

**THE  
BECKONING HAND:**

**John Cann's Treasure**

**By  
Grant Allen**

**1887**

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## JOHN CANN'S TREASURE.

Cecil Mitford sat at a desk in the Record Office with a stained and tattered sheet of dark dirty-brown antique paper spread before him in triumph, and with an eager air of anxious inquiry speaking forth from every line in his white face and every convulsive twitch at the irrepressible corners of his firm pallid mouth. Yes, there was no doubt at all about it; the piece of torn and greasy paper which he had at last discovered was nothing more or less than John Cann's missing letter. For two years Cecil Mitford had given up all his spare time, day and night, to the search for that lost fragment of crabbed seventeenth-century handwriting; and now at length, after so many disappointments and so much fruitless anxious hunting, the clue to the secret of John Cann's treasure was lying there positively before him. The young man's hand trembled violently as he held the paper fast unopened in his feverish grasp, and read upon its back the autograph endorsement of Charles the Second's Secretary of State—"Letter in cypher from Io. Cann, the noted Buccaneer, to his brother Will<sup>m</sup>., intercepted at Port Royal by his Ma<sup>tie</sup>'s command, and despatched by General Ed. D'Oyley, his Ma<sup>tie</sup>'s Captain-Gen<sup>l</sup> and Governor-in-Chief of the Island of Jamaica, to me, H. NICHOLAS." That was it, beyond the shadow of a doubt; and though Cecil Mitford had still to apply to the cypher John Cann's own written key, and to find out the precise import of the directions it contained, he felt at that moment that the secret was now at last virtually discovered, and that John Cann's untold thousands of buried wealth were potentially his very own already.

He was only a clerk in the Colonial Office, was Cecil Mitford, on a beggarly income of a hundred and eighty a year—how small it seemed now, when John Cann's money was actually floating before his mind's eye; but he had brains and industry and enterprise after a fitful adventurous fashion of his own; and he had made up his mind years before that he would find out the secret of John Cann's buried treasure, if he had to spend half a lifetime on the almost hopeless quest. As a boy, Cecil Mitford had been brought up at his father's rectory on the slopes of Dartmoor, and there he had played from his babyhood upward among the rugged granite boulders of John Cann's rocks, and had heard from the farm labourers and the other children around the romantic but perfectly historical legend of John Cann's treasure. Unknown and incredible sums in Mexican doubloons and Spanish dollars lay guarded by a strong oaken chest in a cavern on the hilltop, long since filled up with flints and mould from the neighbouring summits. To that secure hiding-place the great buccaneer had committed the hoard gathered in his numberless piratical expeditions,

burying all together under the shadow of a petty porphyritic tor that overhangs the green valley of Bovey Tracy. Beside the bare rocks that mark the site, a perfectly distinct pathway is worn by footsteps into the granite platform underfoot; and that path, little Cecil Mitford had heard with childish awe and wonder, was cut out by the pacing up and down of old John Cann himself, mounting guard in the darkness and solitude over the countless treasure that he had hidden away in the recesses of the pixies' hole beneath.

As young Mitford grew up to man's estate, this story of John Cann's treasure haunted his quick imagination for many years with wonderful vividness. When he first came up to London, after his father's death, and took his paltry clerkship in the Colonial Office—how he hated the place, with its monotonous drudgery, while John Cann's wealth was only waiting for him to take it and floating visibly before his prophetic eyes!—the story began for a while to fade out under the disillusioning realities of respectable poverty and a petty Government post. But before he had been many months in the West India department (he had a small room on the third floor, overlooking Downing Street) a casual discovery made in overhauling the archives of the office suddenly revived the boyish dream with all the added realism and cool intensity of maturer years. He came across a letter from John Cann himself to the Protector Oliver, detailing the particulars of a fierce irregular engagement with a Spanish privateer, in which the Spaniard had been captured with much booty, and his vessel duly sold to the highest bidder in Port Royal harbour. This curious coincidence gave a great shock of surprise to young Mitford. John Cann, then, was no mythical prehistoric hero, no fairy-king or pixy or barrow-haunter of the popular fancy, but an actual genuine historical figure, who corresponded about his daring exploits with no less a personage than Oliver himself! From that moment forth, Cecil Mitford gave himself up almost entirely to tracing out the forgotten history of the old buccaneer. He allowed no peace to the learned person who took care of the State Papers of the Commonwealth at the Record Office, and he established private relations, by letter, with two or three clerks in the Colonial Secretary's Office at Kingston, Jamaica, whom he induced to help him in reconstructing the lost story of John Cann's life.

Bit by bit Cecil Mitford had slowly pieced together a wonderful mass of information, buried under piles of ragged manuscript and weary reams of dusty documents, about the days and doings of that ancient terror of the Spanish Main. John Cann was a Devonshire lad, of the rollicking, roving seventeenth century, born and bred at Bovey Tracy, on the flanks of Dartmoor, the last survivor of those sea-dogs of Devon who had sallied forth to conquer and explore a new Continent under

the guidance of Drake, and Raleigh, and Frobisher, and Hawkins. As a boy, he had sailed with his father in a ship that bore the Queen's letters of marque and reprisal against the Spanish galleons; in his middle life, he had lived a strange roaming existence—half pirate and half privateer, intent upon securing the Protestant religion and punishing the King's enemies by robbing wealthy Spanish skippers and cutting off the recusant noses of vile Papistical Cuban slave traders; in his latter days, the fierce, half-savage old mariner had relapsed into sheer robbery, and had been hunted down as a public enemy by the Lord Protector's servants, or later still by the Captains-General and Governors-in-Chief of his Most Sacred Majesty's Dominions in the West Indies. For what was legitimate warfare in the spacious days of great Elizabeth, had come to be regarded in the degenerate reign of Charles II. as rank piracy.

One other thing Cecil Mitford had discovered, with absolute certainty; and that was that in the summer of 1660, "the year of his Ma<sup>tie's</sup> most happy restoration," as John Cann himself phrased it, the persecuted and much misunderstood old buccaneer had paid a secret visit to England, and had brought with him the whole hoard which he had accumulated during sixty years of lawful or unlawful piracy in the West Indies and the Spanish Main. Concerning this hoard, which he had concealed somewhere in Devonshire, he kept up a brisk vernacular correspondence in cypher with his brother William, at Tavistock; and the key to that cypher, marked outside "A clew to my Bro. Iohn's secret writing," Cecil Mitford had been fortunate enough to unearth among the undigested masses of the Record Office. But one letter, the last and most important of the whole series, containing as he believed the actual statement of the hiding-place, had long evaded all his research: and that was the letter which, now at last, after months and months of patient inquiry, lay unfolded before his dazzled eyes on the little desk in his accustomed corner. It had somehow been folded up by mistake in the papers relating to the charge against Cyriack Skinner, of complicity in the Rye House Plot. How it got there nobody knows, and probably nobody but Cecil Mitford himself could ever have succeeded in solving the mystery.

As he gazed, trembling, at the precious piece of dusty much-creased paper, scribbled over in the unlettered schoolboy hand of the wild old sea-dog; Cecil Mitford could hardly restrain himself for a moment from uttering a cry. Untold wealth swam before his eyes: he could marry Ethel now, and let her drive in her own carriage! Ah, what he would give if he might only shout in his triumph. He couldn't even read the words, he was so excited. But after a minute or two, he recovered his

composure sufficiently to begin deciphering the crabbed writing, which constant practice and familiarity with the system enabled him to do immediately, without even referring to the key. And this was what, with a few minutes' inspection, Cecil Mitford slowly spelled out of the dirty manuscript:—

“From Jamaica. This 23rd day of Jan<sup>y</sup>.

in the Yeare of our Lord 1663.

“My deare Bro.,—I did not think to have written you againe, after the scurvie Trick you have played me in disclosing my Affairs to that meddlesome Knight that calls himself the King's Secretary: but in truth your last Letter hath so moved me by your Vileness that I must needs reply thereto with all Expedition. These are to assure you, then, that let you pray how you may, or gloze over your base treatment with fine cozening Words and fair Promises, you shall have neither lot nor scot in my Threasure, which is indeed as you surmise hidden away in England, but the Secret whereof I shall impart neither to you nor to no man. I have give commands, therefore that the Paper whereunto I have committed the place of its hiding shall be buried with my own Body (when God please) in the grave-yarde at Port Royal in this Island: so that you shall never be bettered one Penny by your most Damnable Treachery and Double-facedness. For I know you, my deare Bro., in very truth for a prating Coxcomb, a scurvie cowardlie Knave, and a lying Thief of other Men's Reputations. Therefore, no more herewith from your very humble Ser<sup>vt</sup>. and Loving Bro.,

“JOHN CANN, Capt<sup>n</sup>.”

Cecil Mitford laid the paper down as he finished reading it with a face even whiter and paler than before, and with the muscles of his mouth trembling violently with suppressed emotion. At the exact second when he felt sure he had discovered the momentous secret, it had slipped mysteriously through his very fingers, and seemed now to float away into the remote distance, almost as far from his eager grasp as ever. Even there, in the musty Record Office, before all the clerks and scholars who were sitting about working carelessly at their desks at mere dilettante historical problems—the stupid prigs, how he hated them!—he could hardly restrain the expression of his pent-up feelings at that bitter disappointment in the very hour of his fancied triumph. Jamaica! How absolutely distant and unapproachable it sounded! How hopeless the attempt to follow up the clue! How utterly his day-

dream had been dashed to the ground in those three minutes of silent deciphering! He felt as if the solid earth was reeling beneath him, and he would have given the whole world if he could have put his face between his two hands on the desk and cried like a woman before the whole Record Office.

For half an hour by the clock he sat there dazed and motionless, gazing in a blank disappointed fashion at the sheet of coffee-coloured paper in front of him. It was late, and workers were dropping away one after another from the scantily peopled desks. But Cecil Mitford took no notice of them: he merely sat with his arms folded, and gazed abstractedly at that disappointing, disheartening, irretrievable piece of crabbed writing. At last an assistant came up and gently touched his arm. "We're going to close now, sir," he said in his unfeeling official tone—just as if it were a mere bit of historical inquiry he was after—"and I shall be obliged if you'll put back the manuscripts you've been consulting into F. 27." Cecil Mitford rose mechanically and sorted out the Cyriack Skinner papers into their proper places. Then he laid them quietly on the shelf, and walked out into the streets of London, for the moment a broken-hearted man.

But as he walked home alone that clear warm summer evening, and felt the cool breeze blowing against his forehead, he began to reflect to himself that, after all, all was not lost; that in fact things really stood better with him now than they had stood that very morning, before he lighted upon John Cann's last letter. He had not discovered the actual hiding-place of the hoard, to be sure, but he now knew on John Cann's own indisputable authority, first, that there really was a hidden treasure; second, that the hiding-place was really in England; and third, that full particulars as to the spot where it was buried might be found in John Cann's own coffin at Port Royal, Jamaica. It was a risky and difficult thing to open a coffin, no doubt; but it was not impossible. No, not impossible. On the whole, putting one thing with another, in spite of his terrible galling disappointment, he was really nearer to the recovery of the treasure now than he had ever been in his life before. Till to-day, the final clue was missing; to-day, it had been found. It was a difficult and dangerous clue to follow, but still it had been found.

And yet, setting aside the question of desecrating a grave, how all but impossible it was for him to get to Jamaica! His small funds had long ago been exhausted in prosecuting the research, and he had nothing on earth to live upon now but his wretched salary. Even if he could get three or six months' leave from the Colonial Office, which was highly improbable, how could he ever raise the necessary money for his passage out and home, as well as for the delicate and doubtful operation of searching for documents in John Cann's coffin? It was tantalising, it was horrible, it



was unendurable; but here, with the secret actually luring him on to discover it, he was to be foiled and baffled at the last moment by a mere paltry, petty, foolish consideration of two hundred pounds! Two hundred pounds! How utterly ludicrous! Why, John Cann's treasure would make him a man of fabulous wealth for a whole lifetime, and he was to be prevented from realizing it by a wretched matter of two hundred pounds! He would do anything to get it—for a loan, a mere loan; to be repaid with cent. per cent. interest; but where in the world, where in the world, was he ever to get it from?

And then, quick as lightning, the true solution of the whole difficulty flashed at once across his excited brain. He could borrow all the money if he chose from Ethel! Poor little Ethel; she hadn't much of her own; but she had just enough to live very quietly upon with her Aunt Emily; and, thank Heaven, it wasn't tied up with any of those bothering, meddling three-per-cent.-loving trustees! She had her little all at her own disposal, and he could surely get two or three hundred pounds from her to secure for them both the boundless buried wealth of John Cann's treasure.

Should he make her a confidante outright, and tell her what it was that he wanted the money for? No, that would be impossible, for though she had heard all about John Cann over and over again, she had not faith enough in the treasure—women are so unpractical—to hazard her little scrap of money on it; of that he felt certain. She would go and ask old Mr. Cartwright's opinion; and old Mr. Cartwright was one of those penny-wise, purblind, unimaginative old gentlemen who will never believe in anything until they've seen it. Yet here was John Cann's money going a-begging, so to speak, and only waiting for him and Ethel to come and enjoy it. Cecil had no patience with those stupid, stick-in-the-mud, timid people who can see no further than their own noses. For Ethel's own sake he would borrow two or three hundred pounds from her, one way or another, and she would easily forgive him the harmless little deception when he paid her back a hundredfold out of John Cann's boundless treasure.

## II.

That very evening, without a minute's delay, Cecil determined to go round and have a talk with Ethel Sunderland. "Strike while the iron's hot," he said to himself. "There isn't a minute to be lost; for who knows but somebody else may find John Cann's treasure before I do?"

Ethel opened the door to him herself; theirs was an old engagement of long standing, after the usual Government clerk's fashion; and Aunt Emily didn't stand out

so stiffly as many old maids do for the regular proprieties. Very pretty Ethel looked with her pale face and the red ribbon in her hair; very pretty, but Cecil feared, as he looked into her dark hazel eyes, a little wearied and worn-out, for it was her music-lesson day, as he well remembered. Her music-lesson day! Ethel Sutherland to give music-lessons to some wretched squealing children at the Westend, when all John Cann's wealth was lying there, uncounted, only waiting for him and her to take it and enjoy it! The bare thought was a perfect purgatory to him. He must get that two hundred pounds to-night, or give up the enterprise altogether.

"Well, Ethel darling," he said tenderly, taking her pretty little hand in his; "you look tired, dearest. Those horrid children have been bothering you again. How I wish we were married, and you were well out of it!"

Ethel smiled a quiet smile of resignation. "They *are* rather trying, Cecil," she said gently, "especially on days when one has got a headache; but, after all, I'm very glad to have the work to do; it helps such a lot to eke out our little income. We have so *very* little, you know, even for two lonely women to live upon in simple little lodgings like these, that I'm thankful I can do something to help dear Aunt Emily, who's really goodness itself. You see, after all, I get very well paid indeed for the lessons."

"Ethel," Cecil Mitford said suddenly, thinking it better to dash at once into the midst of business; "I've come round this evening to talk with you about a means by which you can add a great deal with perfect safety to your little income. Not by lessons, Ethel darling; not by lessons. I can't bear to see you working away the pretty tips off those dear little fingers of yours with strumming scales on the piano for a lot of stupid, gawky school-girls; it's by a much simpler way than that; I know of a perfectly safe investment for that three hundred that you've got in New Zealand Four per Cents. Can you not have heard that New Zealand securities are in a very shaky way just at present?"

"Very shaky, Cecil?" Ethel answered in surprise. "Why, Mr. Cartwright told me only a week ago they were as safe as the Bank of England!"

"Mr. Cartwright's an ignorant old martinet," Cecil replied vigorously. "He thinks because the stock's inscribed and the dividends are payable in Threadneedle Street that the colony of New Zealand's perfectly solvent. Now, I'm in the Colonial Office, and I know a great deal better than that. New Zealand has over-borrowed, I assure you; quite over-borrowed; and a serious fall is certain to come sooner or later. Mark my words, Ethel darling; if you don't sell out those New Zealand Fours, you'll find your three hundred has sunk to a hundred and fifty in rather less than half no time!"

Ethel hesitated, and looked at him in astonishment. "That's very queer," she said, "for Mr. Cartwright wants me to sell out my little bit of Midland and put it all into the

same New Zealands. He says they're so safe and pay so well."

"Mr. Cartwright indeed!" Cecil cried contemptuously. "What means on earth has he of knowing? Didn't he advise you to buy nothing but three per cents., and then let you get some Portuguese Threes at fifty, which are really sixes, and exceedingly doubtful securities? What's the use of trusting a man like that, I should like to know? No, Ethel, if you'll be guided by me—and I have special opportunities of knowing about these things at the Colonial Office—you'll sell out your New Zealands, and put them into a much better investment that I can tell you about. And if I were you, I'd say nothing about it to Mr. Cartwright."

"But, Cecil, I never did anything in business before without consulting him! I should be afraid of going quite wrong."

Cecil took her hand in his with real tenderness. Though he was trying to deceive her—for her own good—he loved her dearly in his heart of hearts, and hated himself for the deception he was remorsefully practising upon her. Yet, for her sake, he would go through with it. "You must get accustomed to trusting *me* instead of him, darling," he said softly. "When you are mine for ever, as I hope you will be soon, you will take my advice, of course, in all such matters, won't you? And you may as well begin by taking it now. I have great hopes, Ethel, that before very long my circumstances will be so much improved that I shall be able to marry you—I hardly know how quickly; perhaps even before next Christmas. But meanwhile, darling, I have something to break to you that I dare say will grieve you a little for the moment, though it's for your ultimate good, birdie—for your ultimate good. The Colonial Office people have selected me to go to Jamaica on some confidential Government business, which may keep me there for three months or so. It's a dreadful thing to be away from you so long, Ethel; but if I manage the business successfully—and I shall, I know—I shall get promoted when I come back, well promoted, perhaps to the chief clerkship in the Department; and then we could marry comfortably almost at once."

"To Jamaica! Oh, Cecil! How awfully far! And suppose you were to get yellow fever or something?"

"But I won't, Ethel; I promise you I won't, and I'll guarantee it with a kiss, birdie; so now, that's settled. And then, consider the promotion! Only three months, probably, and when I come back, we can be actually married. It's a wonderful stroke of luck, and I only heard of it this morning. I couldn't rest till I came and told you."

Ethel wiped a tear away silently, and only answered, "If you're glad, Cecil dearest, I'm glad too."

“Well now, Ethel,” Cecil Mitford went on as gaily as he could, “that brings me up to the second point. I want you to sell out these wretched New Zealands, so as to take the money with me to invest on good mortgages in Jamaica. My experience in West Indian matters—after three years in the Department—will enable me to lay it out for you at nine per cent.—nine per cent., observe, Ethel,—on absolute security of landed property. Planters want money to improve their estates, and can’t get it at less than that rate. Your three hundred would bring you in twenty-seven pounds, Ethel; twenty-seven pounds is a lot of money!”

What could poor Ethel do? In his plausible, affectionate manner—and all for her own good, too—Cecil talked her over quickly between love and business experience, coaxing kisses and nine per cent. interest, endearing names and knowledge of West Indian affairs, till helpless little Ethel willingly promised to give up her poor little three hundred, and even arranged to meet Cecil secretly on Thursday at the Bank of England, about Colonial Office dinner-hour, to effect the transfer on her own account, without saying a single word about it to Aunt Emily or Mr. Cartwright. Cecil’s conscience—for he *had* a conscience, though he did his best to stifle it—gave him a bitter twinge every now and then, as one question after another drove him time after time into a fresh bit of deceit; but he tried to smile and smile and be a villain as unconcernedly and lightly as possible. Once only towards the end of the evening, when everything was settled, and Cecil had talked about his passage, and the important business with which he was entrusted, at full length, a gleam of suspicion seemed to flash for a single second across poor Ethel’s deluded little brains. Jamaica—promotion—three hundred pounds—it was all so sudden and so connected; could Cecil himself be trying to deceive her, and using her money for his wild treasure hunt? The doubt was horrible, degrading, unworthy of her or him; and yet somehow for a single moment she could not help half-unconsciously entertaining it.

“Cecil,” she said, hesitating, and looking into the very depths of his truthful blue eyes; “you’re not concealing anything from me, are you? It’s not some journey connected with John Cann?”

Cecil coughed and cleared his throat uneasily, but by a great effort he kept his truthful blue eyes still fixed steadily on hers. (He would have given the world if he might have turned them away, but that would have been to throw up the game incontinently.) “My darling Ethel,” he said evasively, “how on earth could the Colonial Office have anything to do with John Cann?”

“Answer me ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ Cecil. Do please answer me ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

Cecil kept his eyes still fixed immovably on hers, and without a moment’s

hesitation answered quickly "no." It was an awful wrench, and his lips could hardly frame the horrid falsehood, but for Ethel's sake he answered "no."

"Then I know I can trust you, Cecil," she said, laying her head for forgiveness on his shoulder. "Oh, how wrong it was of me to doubt you for a second!"

Cecil sighed uneasily, and kissed her white forehead without a single word.

"After all," he thought to himself, as he walked back to his lonely lodgings late that evening, "I need never tell her anything about it. I can pretend, when I've actually got John Cann's treasure, that I came across the clue accidentally while I was in Jamaica; and I can lay out three hundred of it there in mortgages; and she need never know a single word about my innocent little deception. But indeed in the pride and delight of so much money, all our own, she'll probably never think at all of her poor little paltry three hundred."

### III.

It was an awfully long time, that eighteen days at sea, on the Royal Mail Steamship *Don*, bound for Kingston, Jamaica, with John Cann's secret for ever on one's mind, and nothing to do all day, by way of outlet for one's burning energy, but to look, hour after hour, at the monotonous face of the seething water. But at last the journey was over; and before Cecil Mitford had been twenty-four hours at Date Tree Hall, the chief hotel in Kingston, he had already hired a boat and sailed across the baking hot harbour to Port Royal, to look in the dreary, sandy cemetery for any sign or token of John Cann's grave.

An old grey-haired negro, digging at a fresh grave, had charge of the cemetery, and to him Cecil Mitford at once addressed himself, to find out whether any tombstone about the place bore the name of John Cann. The old man turned the name over carefully in his stolid brains, and then shook his heavy grey head with a decided negative. "Massa John Cann, sah," he said dubiously, "Massa John Cann; it don't nobody buried here by de name ob Massa John Cann. I sartin, sah, because I's sexton in dis here cemetry dese fifty year, an' I know de grabe ob ebbery buckra gentleman dat ebber buried here since I fuss came."

Cecil Mitford tossed his head angrily. "Since *you* first came, my good man," he said with deep contempt. "Since you first came! Why, John Cann was buried here ages and ages before you yourself were ever born or thought of."

The old negro looked up at him inquiringly. There is nothing a negro hates like contempt; and he answered back with a disdainful tone, "Den I can find out if him ebber was buried here at all, as well as you, sah. We has register here, we don't

ignorant heathen. I has register in de church ob every pusson dat ebber buried in dis cemetry from de berry beginnin—from de year ob de great earthquake itself. What year dis Massa John Cann him die, now? What year him die?”

Cecil pricked up his ears at the mention of the register, and answered eagerly, “In the year 1669.”

The old negro sat down quietly on a flat tomb, and answered with a smile of malicious triumph, “Den you is ignorant know-nuffin pusson for a buckra gentleman, for true, sah, if you tink you will find him grabe in dis here cemetry. Don’t you nebber read your history book, dat all Port Royal drowned in de great earthquake ob de year 1692? We has register here for ebbery year, from de year 1692 downward; but de graves, and de cemetry, and de register, from de year 1692 upward, him all swallowed up entirely in de great earthquake, bress de Lord!”

Cecil Mitford felt the earth shivering beneath him at that moment, as verily as the Port Royal folk had felt it shiver in 1692. He clutched at the headstone to keep him from falling, and sat down hazily on the flat tomb, beside the grey-headed old negro, like one unmanned and utterly disheartened. It was all only too true. With his intimate knowledge of John Cann’s life, and of West Indian affairs generally, how on earth could he ever have overlooked it? John Cann’s grave lay buried five fathoms deep, no doubt, under the blue waters of the Caribbean. And it was for this that he had madly thrown up his Colonial Office appointment, for this that he had wasted Ethel’s money, for this that he had burdened his conscience with a world of lies; all to find in the end that John Cann’s secret was hidden under five fathoms of tropical lagoon, among the scattered and waterlogged ruins of Old Port Royal. His fortitude forsook him for a single moment, and burying his face in his two hands, there, under the sweltering midday heat of that deadly sandbank, he broke down utterly, and sobbed like a child before the very eyes of the now softened old negro sexton.

#### IV.

It was not for long, however. Cecil Mitford had at least one strong quality—indomitable energy and perseverance. All was not yet lost: if need were, he would hunt for John Cann’s tomb in the very submerged ruins of Old Port Royal. He looked up once more at the puzzled negro, and tried to bear this bitter downfall of all his hopes with manful resignation.

At that very moment, a tall and commanding-looking man, of about sixty, with white hair but erect figure, walked slowly from the cocoa-nut grove on the sand-spit into the dense and tangled precincts of the cemetery. He was a brown man, a

mulatto apparently, but his look and bearing showed him at once to be a person of education and distinction in his own fashion. The old sexton rose up respectfully as the stranger approached, and said to him in a very different tone from that in which he had addressed Cecil Mitford, "Marnin, sah; marnin, Mr. Barclay. Dis here buckra gentleman from Englan', him come 'quiring in de cemetry after de grabe of pusson dat dead before de great earthquake. What for him come here like-a-dat on fool's errand, eh, sah? What for him not larn before him come dat Port Royal all gone drowned in de year 1692?"

The new-comer raised his hat slightly to Cecil Mitford, and spoke at once in the grave gentle voice of an educated and cultivated mulatto. "You wanted some antiquarian information about the island, sir; some facts about some one who died before the Port Royal earthquake? You have luckily stumbled across the right man to help you; for I think if anything can be recovered about anybody in Jamaica, I can aid you in recovering it. Whose grave did you want to see?"

Cecil hardly waited to thank the polite stranger, but blurted out at once, "The grave of John Cann, who died in 1669."

The stranger smiled quietly. "What! John Cann, the famous buccaneer?" he said, with evident delight. "Are you interested in John Cann?"

"I am," Cecil answered hastily. "Do you know anything about him?"

"I know all about him," the tall mulatto replied. "All about him in every way. He was not buried at Port Royal at all. He intended to be, and gave orders to that effect; but his servants had him buried quietly elsewhere, on account of some dispute with the Governor of the time being, about some paper which he desired to have placed in his coffin."

"Where, where?" Cecil Mitford gasped out eagerly, clutching at this fresh straw with all the anxiety of a drowning man.

"At Spanish Town," the stranger answered calmly. "I know his grave there well to the present day. If you are interested in Jamaican antiquities, and would like to come over and see it, I shall be happy to show you the tomb. That is my name." And he handed Cecil Mitford his card, with all the courteous dignity of a born gentleman.

Cecil took the card and read the name on it: "The Hon. Charles Barclay, Leigh Caymanas, Spanish Town." How his heart bounded again that minute! Proof was accumulating on proof, and luck on luck! After all, he had tracked down John Cann's grave; and the paper was really there, buried in his coffin. He took the handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his damp brow with a feeling of unspeakable relief. Ethel was saved, and they might still enjoy John Cann's treasure.

Mr. Barclay sat down beside him on the stone slab, and began talking over all he knew about John Cann's life and actions. Cecil affected to be interested in all he said, though really he could think of one thing only: the treasure, the treasure, the treasure. But he managed also to let Mr. Barclay see how much he too knew about the old buccaneer: and Mr. Barclay, who was a simple-minded learned enthusiast for all that concerned the antiquities of his native island, was so won over by this display of local knowledge on the part of a stranger and an Englishman, that he ended by inviting Cecil over to his house at Spanish Town, to stop as long as he was able. Cecil gladly accepted the invitation, and that very afternoon, with a beating heart, he took his place in the lumbering train that carried him over to the final goal of his Jamaican expedition.

## V.

In a corner of the Cathedral graveyard at Spanish Town, overhung by a big spreading mango tree, and thickly covered by prickly scrub of agave and cactus, the white-haired old mulatto gentleman led Cecil Mitford up to a water-worn and weathered stone, on which a few crumbling letters alone were still visible. Cecil kneeled down on the bare ground, regardless of the sharp cactus spines that stung and tore his flesh, and began clearing the moss and lichen away from the neglected monument. Yes, his host was right! right, right, right, indubitably. The first two letters were Io, then a blank where others were obliterated, and then came ANN. That stood clearly for JOHN CANN. And below he could slowly make out the words, "Born at . . . vey Tra . . . Devon . . ." with an illegible date, "Died at P . . . Royal, May 12, 1669." Oh, great heavens, yes. John Cann's grave! John Cann's grave! John Cann's grave! Beyond any shadow or suspicion of mistake, John Cann and his precious secret lay buried below that mouldering tombstone.

That very evening Cecil Mitford sought out and found the Spanish Town gravedigger. He was a solemn-looking middle-aged black man, with a keen smart face, not the wrong sort of man, Cecil Mitford felt sure, for such a job as the one he contemplated. Cecil didn't beat about the bush or temporise with him in any way. He went straight to the point, and asked the man outright whether he would undertake to open John Cann's grave, and find a paper that was hidden in the coffin. The gravedigger stared at him, and answered slowly, "I don't like de job, sah; I don't like de job. Perhaps Massa John Cann's ghost, him come and trouble me for dat: I don't going to do it. What you gib me, sah; how much you gib me?"

Cecil opened his purse and took out of it ten gold sovereigns. "I will give you



that," he said, "if you can get me the paper out of John Cann's coffin."

The negro's eyes glistened, but he answered carelessly, "I don't tink I can do it. I don't want to open grabe by night, and if I open him by day, de magistrates dem will hab me up for desecration ob interment. But I can do dis for you, sah. If you like to wait till some buckra gentleman die—John Cann grabe among de white man side in de grabeyard—I will dig grabe alongside ob John Cann one day, so let you come yourself in de night and take what you like out ob him coffin. I don't go meddle with coffin myself, to make de John Cann duppy trouble me, and magistrate send me off about me business."

It was a risky thing to do, certainly, but Cecil Mitford closed with it, and promised the man ten pounds if ever he could recover John Cann's paper. And then he settled down quietly at Leigh Caymanas with his friendly host, waiting with eager, anxious expectation—till some white person should die at Spanish Town.

What an endless aimless time it seemed to wait before anybody could be comfortably buried! Black people died by the score, of course: there was a small-pox epidemic on, and they went to wakes over one another's dead bodies in wretched hovels among the back alleys, and caught the infection and sickened and died as fast as the wildest imagination could wish them: but then, they were buried apart by themselves in the pauper part of the Cathedral cemetery. Still, no white man caught the small-pox, and few mulattoes: they had all been vaccinated, and nobody got ill except the poorest negroes. Cecil Mitford waited with almost fiendish eagerness to hear that some prominent white man was dead or dying.

A month, six weeks, two months, went slowly past, and still nobody of consequence in all Spanish Town fell ill or sickened. Talk about tropical diseases! why, the place was abominably, atrociously, outrageously healthy. Cecil Mitford fretted and fumed and worried by himself, wondering whether he would be kept there for ever and ever, waiting till some useless nobody chose to die. The worst of it all was, he could tell nobody his troubles: he had to pretend to look unconcerned and interested, and listen to all old Mr. Barclay's stories about Maroons and buccaneers as if he really enjoyed them.

At last, after Cecil had been two full months at Spanish Town, he heard one morning with grim satisfaction that yellow fever had broken out at Port Antonio. Now, yellow fever, as he knew full well, attacks only white men, or men of white blood: and Cecil felt sure that before long there would be somebody white dead in Spanish Town. Not that he was really wicked or malevolent or even unfeeling at heart; but his wild desire to discover John Cann's treasure had now overridden every better instinct of his nature, and had enslaved him, body and soul, till he could

think of nothing in any light save that of its bearing on his one mad imagination. So he waited a little longer, still more eagerly than before, till yellow fever should come to Spanish Town.

Sure enough the fever did come in good time, and the very first person who sickened with it was Cecil Mitford. That was a contingency he had never dreamt of, and for the time being it drove John Cann's treasure almost out of his fevered memory. Yet not entirely, even so, for in his delirium he raved of John Cann and his doubloons till good old Mr. Barclay, nursing at his bedside like a woman, as a tender-hearted mulatto always will nurse any casual young white man, shook his head to himself and muttered gloomily that poor Mr. Mitford had overworked his brain sadly in his minute historical investigations.

For ten days Cecil Mitford hovered fitfully between life and death, and for ten days good old Mr. Barclay waited on him, morning, noon, and night, as devotedly as any mother could wait upon her first-born. At the end of that time he began to mend slowly; and as soon as the crisis was over he forgot forthwith all about his illness, and thought once more of nothing on earth save only John Cann's treasure. Was anybody else ill of the fever in Spanish Town? Yes, two, but not dangerously. Cecil's face fell at that saving clause, and in his heart he almost ventured to wish it had been otherwise. He was no murderer, even in thought; but John Cann's treasure! John Cann's treasure! John Cann's treasure! What would not a man venture to do or pray, in order that he might become the possessor of John Cann's treasure!

As Cecil began to mend, a curious thing happened at Leigh Caymanas, contrary to almost all the previous medical experience of the whole Island. Mr. Barclay, though a full mulatto of half black blood, suddenly sickened with the yellow fever. He had worn himself out with nursing Cecil, and the virus seemed to have got into his blood in a way that it would never have done under other circumstances. And when the doctor came to see him, he declared at once that the symptoms were very serious. Cecil hated and loathed himself for the thought; and yet, in a horrid, indefinite way he gloated over the possibility of his kind and hospitable friend's dying. Mr. Barclay had tended him so carefully that he almost loved him; and yet, with John Cann's treasure before his very eyes, in a dim, uncertain, awful fashion, he almost looked forward to his dying. But where would he be buried? that was the question. Not, surely, among the poor black people in the pauper corner. A man of his host's distinction and position would certainly deserve a place among the most exalted white graves—near the body of Governor Modyford, and not far from the tomb of John Cann himself.

Day after day Mr. Barclay sank slowly but surely, and Cecil, weak and hardly

convalescent himself, sat watching by his bedside, and nursing him as tenderly as the good brown man had nursed Cecil himself in his turn a week earlier. The young clerk was no hard-hearted wretch who could see a kind entertainer die without a single passing pang; he felt for the grey old mulatto as deeply as he could have felt for his own brother, if he had had one. Every time there was a sign of suffering or feebleness, it went to Cecil's heart like a knife—the very knowledge that on one side of his nature he wished the man to die made him all the more anxious and careful on the other side to do everything he could to save him, if possible, or at least to alleviate his sufferings. Poor old man! it was horrible to see him lying there, parched with fever and dying by inches; but then—John Cann's treasure! John Cann's treasure! John Cann's treasure! every shade that passed over the good mulatto's face brought Cecil Mitford a single step nearer to the final enjoyment of John Cann's treasure.

## VI.

On the evening when the Hon. Charles Barclay died, Cecil Mitford went out, for the first time after his terrible illness, to speak a few words in private with the negro sexton. He found the man lounging in the soft dust outside his hut, and ready enough to find a place for the corpse (which would be buried next morning, with the ordinary tropical haste), close beside the spot actually occupied by John Cann's coffin. All the rest, the sexton said with a horrid grin, he would leave to Cecil.

At twelve o'clock of a dark moonless night, Cecil Mitford, still weak and ill, but trembling only from the remains of his fever, set out stealthily from the dead man's low bungalow in the outskirts of Spanish Town, and walked on alone through the unlighted, unpaved streets of the sleeping city to the Cathedral precinct. Not a soul met or passed him on the way through the lonely alleys; not a solitary candle burned anywhere in a single window. He carried only a little dark lantern in his hand, and a very small pick that he had borrowed that same afternoon from the negro sexton. Stumbling along through the unfamiliar lanes, he saw at last the great black mass of the gaunt ungainly Cathedral, standing out dimly against the hardly less black abyss of night that formed the solemn background. But Cecil Mitford was not awed by place or season; he could think only of one subject, John Cann's treasure. He groped his way easily through scrub and monuments to the far corner of the churchyard; and there, close by a fresh and open grave he saw the well-remembered, half-effaced letters that marked the mouldering upright slab as John Cann's gravestone. Without a moment's delay, without a touch of hesitation, without

a single tinge of womanish weakness, he jumped down boldly into the open grave and turned the light side of his little lantern in the direction of John Cann's undeseccrated coffin.

A few strokes of the pick soon loosened the intervening earth sufficiently to let him get at a wooden plank on the nearer side of the coffin. It had mouldered away with damp and age till it was all quite soft and pliable; and he broke through it with his hand alone, and saw lying within a heap of huddled bones, which he knew at once for John Cann's skeleton. Under any other circumstances, such a sight, seen in the dead of night, with all the awesome accessories of time and place, would have chilled and appalled Cecil Mitford's nervous blood; but he thought nothing of it all now; his whole soul was entirely concentrated on a single idea—the search for the missing paper. Leaning over toward the breach he had made into John Cann's grave, he began groping about with his right hand on the floor of the coffin. After a moment's search his fingers came across a small rusty metal object, clasped, apparently, in the bony hand of the skeleton. He drew it eagerly out; it was a steel snuff-box. Prising open the corroded hinge with his pocket-knife, he found inside a small scrap of dry paper. His fingers trembled as he held it to the dark lantern; oh heavens, success! success! it was, it was—the missing document!

He knew it in a moment by the handwriting and the cypher! He couldn't wait to read it till he went home to the dead man's house; so he curled himself up cautiously in Charles Barclay's open grave, and proceeded to decipher the crabbed manuscript as well as he was able by the lurid light of the lantern. Yes, yes, it was all right: it told him with minute and unmistakable detail the exact spot in the valley of the Bovey where John Cann's treasure lay securely hidden. Not at John Cann's rocks on the hilltop, as the local legend untruly affirmed—John Cann had not been such an unguarded fool as to whisper to the idle gossips of Bovey the spot where he had really buried his precious doubloons—but down in the valley by a bend of the river, at a point that Cecil Mitford had known well from his childhood upward. Hurrah! hurrah! the secret was unearthed at last, and he had nothing more to do than to go home to England and proceed to dig up John Cann's treasure!

So he cautiously replaced the loose earth on the side of the grave, and walked back, this time bold and erect, with his dark lantern openly displayed (for it mattered little now who watched or followed him), to dead Charles Barclay's lonely bungalow. The black servants were crooning and wailing over their master's body, and nobody took much notice of the white visitor. If they had, Cecil Mitford would have cared but little, so long as he carried John Cann's last dying directions safely folded in his leather pocket-book.

Next day, Cecil Mitford stood once more as a chief mourner beside the grave he had sat in that night so strangely by himself: and before the week was over, he had taken his passage for England in the Royal Mail Steamer *Tagus*, and was leaving the cocoa-nut groves of Port Royal well behind him on the port side. Before him lay the open sea, and beyond it, England, Ethel, and John Cann's treasure.

## VII.

It had been a long job after all to arrange fully the needful preliminaries for the actual search after John Cann's buried doubloons. First of all, there was Ethel's interest to pay, and a horrid story for Cecil to concoct—all false, of course, worse luck to it—about how he had managed to invest her poor three hundred to the best advantage. Then there was another story to make good about three months' extra leave from the Colonial Office. Next came the question of buying the land where John Cann's treasure lay hidden, and this was really a matter of very exceptional and peculiar difficulty. The owner—pig-headed fellow!—didn't want to sell, no matter how much he was offered, because the corner contained a clump of trees that made a specially pretty element in the view from his dining-room windows. His dining-room windows, forsooth! What on earth could it matter, when John Cann's treasure was at stake, whether anything at all was visible or otherwise from his miserable dining-room windows? Cecil was positively appalled at the obstinacy and narrow-mindedness of the poor squireen, who could think of nothing at all in the whole world but his own ridiculous antiquated windows. However, in the end, by making his bid high enough, he was able to induce this obstructive old curmudgeon to part with his triangular little corner of land in the bend of the river. Even so, there was the question of payment: absurd as it seemed, with all John Cann's money almost in his hands, Cecil was obliged to worry and bother and lie and intrigue for weeks together in order to get that paltry little sum in hard cash for the matter of payment. Still, he raised it in the end: raised it by inducing Ethel to sell out the remainder of her poor small fortune, and cajoling Aunt Emily into putting her name to a bill of sale for her few worthless bits of old-fashioned furniture. At last, after many delays and vexatious troubles, Cecil found himself the actual possessor of the corner of land wherein lay buried John Cann's treasure.

The very first day that Cecil Mitford could call that coveted piece of ground his own, he could not restrain his eagerness (though he knew it was imprudent in a land where the unjust law of treasure-trove prevails), but he must then and there begin covertly digging under the shadow of the three big willow trees, in the bend of the

river. He had eyed and measured the bearings so carefully already that he knew the very spot to a nail's breadth where John Cann's treasure was actually hidden. He set to work digging with a little pick as confidently as if he had already seen the doubloons lying there in the strong box that he knew enclosed them. Four feet deep he dug, as John Cann's instructions told him; and then, true to the inch, his pick struck against a solid oaken box, well secured with clamps of iron. Cecil cleared all the dirt away from the top, carefully, not hurriedly, and tried with all his might to lift the box out, but all in vain. It was far too heavy, of course, for one man's arms to raise: all that weight of gold and silver must be ever so much more than a single pair of hands could possibly manage. He must try to open the lid alone, so as to take the gold out, a bit at a time, and carry it away with him now and again, as he was able, covering the place up carefully in between, for fear of the Treasury and the Lord of the Manor. How abominably unjust it seemed to him at that moment—the legal claim of those two indolent hostile powers! to think that after he, Cecil Mitford, had borne the brunt of the labour in adventurously hunting up the whole trail of John Cann's secret, two idle irresponsible participators should come in at the end, if they could, to profit entirely by *his* ingenuity and *his* exertions!

At last, by a great effort, he forced the rusty lock open, and looked eagerly into the strong oak chest. How his heart beat with slow, deep throbs at that supreme moment, not with suspense, for he *knew* he should find the money, but with the final realization of a great hope long deferred! Yes, there it lay, in very truth, all before him—great shining coins of old Spanish gold—gold, gold, gold, arranged in long rows, one coin after another, over the whole surface of the broad oak box. He had found it, he had found it, he had really found it! After so much toilsome hunting, after so much vain endeavour, after so many heart-breaking disappointments, John Cann's treasure in very truth lay open there actually before him!

For a few minutes, eager and frightened as he was, Cecil Mitford did not dare even to touch the precious pieces. In the greatness of his joy, in the fierce rush of his overpowering emotions, he had no time to think of mere base everyday gold and silver. It was the future and the ideal that he beheld, not the piled-up heaps of filthy lucre. Ethel was his, wealth was his, honour was his! He would be a rich man and a great man now and henceforth for ever! Oh, how he hugged himself in his heart on the wise successful fraud by which he had induced Ethel to advance him the few wretched hundreds he needed for his ever-memorable Jamaican journey! How he praised to himself his own courage, and ingenuity, and determination, and inexhaustible patience! How he laughed down that foolish conscience of his that would fain have dissuaded him from his master-stroke of genius. He deserved it all,

he deserved it all! Other men would have flinched before the risk and expense of the voyage to Jamaica, would have given up the scent for a fool's errand in the cemetery at Port Royal, would have shrunk from ransacking John Cann's grave at dead of night in the Cathedral precincts at Spanish Town, would have feared to buy the high-priced corner of land at Bovey Tracy on a pure imaginative speculation. But he, Cecil Mitford, had had the boldness and the cleverness to do it every bit, and now, wisdom was justified of all her children. He sat for five minutes in profound meditation on the edge of the little pit he had dug, gloating dreamily over the broad gold pieces, and inwardly admiring his own bravery and foresight and indomitable resolution. What a magnificent man he really was—a worthy successor of those great freebooting, buccaneering, filibustering Devonians of the grand Elizabethan era! To think that the worky-day modern world should ever have tried to doom him, Cecil Mitford, with his splendid enterprise and glorious potentialities, to a hundred and eighty a year and a routine clerkship at the Colonial Office!

After a while, however, mere numerical cupidity began to get the better of this heroic mood, and Cecil Mitford turned somewhat languidly to the vulgar task of counting the rows of doubloons. He counted up the foremost row carefully, and then for the first time perceived, to his intense surprise, that the row behind was not gold, but mere silver Mexican pistoles. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, but the fact was unmistakable; there was only one row of yellow gold in the top layer, and all the rest was merely bright and glittering silver. Strange that John Cann should have put coins of such small value near the top of his box: the rest of the gold must certainly be in successive layers down further. He lifted up the big gold doubloons in the first row, and then, to his blank horror and amazement, came to—not more gold, not more silver, but—but—but—ay, incredible as it seemed, appalling, horrifying—a wooden bottom!

Had John Cann, in his care and anxiety, put a layer of solid oak between each layer of gold and silver? Hardly that, the oak was too thick. In a moment Cecil Mitford had taken out all the coins of the first tier, and laid bare the oaken bottom. A few blows of the pick loosened the earth around, and then, oh horror, oh ghastly disappointment, oh unspeakable heart-sickening revelation, the whole box came out entire. It was only two inches deep altogether, including the cover—it was, in fact, a mere shallow tray or saucer, something like the sort of thin wooden boxes in which sets of dessert-knives or fish-knives are usually sold for wedding presents!

For the space of three seconds Cecil Mitford could not believe his eyes, and then, with a sudden flash of awful vividness, the whole terrible truth flashed at once across his staggering brain. He had found John Cann's treasure indeed—the John

Cann's treasure of base actual reality; but the John Cann's treasure of his fervid imagination, the John Cann's treasure he had dreamt of from his boyhood upward, the John Cann's treasure he had risked all to find and to win, did not exist, could not exist, and never had existed at all anywhere! It was all a horrible, incredible, unthinkable delusion! The hideous fictions he had told would every one be now discovered; Ethel would be ruined; Aunt Emily would be ruined; and they would both know him, not only for a fool, a dreamer, and a visionary, but also for a gambler, a thief, and a liar.

In his black despair he jumped down into the shallow hole once more, and began a second time to count slowly over the accursed dollars. The whole miserable sum—the untold wealth of John Cann's treasure—would amount altogether to about two hundred and twenty pounds of modern sterling English money. Cecil Mitford tore his hair as he counted it in impotent self punishment; two hundred and twenty pounds, and he had expected at least as many thousands! He saw it all in a moment. His wild fancy had mistaken the poor outcast hunted-down pirate for a sort of ideal criminal millionaire; he had erected the ignorant, persecuted John Cann of real life, who fled from the king's justice to a nest of chartered outlaws in Jamaica, into a great successful naval commander, like the Drake or Hawkins of actual history. The whole truth about the wretched solitary old robber burst in upon him now with startling vividness; he saw him hugging his paltry two hundred pounds to his miserly old bosom, crossing the sea with it stealthily from Jamaica, burying it secretly in a hole in the ground at Bovey, quarrelling about it with his peasant relations in England, as the poor will often quarrel about mere trifles of money, and dying at last with the secret of that wretched sum hidden in the snuff-box that he clutched with fierce energy even in his lifeless skeleton fingers. It was all clear, horribly, irretrievably, unmistakably clear to him now; and the John Cann that he had once followed through so many chances and changes had faded away at once into absolute nothingness, now and for ever!

If Cecil Mitford had known a little less about John Cann's life and exploits he might still perhaps have buoyed himself up with the vain hope that all the treasure was not yet unearthed—that there were more boxes still buried in the ground, more doubloons still hidden further down in the unexplored bosom of the little three-cornered field. But the words of John Cann's own dying directions were too explicit and clear to admit of any such gloss or false interpretation. "In a strong oaken chest, bound round with iron, and buried at four feet of depth in the south-western angle of the Home Croft, at Bovey," said the document, plainly; there was no possibility of making two out of it in any way. Indeed, in that single minute, Cecil Mitford's mind



had undergone a total revolution, and he saw the John Cann myth for the first time in his life now in its true colours. The bubble had burst, the halo had vanished, the phantom had faded away, and the miserable squalid miserly reality stood before him with all its vulgar nakedness in their place. The whole panorama of John Cann's life, as he knew it intimately in all its details, passed before his mind's eye like a vivid picture, no longer in the brilliant hues of boyish romance, but in the dingy sordid tones of sober fact. He had given up all that was worth having in this world for the sake of a poor gipsy pirate's penny-saving hoard.

A weaker man would have swallowed the disappointment or kept the delusion still to his dying day. Cecil Mitford was made of stronger mould. The ideal John Cann's treasure had taken possession of him, body and soul; and now that John Cann's treasure had faded into utter nonentity—a paltry two hundred pounds—the whole solid earth had failed beneath his feet, and nothing was left before him but a mighty blank. A mighty blank. Blank, blank, blank. Cecil Mitford sat there on the edge of the pit, with his legs dangling over into the hollow where John Cann's treasure had never been, gazing blankly out into a blank sky, with staring blank eyeballs that looked straight ahead into infinite space and saw utterly nothing.

How long he sat there no one knows; but late at night, when the people at the Red Lion began to miss their guest, and turned out in a body to hunt for him in the corner field, they found him sitting still on the edge of the pit he had dug for the grave of his own hopes, and gazing still with listless eyes into blank vacancy. A box of loose coin lay idly scattered on the ground beside him. The poor gentleman had been struck crazy, they whispered to one another; and so indeed he had: not raving mad with acute insanity, but blankly, hopelessly, and helplessly imbecile. With the loss of John Cann's treasure the whole universe had faded out for him into abject nihilism. They carried him home to the inn between them on their arms, and put him to bed carefully in the old bedroom, as one might put a new-born baby.

The Lord of the Manor, when he came to hear the whole pitiful story, would have nothing to do with the wretched doubloons; the curse of blood was upon them, he said, and worse than that; so the Treasury, which has no sentiments and no conscience, came in at the end for what little there was of John Cann's unholy treasure.

## VIII.

In the County Pauper Lunatic Asylum for Devon there was one quiet impassive patient, who was always pointed out to horror-loving visitors, because he had once

been a gentleman, and had a strange romance hanging to him still, even in that dreary refuge of the destitute insane. The lady whom he had loved and robbed—all for her own good—had followed him down from London to Devonshire; and she and her aunt kept a small school, after some struggling fashion, in the town close by, where many kind-hearted squires of the neighbourhood sent their little girls, while they were still very little, for the sake of charity, and for pity of the sad, sad story. One day a week there was a whole holiday—Wednesday it was—for that was visiting day at the County Asylum; and then Ethel Sutherland, dressed in deep mourning, walked round with her aunt to the gloomy gateway at ten o'clock, and sat as long as she was allowed with the faded image of Cecil Mitford, holding his listless hand clasped hard in her pale white fingers, and looking with sad eager anxious eyes for any gleam of passing recognition in his. Alas, the gleam never came (perhaps it was better so): Cecil Mitford looked always straight before him at the blank whitewashed walls, and saw nothing, heard nothing, thought of nothing, from week's end to week's end.

Ethel had forgiven him all; what will not a loving woman forgive? Nay, more, had found excuses and palliations for him which quite glossed over his crime and his folly. He must have been losing his reason long before he ever went to Jamaica, she said; for in his right mind he would never have tried to deceive her or himself in the way he had done. Did he not fancy he was sent out by the Colonial Office, when he had really gone without leave or mission? And did he not persuade her to give up her money to him for investment, and after all never invest it? What greater proofs of insanity could you have than those? And then that dreadful fever at Spanish Town, and the shock of losing his kind entertainer, worn out with nursing him, had quite completed the downfall of his reason. So Ethel Sutherland, in her pure beautiful woman's soul, went on believing, as steadfastly as ever, in the faith and the goodness of that Cecil Mitford that had never been. *His* ideal had faded out before the first touch of disillusioning fact; *hers* persisted still, in spite of all the rudest assaults that the plainest facts could make upon it. Thank heaven for that wonderful idealising power of a good woman, which enables her to walk unsullied through this sordid world, unknowing and unseeing.

At last one night, one terrible windy night in December, Ethel Sutherland was wakened from her sleep in the quiet little school-house by a fearful glare falling fiercely upon her bedroom window. She jumped up hastily and rushed to the little casement to look out towards the place whence the glare came. One thought alone rose instinctively in her white little mind—Could it be at Cecil's Asylum? Oh, horror, yes; the whole building was in flames, and if Cecil were taken—even poor mad imbecile Cecil—what, what on earth would then be left her?

Huddling on a few things hastily, anyhow, Ethel rushed out wildly into the street, and ran with incredible speed where all the crowd of the town was running together, towards the blazing Asylum. The mob knew her at once, and recognized her sad claim; they made a little lane down the surging mass for her to pass through, till she stood beside the very firemen at the base of the gateway. It was an awful sight—poor mad wretches raving and imploring at the windows, while the firemen plied their hose and brought their escapes to bear as best they were able on one menaced tier after another. But Ethel saw or heard nothing, save in one third floor window of the right wing, where Cecil Mitford stood, no longer speechless and imbecile, but calling loudly for help, and flinging his eager arms wildly about him. The shock had brought him back his reason, for the moment at least: oh, thank God, thank God, he saw her, he saw her!

With a sudden wild cry Ethel burst from the firemen who tried to hold her back, leaped into the burning building and tore up the blazing stairs, blinded and scorched, but by some miracle not quite suffocated, till she reached the stone landing on the third story. Turning along the well-known corridor, now filled with black wreaths of stifling smoke, she reached at last Cecil's ward, and flung herself madly, wildly into his circling arms. For a moment they both forgot the awful death that girt them round on every side, and Cecil, rising one second superior to himself, cried only "Ethel, Ethel, Ethel, I love you; forgive me!" Ethel pressed his hand in hers gently, and answered in an agony of joy, "There is nothing to forgive, Cecil; I can die happy now, now that I have once more heard you say you love me, you love me."

Hand in hand they turned back towards the blazing staircase, and reached the window at the end where the firemen were now bringing their escape-ladder to bear on the third story. The men below beckoned them to come near and climb out on to the ladder, but just at that moment something behind seemed incomprehensibly to fascinate and delay Cecil, so that he would not move a step nearer, though Ethel led him on with all her might. She looked back to see what could be the reason, and beheld the floor behind them rent by the flames, and a great gap spreading downward to the treasurer's room. On the tiled floor a few dozen pence and shillings and other coins lay, white with heat, among the glowing rubbish; and the whole mass, glittering like gold in the fierce glare, seemed some fiery cave filled to the brim with fabulous wealth. Cecil's eye was riveted upon the yawning gap, and the corners of his mouth twitched horribly as he gazed with intense interest upon the red cinders and white hot coin beneath him. Instinctively Ethel felt at once that all was lost, and that the old mania was once more upon him. Claspng her arm tight round his waist, while the firemen below shouted to her to leave him and come down

as she valued her life, she made one desperate effort to drag him by main force to the head of the ladder. But Cecil, strong man that he was, threw her weak little arm impetuously away, as he might have thrown a two-year-old baby's, and cried to her in a voice trembling with excitement, "See, see, Ethel, at last, at last; there it is, there it is in good earnest. JOHN CANN'S TREASURE!"

Ethel seized his arm imploringly once more. "This way, darling," she cried, in a voice choked by sobs and half stifled with the smoke. "This way to the ladder."

But Cecil broke from her fiercely, with a wild light in his big blue eyes, and shouting aloud, "The treasure, the treasure!" leaped with awful energy into the very centre of the seething fiery abyss. Ethel fell, fainting with terror and choked by the flames, on to the burning floor of the third story. The firemen, watching from below, declared next day that that crazy madman must have died stifled before he touched the heap of white hot ruins in the central shell, and the poor lady was insensible or dead with asphyxia full ten minutes before the flames swept past the spot where her lifeless body was lying immovable.

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.

Inconsistent use of hyphens and hyphenated words maintained.

Cover created for this ebook.

[The end of *The Beckoning Hand: John Cann's Treasure* by Grant Allen]