enough. But, with the *Naomi*, civilisation had returned to Cock Island and my admission sounded horribly cold-blooded in my ears. As briefly as might be, but without concealing any salient fact, I told Garth the story of what had supervened after his departure with Carstairs. With ill-concealed impatience and with reddening cheeks he listened to my tale; but he grew too angry to hear me to the end. When I told him how I had come upon Marjorie in the room behind the galley he burst out in fury.

"So this is the end of your wild-goose chase! My little girl, alone and unprotected, in the hands of these savages! By God, Major Okewood, if any harm has come to her through your doing...."

"When I asked your help to get to Cock Island, Sir Alexander," I answered, "I had no means of knowing where this adventure would lead us. Nor had I any suspicion that I would, that I could, be followed. Otherwise I should never...."

He cut me short with an angry gesture of the hand.

"I don't want to hear any more. It is no thanks to you that my poor girl has not lost her life through your reckless folly. I had my doubts all along as to how far I could trust myself to your judgment. If I had any idea that you and that blackguardly doctor between you would have dragged my little girl into it...."

This was too much even from a distraught parent.

"It was none of my doing that Miss Garth came ashore," I retorted hotly. "And as for Custrin, it was you who unhesitatingly accepted him at face value. You even suggested that he should join our expedition...."

"But for you, Custrin would never have come on board. You'll not contest that, I suppose? I wish to Heaven the *Naomi* had never seen you...."

"I can only say how very deeply I regret the terrible experience Miss Garth had to undergo," I began.

But he only snorted.

"I don't want to hear any more from you!" he retorted and walked away.

I was keenly aware of the hostile atmosphere he radiated and it added to my utter sense of forlornness. But Lawless was speaking to me, as I stood dumbfounded, clapping me on the back, asking if I were all right.

"The gang's hooked it," he chuckled. "With the report of the *Naomi's* gun they must have just bolted off to their launch in Sturt Bay, way across the island, leaving their skipper to his fate. A dangerous man, that, major! We saw the launch.... it's a sea-going submarine chaser.... crossing the bar and making for the open sea. Sir Alexander was all for my going after 'em. But I told him it was no good with their start...."

Then he told me of the immense surprise which the appearance of the *Naomi's* launch had occasioned on board the yacht as she lay off Alcedo Rock.

"When the old man found that I had let Miss Garth ashore with the doctor," the captain continued, "I thought he was going out of his mind. He raged like a wild man. Whew! but it was hot work for a bit. He called me every name he could lay his tongue to and I'm damned if I know whether I'm in his service yet or know. I've been carpeted once or twice in my time and talked to rough but I never did see such a dido as Sir Alexander raised! And he's fighting mad with you, too....."

"I have the same impression myself!" I answered.

"We put about at once," Lawless resumed, "and ran for the island. Jock Mackay crammed on every ounce of steam he could raise. He had nightmare every night thinking of the coal-bill! We dropped anchor off the bar and took the launch ashore at once. As we came in through the lagoon, I caught through my glasses the flash of your heliograph from the cliffs in the centre of the island. So directly we landed we made for the high ground...."

"I hadn't a notion how to let you know where we were," said I, "until I thought of the mirror. It was rather a forlorn hope because, as you saw, things were getting a bit pressing when you arrived...."

Someone touched my elbow. Mackay stood there.

"Yon great Gairman is asking to speak with you!"

They had stretched Clubfoot out on his blankets beneath the tree. I hate to see a man trussed up anyway, and a queer sort of misguided pity stole into my heart as I looked down on Grundt, whom I had feared so greatly, strapped hand and foot.

At my approach he opened his eyes. They were still grim and fearless.

"If my men had come," he said truculently, "you would never have escaped. But they ran and left me,—von Hagel, a German officer, with the rest. Truly, I begin to think the sun has set on my unfortunate country!"

He checked and seemed to think.

"Young man, young man, that you had known me in my prime! But the foundations of my life have been knocked away. Okewood, I am getting old!"

The perspiration was damp on his brow. I could see the sweat glisten on the bristles of his iron-grey hair.

"In my day, in the years of Germany's greatness, I was all-puissant! I had but one master—the Emperor himself! No one—*no one*, do you understand?—not the Imperial Chancellor nor even the head of the Civil Cabinet, who was a greater man than he—dare give me—*der Stelze*, orders! Yet I had no official position! My name was in no *Rang-Liste* and I held no decorations. *Der Stelze* was not to be bought by those glittering crosses and stars with which so many of my fellow-countrymen loved to hang themselves! No, I was the secret power of the throne, the instrument of His Majesty. And, with this one exception, the highest in the land trembled at my name...."

His voice sounded tired; and it seemed to me that, of a sudden, he had, in truth, become an old man. His figure had

relaxed; he appeared to have grown grosser of body than of yore; the flesh of his face was sagging and his cheeks had fallen in.

"This was to have been the last adventure," he resumed and stared at me defiantly, "the last of how many? Friends of my master told me of this hoard and delegated me to proceed to Central America to track it down. What they would have given me for my pains would have sufficed to enable me to realise my dream of settling down on a little property I have in Baden, and of passing the evening of my days in peace...."

"And what did your friends want the money for?" I asked.

"That," retorted Grundt proudly, "is the business of my master!"

His words gave me my answer; for I knew of the existence of secret funds destined to bring the Hohenzollerns back to the throne which they had so shamefully abandoned.

"You matched yourself against me, Okewood," Grundt said suddenly, "at a time when already the axe was laid at the roots of the German oak. In the long seclusion which followed my wound—they found it necessary, as you know, to give out that I was dead—I used sometimes to think that our duel was a miniature reproduction of the struggle between Germany and England. And in neither case am I quite clear as to why the *Engländer* won!"

"Perhaps it was a case of conscience, Herr Doktor?"

The German looked up at me in surprise.

"Conscience!" he exclaimed. "But that is not a means of warfare!"

Lawless at my side uttered a loud exclamation. He was bending down over the blankets.

"The treasure!" he exclaimed, "by gum, you've found it!"

And he held up a shining piece of gold.

Funny, I had forgotten all about it.

"On those blankets, captain," said I, "you'll find all the treasure we're ever likely to get out of Cock Island. I located the hiding-place all right. But the treasure's gone. There are fifteen gold-pieces there—I counted them. That's all that's left of it...."

Then Grundt spoke.

"So you were bluffing to the end!" he said and was silent.

"Then that was why the gang was in such a hurry to be off!" cried Lawless.

I shook my head.

"They didn't find the treasure either," I replied. "Somewhere scattered among the rocky ravines and valleys of this island, a hundred thousand pounds in American eagles and German twenty-mark pieces are lying. Old Man Destiny had it in for us, captain. He sent a volcanic eruption which blew the treasure sky-high!"

"Jimini!" exclaimed Lawless in a hushed voice.

"It's an awfu' pity!" ejaculated Mackay mournfully.

Yvonne came. Marjorie was asking for me, she said. I found her sitting up, Garth at her side. The light was slowly mellowing and the sinking sun cast long shadows across the hollow. The sky was all marbled with red and gold flecks.

Rather shyly Marjorie thrust a slim white hand into mine. It may have been my fancy; but I think I saw Garth wince.

"So you did come out on top after all?" she said. "Sit down there beside Daddy and tell me all about it from the beginning. You found the treasure then?"

"I found where it had been hid," I replied. "But it had vanished...."

"Vanished?" cried Marjorie, and I swear there was dismay in her voice.

"Vanished?" echoed Garth.

"But the gold pieces you threw to Grundt," queried the girl. "I don't understand...."

"That was part of one box which had survived the volcanic eruption which scattered Ulrich von Hagel's horde to the four winds. You remember that wisp of smoke we saw rising from the hillside in front of the great image? Well, I discovered that it came from a deep fissure in the mountainside at the foot of the idol. From the little cairn of stones, which still stands on the edge of the cliff, it was clear that the treasure had been stored in a cave which appears to have been hollowed out of the rock in front of the idol.

"Where that cave was is now a yawning hole belching forth smoke and streams of lava. In fact, as far as I can judge, the treasure was blown clean out of the mountainside. That this surmise is correct is shown, I think, by my discovery of the remains of a wooden box in which were still a few gold pieces. Other fragments of charred wood were scattered around. For the rest the treasure is gone and will never be recovered!"

Marjorie's eyes rested mournfully on my face; but I could not meet her gaze.

"But how did you discover all this?"

"The passage by which I escaped from the burial-chamber brought me out within a hundred yards of the image. The sulphur fumes from the fresh cone of the volcano caught me by the throat directly I emerged into the open. My one idea was to find you. So I crammed the gold pieces in my pocket and made for Horseshoe Bay to see if the yacht had returned. Finding no sign of her or you I started to reconnoitre. I guessed that Clubfoot and his party would be watching somewhere near the terraced rock and sure enough, as I was prowling in the undergrowth near here, I saw the whole gang file out towards the rock. I watched where they had come from and creeping up saw you and Grundt in conversation. The only thing that mattered then was to get you out of Grundt's clutches. I saw no signs of any guards but I made sure that Clubfoot would have help within easy reach. As I was turning things over in my mind I heard the *Naomi's* gun. So I decided to risk everything on a final bluff and I acted at once...."

"When they told me you were not in the cave," said Marjorie, "I couldn't believe my ears. How on earth did you manage to escape?"

"Well," I replied, "you remember that stone table on which the mummies lay? Under one of them I found, let in the table, a flat stone carved with a turtle. I don't know whether you realise the significance of that sign. The turtle was the mark of that celebrated buccaneer, Captain Roberts, who, in the old days, was a great man in these waters. The buccaneers are known to have used Cock Island for obtaining fresh meat and water—you can read about it in the 'Sailing Directions'—so the sign of the turtle set me thinking.

"I tried to get the stone up but it was firmly cemented in the table. However, in my pushing and thrusting I leant against the table edge and suddenly the whole top swung round outwards into the cave leaving a hole about five feet deep. The hole was the opening of a passage several hundred yards long which led into the open air——"

"But how did you manage to close the opening behind you?"

"Quite simply. I arranged the mummies as they were before, covering the turtle stone, then standing in the hole I drew the table-top back into place again. It is quite solid and does not ring hollow—the simplest and neatest device of its kind I ever saw. Roberts and his men must have used the burial-chamber for some sort of secret meetings, I imagine.

Perhaps in their day Cock Island was inhabited...."

There was so much I had to ask, so much I would have said. But the presence of her father, dour and intractable, threw an invisible bar between us. I felt embarrassed and miserable—because I realised I suppose, that our island dream was at an end.

"It is getting dark," said Garth, standing up. "Come, Marjie, it's time we were back on board!"

He did not include me in the summons. Yet I should have to sail with him again. He could not maroon me there.

"You're coming with us?" said my dear Marjorie with her ready tact.

"Only as far as the beach," I replied. "We have to decide what's to be done with our friend yonder...."

In truth the problem of Grundt was beginning to obtrude itself in my mind.

"I'll come on board later," I said, "if Sir Alexander will allow me...."

"We must, of course, take Major Okewood back with us to Rodriguez," Garth observed stiffly.

At that Marjorie flared up.

"Daddy!" she cried indignantly.

We went down to the shore in silence. As we emerged from the woods, John Bard came striding up the beach.

CHAPTER XXV

THE END OF A DREAM

I don't think I was ever so glad in my life before to see anyone. There he was in the flesh, dear old John, tall and grave and courteous, like any Spanish don, in a clean tussore suit and the inevitable cigar stuck in a corner of his mouth.

"John!" I exclaimed. "How on earth did you ever get here?"

He stared at me in astonishment. It was obvious that, for the moment, he did not recognise me. Well might he wonder who this begrimed tramp might be who greeted him so familiarly. But then he cried out and clapped me on the back.

"Desmond, by all that's holy! Man, you've given us an anxious time! What have you been up to to get yourself in that condition?"

"It's a long story now ended," I answered soberly, "and it'll keep! At present I can't get over your turning up here!...."

"From inquiries I made about El Cojo and his gang after you left I got seriously alarmed about you," said this most faithful friend. "But when I heard that the Government coastal defence motor-boat, the fastest craft in these waters, was missing, I decided it was time I came to look for you. One of my fruit-ships, the *Cristobal*, happened to be in harbour, so I came along in her. She's lying outside now. Before we do any more talking I suggest you come aboard with me and have a clean-up. And you look as though you could do with a drink as well!...."

I explained the difficulty I was in regarding the disposal of Grundt.

"El Cojo, eh?" commented Bard and whistled. "That's some capture you've got there, Desmond. We'll take him back with us to Rodriguez. He's hand in glove with the President, I believe, and I should like to give his Excellency a lesson."

So we settled it. Bard arranged to send a boat ashore to fetch Clubfoot to the *Cristobal*. He promised to see to it that my enemy was safely bestowed.

So I turned my back on Cock Island and left it brooding sadly beneath the stars with the terraced rock and the image and the little bowl-shaped clearing where Von Hagel slept. I went on board the *Cristobal* and for a good half-hour, with a long "peg" within easy reach of my hand, lay and soaked the stiffness out of my bones in a boiling hot bath. John had volunteered, in the meantime, to send a boat over to the *Naomi* to fetch my luggage; for I had told him how things stood between me and Garth, and he assumed that I would remain on the *Cristobal*. I had hesitated an instant before replying; for I desperately wanted to see Marjorie again. But, I reflected, a millionaire's daughter was not for me—and it was better we should part thus. So I scribbled a note for the coloured steward to take to her: just a line to say good-bye and to thank her for her action that had saved my life.

They brought me some food in my cabin and while, attired in a voluminous dressing-gown of my friend's, I ate, John Bard told me what he had learnt regarding the connection of El Cojo's gang with Cock Island.

"During the war," he said, "the island was the depôt for certain important gun-running operations carried out by Black Pablo and his friends for the Mexican insurgents. The idea of the scheme, which was directed by the German espionage heads in the United States, was to keep things humming on the American border and to detain United States troops there.

"In those days Black Pablo had a ship of his own. He used to call periodically and collect arms and ammunition deposited on the island by some German commerce-raiders or other—there is talk of a mysterious vessel under the Swedish flag that used to stand off here—and take this contraband to Rodriguez. Here in port, under cover of night, it was transferred to a Mexican steamer which ultimately ran it ashore somewhere on the Mexican coast. On the outward trip to Cock Island, Black Pablo used to carry large stocks of gasoline for German craft operating in these waters...."

"There's a group of sheds on the other side of the island which Clubfoot's men called 'The Petrol Store,'" I put in.

"Precisely," said Bard. "There was a regular traffic here. The island is, after all, conveniently enough situated for the work they had in hand; not too far from the Central American coast yet well off the trade routes. It was naturally, as you might say, selected as the rendezvous in connection with what was intended to be Germany's biggest coup against the Americans in the war.... the destruction of the Panama Canal!"

"By George!" I commented.

"If it hadn't been for the Armistice," Bard continued, "I believe they would have pulled it off. They spent months on the preparations; everything was worked out to the last detail. The most vulnerable points were to be dynamited; the Gatun Lock and the Culebra Cut, I know, were mentioned. The big bang was planned for November, '18...."

"I see! And the Armistice spoilt it?"

"Exactly. The H.E. had been passed by Black Pablo and Co. to the parties appointed to carry out the explosion, and it was agreed that, as soon as the coup had come off, Black Pablo should make for the island rendezvous to receive his pay from a trusted German emissary who would await him there. The sum was one hundred thousand pounds in American gold dollars and German gold marks. But the Armistice, as you say, knocked the whole thing on the head. The entire German fabric collapsed, its plots and intrigues with it, including the canal coup. The Allies took a very firm hand with the Rodriguez Government and forced them to expel Black Pablo and confiscate his ship. Pablo went to San Salvador and did his best to charter a vessel there. But there was a heavy slump in German stock and everybody had the wind up. So nothing was done...."

"And Grundt—El Cojo?"

"I did not succeed in finding out a great deal about his movements; for the people from whom I inquired either did

not or would not know anything about him. But apparently he turned up from Havana some months ago. The rest of the story—how they got on to Dutchey and his tale of the message taken by the Englishman from the grave—you know...."

There was a tap at the cabin-door. The dark-skinned steward of the *Cristobal* was there with my kit from the *Naomi*. "El Cojo," he told us, had just come on board. Bard threw a questioning glance at me.

"I leave him to you, John," I said. "I don't want to see him again...."

My friend grinned understandingly and left the cabin. In silence the steward laid out some clean clothes for me. He said nothing about my note to Marjorie. Had she had it? Surely she would have answered....

"You left my letter for the Señorita?" I asked at last.

"Si, si, Señor Commandante," the man replied. "The Señorita was on the deck with the rich Inglez, her father, and I gave the Señor Commandante's note into her own hands!"

"And she read it?"

"Si, Señor!"

"And there was.... no reply?"

"No, Señor!"

Well, that settled it. I had my congé. Cock Island and those wonder days with Marjorie must go into the store-house of past memories.... Yet there was a tug at my heart as for a moment I thought of her as I had held her in my arms in the burial-chamber and she had raised her face to mine. "Money doesn't count down here!" she had whispered; but now we were back in the work-a-day world where money could prove an insuperable barrier between true lovers....

In moody silence I dressed and went above. A crescent moon hung low down on the horizon and the deck was eerie with fantastic shadows. No one was about. On our starboard bow the rugged mass of Cock Island was a black blur against the stars.

It is one of the failings of the Celtic temperament that its moments of the highest elation are apt to be followed by phases of the deepest depression. Reaction had come upon me after our days of high adventure and floored me utterly. All the spice, so it seemed to me in that dark hour beneath the moon on the *Cristobal's* deserted deck, had gone out of the romance of my profession and left me with an ill taste in my mouth. As I paced up and down I revisualised the scenes through which I had passed in my quest; Adams gasping for breath in his hovel, Garth and I scrambling through the steaming jungle, that storm-tossed figure by the grave, Marjorie pillowing her gold-brown head on my chest in the darkness of the cave.

From every one of the pictures which passed across my mind her face seemed to look out, the narrow pencilled eyebrows above the clear grey eyes, the great tenderness of her mouth.... Within a few hours, I pondered sadly, I had found my love and lost her just as I had found and lost the treasure....

A voice was hailing us out of the gloom that hung over the opalescent sea.

"*Cristobal* ahoy!"

The sound of oars came to me and presently a ship's boat emerged from the night, a white figure in the stern. A few minutes later Marjorie Garth, wrapped in a white blanket coat, stepped out of the boat that rocked in the swell at the foot of the *Cristobal's* companion and mounted to the deck.

"You would have left me like this?" she said, and stood close by my side.

I shrugged my shoulders.

"It was not a friendly thing to do.... partner," she added in a breathless sort of way.

"Your father...." I began.

"Oh!" she cried in a low voice, "I was ashamed of him. After what you risked to save me. But you must make allowances. I am all he has, you know. He'll be all right in a day or two. We're going back to Panama and home by way of America. And I've come to fetch you back to the *Naomi*!...."

I shook my head.

"No!" I said.

"If I ask you to come. And I'll make Daddy apologise, if you like...."

She laid her hand on my arm.

"No!" I said again.

Hurt, she withdrew her hand.

"Your stupid pride...." she began.

"Don't let us quarrel," I pleaded. "Let me keep a wonderful dream unspoiled, Marjorie. But dreams can't last for ever, my dear. One has to wake up some time, you know!"

Questioningly her eyes sought mine.

"Even if Sir Alexander had not told me I was not wanted on the *Naomi*," I continued, "I think I should yet have parted from you here. My dear, my dear, don't you see it's hopeless? I care far too much for you to be able to know you merely as a friend. I must make an end of it. The barrier between us is insurmountable...."

"Barrier?" she repeated. "What barrier?"

"Money! You're too rich, Marjorie, for me to ask you the question which, almost from the moment I first saw you in the smoke-room of the *Naomi*, I have wanted to put to you. I make enough out of this odd trade of mine to keep a wife. But as long as I'm in the Secret Service I'd ask no woman to marry me. It wouldn't be playing the game by her—or by the service, either!...."

She listened to me in silence. Then she said quite simply:

"Desmond, if you'll ask me, I'll be your wife. I've never met a man I'd marry before; but I'd marry you. Why should you let money stand between us? I shall have enough for both...."

I loved her for her words. But I shook my head again.

"It won't do, my dear," said I. "And you know it won't do. If I'd found that cursed treasure, things might have been different. But now I've only to tell you I shall never forget that you paid me the greatest compliment a woman can pay a man.... and to say good-bye...."

With a sob, she turned from me and, ignoring my arm, ran down the ladder and stepped into the boat.

Before morning Clubfoot had escaped. Loud shouts from Cock Island where, by Garth's permission, some of the crew of the *Naomi* had spent the night ashore, discovered the news to us. The *Naomi's* launch, which they had drawn up on the beach, was missing, and at the companion of the *Cristobal* a severed length of rope showed that the painter of one of the ship's boats which had been tied up there had been cut.

Bard held an inquiry. But his crew came from Rodriguez, "and," he told me, "they have a holy fear of El Cojo. He

simply blustered his way out of the lamp-room where I had him imprisoned! I'm not sure," he added with a grin, "that old Clubfoot has not himself presented us with the simplest solution of a very difficult problem!"

CHAPTER XXVI

IN WHICH A BLACK BOX PLAYS A DECISIVE PART

A smear of smoke on the horizon was all that was left to denote the presence of the *Naomi* when John Bard came to me as I sat in the shade of the after-deck of the *Cristobal*, going through the mail he had brought me from Rodriguez. He dropped into a chair at my side.

"Captain Lawless and that Scots engineer of his," he said, "spent the greater part of the night ashore grubbing for gold round the image. But they didn't find as much as a dollar. And then to discover they had lost their launch. Gee! they were as sick as mud!"

"Bah!" I answered. "I'm fed up with the whole place. The sooner we're at sea again the better I shall be pleased. I want to get back to work, John...."

"We're sailing at four o'clock," my friend replied. "But before we up anchor, Desmond, old man, I should like to have a look at that burial-chamber and the passage by which you escaped. What do you say to taking me ashore now and showing me round?"

"Anything to pass the time," I said wearily. "When do we start?"

"Right now. And I'll bring a pick and spade. If there's time we might have another grub for gold in the lava round the idol...."

"You bet the canny Scot hasn't left an inch of soil unturned," I laughed as old John went off.

Half an hour later we were pushing our way across the rocky valley at the end of which, against the mountainside, the great idol was set. We skirted the smoking volcano and at length stood before the narrow fissure, half-hidden by a gigantic boulder, through which I had emerged from the burial-chamber.

We had borrowed a couple of lanterns from the ship and Bard carried a pick-axe while I shouldered a spade. We left our tools at the entrance and lit our lamps. Then I led the way into the passage. At the end I found the solid masonry of the table hanging down into the passage. A steady heave swung it round and there, above our heads, was the black square opening of the death-chamber.

And now I struck. The place had too poignant memories for me. I hoisted Bard up into the hole, but I declined to accompany him. Swinging my lamp in my hand, I wandered back along the passage towards the cleft by which we had entered.

I had gone perhaps a hundred yards from the cave when the light of my lantern, striking low, revealed a square flag set in the floor of the passage. It sounded hollow to the foot. Setting down my lamp I stooped to examine it and then I saw that the stone was roughly carved. The carving was worn and filled in with dust. I scraped it clear as best I could with my hands and then saw that the stone was carved with the likeness of a turtle, the counterpart of the turtle carved on the table in the cave. I could see the head and tail and the four flippers roughly hewn.

"John!" I shouted. "Here, John!"

My voice reverberated weirdly in the low-roofed passage. I dropped to my knees and tried to heave the stone up.

But it was firmly set and resisted all my efforts. Then I heard Bard's footsteps echoing along the passage.

"Will you look at that?" I said as he came up.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "Captain Roberts, his mark! Can you heave it up? Wait! I'll get the tools!"

And he darted off along the passage.

With the aid of the pick we prised the stone up. A slot had obviously been cut for it in the rock. A shallow opening was revealed and at the bottom stood a black box.

It was of black leather, discoloured but apparently in good condition, the corners bound with some dull metal which I took to be brass. It was about four foot long, with a rounded lid studded with nails. Bard lifted up one of the lanterns whilst I, lying on my face, dropped an arm into the hole. My fingers closed on a handle at the side of the box. I heaved. The box was immensely heavy and I found that I could barely lift it. I managed, however, to push it to one side, thus making room for my feet. Then I dropped into the hole, up-ended the casket and by dint of our combined exertions we landed it on the floor of the passage.

I looked at Bard and he looked at me.

"You—open it!" I said hoarsely.

The box seemed to be of Spanish manufacture for the leather was handsomely tooled in the Cordova fashion. It was fitted with an elaborately chased iron or steel lock with a hasp that rattled to Bard's touch. Without further ceremony he inserted the point of the pick under the hasp, wrenched, and the nails giving way in the rotten leather, the whole lock came off. Then he threw up the lid and we saw a layer of discoloured brown canvas. This I pulled aside and we fell back in amazement.

For the box was filled to the brim with magnificent gold and silver vessels, interspersed with them richly chased pistols and a couple of daggers with hilts studded with gems. There were, amongst other things, a superbly wrought ewer and basin, both of which seemed to be of solid gold, a flat gold dish set with diamonds and rubies, a gem-laden crucifix, the Christ in pure gold, and an enormous variety of gold and silver forks and spoons. We laid all these treasures out on the floor of the passage and then, beneath some folded lengths of rich crimson brocade, came upon a long ebony box in which, wrapped loosely in a cambric scarf yellowed with age, was a superb collection of gems. There were no less than three magnificent *parures* of pearls, such as great ladies in the days of the Merry Monarch wore upon their neck and bosom, a number of diamond and pearl drops such as were worn on the forehead, diamond ear-rings, a huge emerald set as a brooch, several heavy gold chains, and some diamond buckles. Beside the ebony box, enveloped in a flowered silk wrap, was a curiously fashioned silver globe richly set with different precious stones to represent the various capitals of the world.

Bard heaved a deep sigh and looked at me.

"My word, old boy!" he exclaimed, "you've done it at last!"

"What—what do you suppose it's worth?" I asked rather unsteadily.

"A hundred thousand, two hundred thousand pounds," answered Bard. "Who can say? The antiquarian value, altogether apart from the intrinsic, of some of these things—that crucifix and that globe, for example must be very considerable.

"That emerald and those brilliants, for instance.... but you aren't listening."

I wasn't. A sudden vision had come to me of clear grey eyes trustfully raised to mine, of a tangle of copper-coloured hair that rested against my coat, of a slim warm body that clung confidingly to me. The discoloured leather trunk which lay at our feet was destined to change the whole course of my life. Hope, to which, with Marjorie, I had said good-bye, came surging back into my heart. Our island dream was not at an end.... unless good fortune had come to me too late.

"When will the *Naomi* reach Panama?" I suddenly asked.

"In about a week or ten days," John replied. "Why?"

"Because," I said, "I *must* reach her by cable!...."

It was ultimately from Rodriguez that my message was sent. Akawa, Bard's Japanese butler, took it down the hill to the cable office. I was prostrate with a bad bout of malaria, which I must have contracted in the steamy woods of Cock Island. My cable was to Marjorie, and this is what it said:

"The barriers are down. When will you marry me? DESMOND."

But no reply came. All through the feverish days of my illness, a shadowy cable addressed to me flitted through my tortured mind. Sometimes, when I was light-headed, as Bard told me afterwards, I would fancy that Marjorie had replied, that Akawa was handing me the message.... But when consciousness returned, I awoke to a dark world which even the leather trunk locked away in Bard's strong-room could not illumine....

It was weeks before I could travel to New York, where I placed the treasure in the hands of a firm of antiquaries. They advised that it should only come on the market gradually, piece by piece, in order not to depreciate its value. I do not, therefore, know even now exactly how much it will realise; but from what they tell me I am quite justified in regarding myself as a comparatively wealthy man. Bard will not touch a cent of the treasure. He does not need it, he says, and it belongs to me....

A cable from the Chief, to whom I had communicated my New York address, awaited me on my arrival from Panama. It directed me to go to Washington for instructions. The treasure disposed of, I accordingly boarded the train and proceeded to the capital.

From my hotel at Washington I telephoned to my old friend, Vincent Pargett, at the Embassy, and invited myself to dinner. Vincent made me welcome in his very comfortable bachelor apartment, and over the cocktails produced a batch of cables.

"You'd better read this one first, Desmond," he said. "It came only this morning. The rest have been here a week," and he tossed over the envelope.

It was from Marjorie. My heart seemed to stop beating as my eyes fell on her name printed at the foot of the message. It was from London, and I realised that my cable must have missed her at Panama and followed her home. This was her reply:

"Whenever you like.—Your MARJORIE."

There are moments which justify even the Secret Service agent in abandoning his wonted habit of reticence. With Marjorie's dear message in my hand I told old Vincent, whom I had known all my life, the news which it contained.

"Three cheers!" exclaimed my friend, then raised his glass.

"I drink," said he with mock solemnity, "to the passing of England's premier sleuth!"

* * * * *

I wonder! Shall I, in the stay-at-home Government billet which the Chief procured for me and happy in the possession of Marjorie as my wife, always be able to resist the beckoning finger of romance luring towards high adventure and spirited endeavour? Shall I, to the end of the chapter, remain deaf to the call of the blood, aloof from the thrill of the man-hunt? *Quien sabe?* Who knows?

Of Clubfoot I never heard again, and to this day I do not know whether, weak as he was and single-handed in that little launch, he ever made the land. Garth, inclined to be difficult at first, resigned himself at the last with a good grace

to our matrimonial projects. I think the argument that my share of Captain Roberts' treasure would remain in the family made a distinct appeal to his Lancashire horse-sense. Carstairs is with us still and is developing into an excellent butler.

For the Vice-Consul at Rodriguez, whose friendly services I had not forgotten, the Chief procured the C.B.E. I am told that he wears it very impressively, dangling from its purple ribbon on his shirt front, when, in evening dress, according to the protocol, he attends the President of Rodriguez at the opening of the Legislature....

THE END

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[End of *The Return of Clubfoot*, by Valentine Williams]