

QUEER PARTNERS

Sueclan Murray

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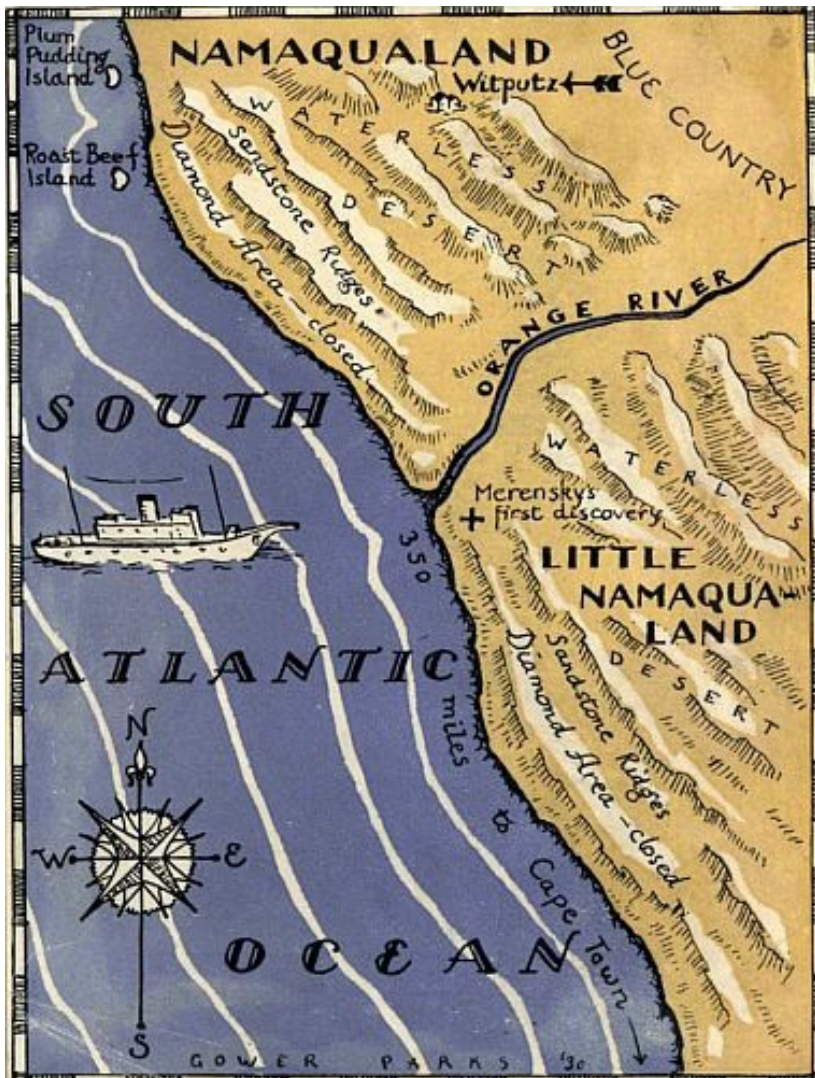
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QUEER PARTNERS

BY
SINCLAIR MURRAY

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CHAPTER I

SUPPOSED DROWNED

BIG BEN was on the stroke of noon when a young man with a wind-bitten and rather haggard face came out of the Admiralty Building, and stood staring dubiously across the Horse Guards Parade. Hands thrust deep in pockets, he waited for a moment, then progressed very deliberately through the iron gate that gives access to St. James's Park. Here he took a cynical glance at the pelicans silhouetted grotesquely against a background of taxicabs speeding along the Birdcage Walk, chose an empty seat by the water's edge, and resigned himself to reflection.

Axed! All very polite and formal. Due notice given—standard gratuity paid. A few appreciative words from the ex-commander who had cornered a cushy office job. Lock hardly heard what he said, being too busy studying the enormous room in which he stood, and getting the feel of this huge building with the aerial on top by which the Lords of the Admiralty talked with first-class battleships and little destroyers scattered over the seven seas. To this brain-centre he had come to be axed!

He straightened his long legs toward the metropolitan pelicans, cursing the British Navy and all connected therewith. They had taken him, that was fifteen years ago, drilled, bullied, trained and in general battered him about, sending him along interminable sea lanes of salt water education, and every day making him of less and less use ashore. Yet a boy, he had smelled blood in the Bight of Heligoland and at Jutland. Three years ago he had got his first ship, an insolent destroyer, and loved every rivet in her snaky hull. He had worked—slaved—sweated—frozen. And now ——!

He gave a laugh too contemptuous for one of his age, stretched himself, and started slowly in the direction of Pall Mall. Lowther was waiting in his club when Lock entered, and a glance at the young man's face sufficed. He knew that look, so talked generalities till they were half-way through lunch.

"Been thinking about you," he interjected suddenly; "you're lucky to get axed so soon."

"Lucky!"

"I think so; heard yesterday of another big batch in three months. Admiralty estimates are cut to the bone, and they won't hit the little chaps who've just joined."

“Then where does my luck come in?”

“This way—just so many jobs of the right kind. To-day there are ten men after each job; three months from now there’ll be forty.”

“Are there any jobs for my sort?” said Lock in a strained tone. “Only one thing I can do, and you know it. That’s the price of serving one’s country.”

“I know of one.” This with a cheerful little nod. “Brought it here, in fact, to talk about.”

Lock stiffened his broad, flat back. “You brought it here?”

“That’s what I said. Now, listen. A month ago I sold the steam yacht *Cygnnet* to a Mrs. Thomas Tarrant. She’s as rich as they make ’em, having come into a big fortune just recently. She lives near Exeter. *Cygnnet* was built by White, of Cowes, for Lord Farramore, and engined by Armstrong. She’s the last word in steam yachts, but details of that later. Interested?”

“Go on,” creaked Lock.

“*Cygnnet*’s going into commission right away—needs entire crew from captain down—and Mrs. T. has left the thing to me. You understand?”

Lock grinned at him. The world, as now represented by this man with the big kindly face, took on a gentler aspect. One didn’t feel so lonely. Lowther was a yacht agent—the yacht agent of Southampton. At his moorings one saw fleets of big and little. Others on the slips being scraped, painted, polished and manicured. He was the sort to whom you might go and say, “A week from to-day I want to sail for the Ionian Sea with my party of a dozen friends. Please get a yacht and arrange everything.” That day week you’d sail.

“Well,” he continued, “the billet’s in my pocket. Only one thing against it.”

“What’s the crab?”

“Owner’s a woman—which suggests more to me than to you—as yet. Later, you may see what I mean. The man who undertakes to satisfy a woman owner has some contract. Oh, yes, I know. Seen too much not to. Any woman wants to own a yacht, but nine-tenths of ’em don’t like the sea. However! In this case,” he added with the least approach to a wink, “there are two women. ’Pon my word, I almost see your finish.”

Lock put the women out of his head. “What’s the job worth?”

“Say forty pounds a month.”

The young man, smiling expansively, finished his beer. What a darned decent fellow Lowther was.

“You understand that I can only recommend you,” his friend went on. “I vouch for your qualifications and all that. The rest is up to you.”

“What do I do?”

“Call on the owner, make your little bow and the right impression. Put yourself over under the examination of two pairs of very bright eyes. I’ve the idea of Mrs. T. that she’s used to having her own way, and is a woman of sharp likes and dislikes. She’s what the Scotch call ‘magerful.’ Also that if you pass muster and take the thing on, you’ll run up against something rather out of the ordinary. This because the lady doesn’t strike me as one who’d be interested in the ordinary. She’s too forceful, too—well—dominant. On top of that, it isn’t exactly usual for a widow to drop in at my shop and buy a five-hundred-tonner, so to speak, over the counter.”

“Widow!”

“Yes. Tarrant, I learned, was drowned about a year ago, when fishing off the Irish coast. He was her second husband. Not long after that she came in for a pile of money. No, there’s no sign of mourning for the departed, and the lady is feeling her oats a bit.” He nodded, at once amused and in earnest. “Go to it, Lock. I’ve the sensation that this job is large with possibilities.”

He broke off as though questioning the wisdom of having said even this much, and examined his guest’s lean face. The mouth was large and strong, the lips flexible. His eyes had the peculiar grey green that at times is azure, at times steel blue. His shoulders sloped sufficiently to mask their breadth. Over him was the sign manual of the sea, revealed in the effortless watchfulness of his gaze, his deliberate movements and the unconscious suggestion he gave of scanning intermittently broad spaces and deep distances visible to himself alone.

“Y’know,” hazarded the older man, “getting back to Mrs. T., it would be an interesting situation if she and the daughter should happen to be after the same thing. I’d hardly know which to back. Well?”

“I’m on—what do I do next?”

Lowther took a letter from his pocket. “Go down to Exeter as soon as you like, or, better, come to Southampton with me this afternoon—we’ll reach it in two hours—and make your little call to-morrow. I’ll put you up, and you can have a look at *Cygnets* before you talk about her. I’ll telephone the lady to expect you.”

“I say,” blurted Lock, “why are you doing all this?”

Lowther stirred his coffee in meditation. “You can leave out the ‘all,’” he said slowly. “Also you can take it that a few of us who have nothing to worry about are not oblivious to what’s going on at the Admiralty. They can’t help it, but we think it a bit rough that chaps like you who have served their country and ask nothing better than to go on serving her should be told that what with one thing and another and good feeling with the U.S.A. and Navy reductions, he’s out of a job. Also, I know

enough of the sea to understand that when she takes a young fellow to her salty bosom she takes him entirely. There's not much of him left ashore. He's just a visitor in the land of his fathers. No—no thanks required. Have a look at *Cygnets*—you'll like her right enough—then go and see how you hit it off with the widow and her daughter. Might as well push along now, eh?"

Lock choked a little. What a decent old world it was! Whizzing down the Portsmouth road, he uncursed the Admiralty. Later, with Lowther, he climbed on board S.Y. *Cygnets*, and saw more floating comforts than ever before in his life. The yacht was oil-fired, turbine-driven, and the slow entrance curve of her bows had the line from neck to shoulder of a perfectly-modelled woman. Lowther, sitting on the rail, and smiling at the keenness of this inspection, gave *Cygnets* a cruising speed of sixteen knots, then harked back to the manner of her purchase.

"The lady breezed in with a copy of *The Yachtsman*, not in any way excited, and asked to be shown over. The daughter was with her. She'll interest you; cool as you like, but has a manner that I found impressive. They spent, I suppose, half an hour on board, then came to the office and bought. I asked had they planned their cruise, and was told no. Lock, they don't know where to go. What strikes me as queer about this affair is that there doesn't seem to be any man in it. But their sort don't live without men. Thing's impossible."

It was this last remark that stuck in Lock's head when next afternoon, five miles north of Exeter, he lifted the latch of the Uplands drive gate. He had walked out, thinking hard, and paused to brush the Devon dust from his boots. The house was a quarter-mile on, with French windows and stretches of perfect lawn.

A manservant opened the door, told him he was expected, and led him through a drawing-room into the garden, where two ladies were sitting. The elder rose as he approached. He felt uncomfortable, and found the situation difficult. So far he had been remote from women, thought little about them, and certainly never expected to be under womanly control. Now Mrs. Tarrant's eyes, quick and perhaps a trifle bold, regarded him with so direct a scrutiny that it roused a touch of antagonism, and he looked back at her without a trace of the deference he had meant to show. It was as though at first meeting they had crossed lances, testing each other's steel. This seemed to please her. She gave a little laugh, low and melodious.

"How do you do? We've each been wondering what the other would be like, haven't we? Eva—Mr. Lock."

The girl put out a hand, murmuring something. Mrs. Tarrant waved to a chair, settled on her own, lifted her finely pencilled brows, and surveyed the visitor with complacency.

“Mr. Lowther telephoned about you this morning. Of course, he’s been rather amused about us, but didn’t mean to show it.”

“Amused?”

“Well, yes. He asked me where we meant to go, and I couldn’t tell him because I didn’t know. Then he began to wonder why I bought the *Cygnets*, since which I’ve been rather wondering myself. But now that we have her, we’ve got to use her.”

“Naturally,” said Lock, wondering how old she was.

Her face had a fine contour, with a sort of classic and flawless beauty that would survive for many a year, and with this was conveyed physical prodigality that must have interpreted itself to many men. Emotionally, she seemed inexhaustible.

“I suppose,” she went on, “there’s no difficulty about going anywhere in the *Cygnets*—she’s big and fast enough?”

“Anywhere you like, Mrs. Tarrant, with water enough to float her.”

“And you could—well—take us? Mr. Lock, aren’t you going to say something about all the things Mr. Lowther assures us you can do?”

He laughed at that, matters moved more easily, and he found himself talking about himself in short staccato sentences that carried far more vividness than he imagined. For Mrs. Tarrant, who listened closely, it seemed to be exactly what she wanted, and he felt encouraged by the expression in her large, fearless eyes. He was describing his last command when something reached him from the girl, who was sitting in complete silence. It suggested that she was more interested in him than in what he had done.

“So that’s that,” he concluded. “And—er—I lunched with Mr. Lowther yesterday.”

“Well, Eva, you’ve been listening, I hope?” said Mrs. Tarrant briskly. “I think it’s just right—do you agree? You know,” here she nodded at Lock. “I’m rather afraid of my daughter.”

The girl got up without a word, crossed the lawn, and disappeared into the house. Lock turned red.

“I’m afraid I’ve talked too much, and anyway——”

He broke off. Eva was already on the way back, a large atlas under her arm. She laid this on a table beside her mother, turning the thick pages till she found the Mediterranean. It was all done with a deliberation made the more marked by her complete silence. Then, unveiling a pair of large and almost purple eyes, she said in a husky tone:

“Where would you suggest going; and why not get something settled now?”

Mrs. Tarrant laughed, and the glance she sent Lock levelled the last barrier of

brief acquaintance. It was exactly as though she had confided in him: "There—that's her way of taking the short cut to what she wants, and you can see how you stand with her." She put this with increasing amiability, indicating that she, too, was satisfied with Lowther's choice, that it was superfluous to say so in so many words, and they might as well move on and be practical.

Lock, infinitely relieved, began to talk. It was quite extraordinary, so lately released from a life of order and discipline, to run his finger from Gibraltar to Algiers, Tunis, pausing on the way back round the Levant, to dip into Taormina, Palermo and Naples, and knowing that it was for him to say what course these unfettered women should take. The thing was inviting, but struck him in an odd way as being soft. His world having been devoid of women, he had never considered that destiny might turn on the lift of an eyebrow. He made no allowances for such things. And, did he but know it, this extreme maleness of his increased his attractiveness to the two women, who followed the deliberate passage of his brown finger over the outspread map.

"How long would all that take?" asked Mrs. Tarrant with a sigh of contentment.

"You could do it in six weeks, but more comfortably in twelve." He was wondering whether this yachting impulse might not pass as suddenly as it came, leaving him stranded again.

"This is all very well, mother," said Eva in her odd tone, "but hardly fair to Mr. Lock. Naturally he's thinking about himself, too, and twelve weeks—what's that?"

This with a glance of complete understanding and friendship. Perhaps more than friendship, because it suggested that they two should start, here and now, with none of the usual preambles. The result was that at once he saw himself on the yacht with her, their growing intimacy, and all that might be involved. Also he felt very grateful.

"Of course,—you're quite right. Mr. Lock, we've got the *Cygnets*, and propose to keep her. It isn't just this cruise; there'll be a lot more. So shall we regard it as a yearly arrangement, and leave the business side to Mr. Lowther? And now that you're one of us, I'll tell you something else. This first trip we mean to take alone—no guests. We want to get used to the *Cygnets*. So if you could be ready in a fortnight——"

He could, easily. And in spite of what she said, it was not likely that *Cygnets* would be in commission for more than six months out of twelve, and he would have the other six to play with. Play! The word had an attractive sound. Fifteen years since he had really played. Queer to be associated with those who did nothing else!

Mrs. Tarrant was recalled to the house, leaving the two tracing courses on the great map. The girl gave Lock another of her heavy-lidded glances, and began to

talk.

“You’ve done a lot for your age; how old are you?”

“It’s not much compared to some men; I’m thirty.”

“I thought you’d say that. You’ll find it all very different now.”

“About as different as things can be.”

“And your people—where are they?”

“I haven’t any—practically. My father was killed in the war, and my mother died five years later. I’ve no brothers or sisters.”

“Neither have I,” she said. “Mr. Tarrant—perhaps you heard about him—was my stepfather.”

But the subject of Tarrant, seemingly, could keep; also her inflection suggested that it was not over-pleasant. She explored Lock for a moment with a gaze extraordinarily intimate yet utterly remote, while he, caught up in this peculiar exchange, returned it with a steadiness of which he was entirely unaware. The girl was slighter than her mother, very dark, with a pointed chin, highly arched brows and quantities of insolently black hair. Her skin was faintly olive and very smooth, and she moved with a languid physical grace. Beneath all this was the suggestion of passion and temper. Lock wondered if she had been spoiled since childhood, then decided that she and her mother must have crossed swords too often.

“It’s not going to be easy,” she said, looking distinctly alluring. “I ought to tell you that.”

“What isn’t?”

“Your job; we change too rapidly—both of us. The last thing that comes into our heads is always the most attractive. That’s how mother happened to buy the *Cygnets*, and I don’t know what will result on board. Probably we’ll fight like anything.”

“That doesn’t sound very serious,” he laughed.

“You just wait. I suppose it’s because we’re different. She likes people in a general way; I don’t—only a few. And the yacht is a sort of experiment. Mother’s always making them, and they never turn out as she expects.”

“I hope this one will.”

“I wonder. She argues that just the fact of having the yacht makes all sorts of things possible and natural that wouldn’t be otherwise. It’s a sort of preliminary to—well—anything you like.”

“What do you expect?” he asked, daring a little.

There was no immediate answer to that, nor did she look at him as before, but seemed to go off prospecting the future, a long, long way from him and the present

moment. She reminded him of something very perfectly made and finished and potent, sleek like a torpedo nestling in its grey-steel sheath and just as charged with explosives. He wondered what would release her forces and when the explosion would take place.

“I don’t know what to expect—ever,” she said slowly. “Perhaps a girl of my age can’t. It all depends on what contacts she makes.”

She left it at that for him to consider. Contacts! he ruminated. And because he felt they had travelled far in a short time, again he resumed the picture of her and himself, perhaps on the Ionian Sea, he trying to remember that he was an employee at forty pounds a month and fighting against her inescapable allure. How easy to go a step too far! And it must be that Mrs. Tarrant had very definite ideas on this matter.

“Here’s mother now, so we’ll have tea,” she said.

Lock jerked himself back. Two menservants brought the trays. Dappled shadows filtered through the trees, casting a dancing chequer-work on silver, linen and fragile porcelain. There was a faint scent of autumn roses. The three of them were moored on a shrub-bordered lake of velvet turf to which banks of multi-coloured stocks made a brilliant fringe. A hundred yards away the polished windows of Uplands glistened at the afternoon sun. The invisible flame of a spirit lamp set up a low puttering. Lock thought of tea gulped in the officers’ mess of H.M.S. *Active* to the accompaniment of complaining steel frames, the throb of racing engines and the odour of hot oil. It made him smile, and Mrs. Tarrant smiled at him knowingly.

“Is it a private joke? I’m sure it’s a good one.”

He was giving her a picture of *Active* in a North Sea gale, when there appeared in an angle of the drive visible from the lawn the tall figure of a man, walking slowly, and halting now and then to stare curiously about. He was over six feet, and carried his hat. From his sharp scrutiny of house and grounds it was plain that the place was new to him, equally plain that he found it of considerable interest. At sight of the group he stopped, regarded them with a motionless stare, then, shaking his head, went on toward the front door.

“Who on earth can that be?” Mrs. Tarrant arrested the cream jug in mid-air. “Do you know, Eva?”

“Never saw him before: perhaps he’s selling things.”

“Not that sort at all. I wonder? Well, Peters, who is it?”

The manservant put his hand to his mouth, and gave an embarrassed cough. “If you please, madam, it’s a Mr. Jackson.”

“And who or what does he want?”

“I asked him who he wished to see, madam, and he said—he said——” Peters,

stammering, got no further.

She put down the jug with a bump that Lock found eloquent, and Eva gave a little laugh.

“Well, Peters, what’s the mystery?”

“If you please, Miss, he inquired for Mr. Tarrant.”

It was an extraordinary moment, and Mrs. Tarrant’s expression not that of a bereaved woman. She looked faintly surprised, a shade amused and much interested. One could read this in the curve of her full lip and arch of strong brow. The girl glancing from Peters to her mother, seemed merely expectant, as though this stranger could be counted on to contribute something to the drama of life. Lock, ill at ease, made a motion to go.

“I’ll not wait. If you’ll address in care of Mr. Lowther about——”

“Please—no,” objected Mrs. Tarrant, “I’ll put things right in a minute, and we’ve a lot more to talk about. Peters, ask Mr. Jackson if he will kindly come out here.”

What then followed had for Lock a significance that it lacked for the two women, in that it gave him his first peep into the relations, that must have existed between Tarrant and his wife.

Jackson emerged from a French window, hat still in hand, and came toward them, a narrow though very strongly built man with a wide mouth and skin the colour of pale mahogany. He moved smoothly, leaning a little forward, with the long easy stride of one who has walked much, and regarded the three with unfeigned curiosity. Reaching them, he made a stiff little bow, his face devoid of any real expression.

“You were inquiring for my husband?” said Mrs. Tarrant calmly. “But I’m a widow now. Mr. Tarrant died a year ago.”

Jackson raised his head, slowly, mechanically. His hat dropped on the grass. He did not notice this, but stood as though frozen while one could almost hear his brain working. Then he tilted his narrow head, thrust out his chin, and took a long breath.

“Dead!” he said. “Tom Tarrant dead!”

“Please, won’t you sit down?”

Mrs. Tarrant was watching him, her head also a shade tilted, and Lock felt in his bones that this man was being appraised as never before. There was something infinitely alert about the woman. Her lids drooped, but she missed nothing. And, it began to appear, the man had brought with him something of which she inwardly approved. Then and there Lock would have sworn that she liked him. Jackson, returning the stare, had not moved a muscle.

“Please sit down,” she said again. “My husband did not speak of you that I can remember, but if you were a friend of his, you’ve every right to know about him.

Were you?"

"I was." This was in a deep, dry voice.

"This is my daughter Eva, and Mr. Lock, just out of the Navy. Were you away from England a year ago?"

"I was in South Africa and didn't hear anything."

"It was an accident—drowned—off the coast of Ireland. He went there to fish."

"Fish!"

Jackson shot this out with startling abruptness, as though the very idea of Tarrant's fishing had obliterated the news of his death. At the same time his wide mouth changed its angle, the expression of his eyes altered. It must have been that something occurred to him, but he kept it to himself, and became suave, modulated and sympathetic.

"Poor old Tom!" he murmured. "Would you care to—would you mind telling me about it? I've travelled a long way to see him. Last I heard was that he had married again and was living here. Got that in some paper. Then I went up country, and no more papers. I landed at Plymouth from Cape Town yesterday, and took a chance. So this young lady is Tom's stepdaughter. Well, well."

Eva, who had not spoken, made a restless movement. She did not like this interruption, nor did she fancy Jackson. For one thing he was too old—perhaps forty-five—to interest her. For another, she resented the intrusion just as she was making excellent progress with Lock, about whom she was rapidly nearing certain conclusions. Also, she objected to being called old Tom's stepdaughter.

"Why don't you tell Mr. Jackson what he wants to know, mother?"

Mrs. Tarrant, taking this very coolly, began at once:

"We were married eighteen months ago, when my husband bought this place. He seemed perfectly well at first—you know how big and strong he was—but after a few weeks seemed to change a great deal. I couldn't understand it. The doctor said it was nerves, which seemed absurd in a man like him. But very soon life became difficult, and he used to go off by himself for weeks at a time."

Jackson had large supple hands, and now he put his finger-tips together, pressing them with a sort of springy force, while he bent on Mrs. Tarrant a look of profound interest. Her story appeared to fascinate him.

"Yes—yes—too bad."

"Had you known my husband long or at all intimately?"

"A good many years, and, ye-es, you might say it was intimate. Big Tom, we used to call him. I've seen him hold another man out at arm's length."

She seemed quite unimpressed.

“As it turned out,” she went on evenly, “we were destined to see very little of each other. He was always quiet, and—well—really I don’t know what else there is to tell you.”

He glanced at her curiously, then across the lawn as though expecting someone.

“Off the coast of Ireland, you said, he was drowned?”

“Yes: he had been staying in County Cork at a place called Glandore, where the fishing is supposed to be very good. He went out alone, the wind came up, and his boat was found turned over on the beach miles away. I learned that he had been acting queerly in the hotel before that. One doesn’t like the word, Mr. Jackson, but it was really suicide.”

Jackson’s compressed skull and long neck nodded slowly, like an inverted pendulum.

“Looks that way; but who’d have thought it of Tom? You see, he and I had been in some tight boxes together, and come out of them, so it’s hardly the road you’d expect him to take. Brain trouble, eh?”

“The doctor said so. Won’t you have some tea?”

It was dawning on Lock that this stranger had a certain forceful attraction. He wasn’t one to be flurried or diverted, and his entire lack of mannerism was an asset. One seemed to believe him automatically, and his personality suggested that he could go on unfolding new aspects of himself, each of increasing interest. He talked to Mrs. Tarrant as though she were a man; and it appeared that Mrs. Tarrant liked it.

“Thanks, I don’t mind if I do. And Tom’s daughter, Hope, where is she?”

There was a little crash amongst the porcelain, and Lock caught a smothered exclamation. Mrs. Tarrant, unable to conceal a swift confusion, had lost every vestige of poise. Her hand trembled, her colour changed. Eva, too, had become alert and was staring at Jackson with a sort of unveiled defiance. Lock saw this, saw the lines of secret satisfaction deepen around Jackson’s mouth, and realized that his own presence could be no longer acceptable. The visitor, by a single, simple sounding inquiry, had struck far below the surface of things. There came an imperative signal from the girl, utterly confidential and imploring. It told him to go—go now—and leave the rest—his part of the future—to her. She would look after him and it, and she didn’t want him mixed up in what would shortly be exchanged between her mother and Jackson. As to Jackson, his eyes had rounded, and were fixed on Mrs. Tarrant with something nothing short of suspicion.

Lock got up, murmuring that he must catch a train, and said good-bye. Mrs. Tarrant, apparently hypnotized, hardly saw him, though she put out her hand and promised to keep in touch. She would write to Lowther that night and confirm

everything.

Eva, to his intense surprise, gave his fingers a quick, hard squeeze, that he took for gratitude. Jackson, measuring him as men measure men, sent a nod implying that he expected to be better informed about Lock before long. Then, his brain one great question mark, the young man strode off across the lawn. Odd that he should so object to leaving Jackson behind him!

At Exeter, lighting his pipe in the corner of an empty third-class carriage, Lock observed close to the window a red-faced man in blue clothes. This individual, grasping the door handle, was glancing keenly along the length of the train, as though undecided whether to take it: and it was not till the wheels began to move that he jerked open the door and got in.

“Hot!” he said, wiping his face.

Lock nodded indifferently, unfolded his paper and began to read, but his thoughts were not on anything he found. Less interesting than his own affair, and he fell to thinking of two rich women of unlimited means on a yacht, not knowing where to go or what they wanted, and himself a cicerone.

Grotesque!

Jackson! Who was Jackson? What did he know about Tarrant’s daughter, and where was she? He gave his head a little shake, and looked up to meet the quickly averted glance of his fellow-traveller.

He seemed bigger now and more massive, sitting very upright and bearlike on the narrow cushion. His eyes, deepset and shrouded under straggling brows, were of a pale watery blue, and Lock perceived that their oblique regard, now fastened on the passing landscape, was exceedingly alert. He was apparently of great strength, with a barrel-like body and massive arms. The suit he wore was well cut, his linen against the brown of his skin looked exceedingly white, and a heavy gold chain, passing through the second buttonhole of his waistcoat, made a double curve across his wide chest.

“Hot for this time of year,” he said in a deep vibrant voice.

“We’ve had a long drought, and it’s bad for the country.”

“Ye-es, and not a dry heat like I’m used to. Travelled a lot yourself, haven’t you?”

“I was in the Navy,” said Lock, reflecting that this was a thing of the past already.

“Ah, the Navy! Seen a bit of the world, you have. Well, I’ve seen a bit, too—on

dry land—too durned dry sometimes.” He gave a sort of snort, full of meaning. “This English drought, they don’t know what drought is.”

He rumbled this out, dismissing the subject, together with a lot of things he could say about water shortage if he wanted to, then began forcing his broad thumb through the hollow of his forefinger with a dry creaking sound.

“Not going to sea again, are you? Had enough, I suppose?”

“It happens I am, it being about all I can do. Lucky to have the chance.”

“Well, I suppose that’s right”—he nodded at the brown fields and shaven Devon hedges; “you’d find it hard to settle down here. Long at sea?”

“Fifteen years.”

“Not much out of a man’s life. At Jutland?”

“Yes.”

“Well, about that time I was chasing some of my German friends—they were friends right enough, too—up country in Africa. Queer feeling that, trying to pot the chaps you’d traded with for years, and they trying to pot you. I guess we didn’t shoot very straight—sometimes. With you fellows at sea it was different, not so intimate. However, that’s all over now.”

He broke off, pushing out his lips and staring at Lock so intently that his eyes seemed to change colour with changing thoughts. Hesitating thus on the doorstep of confidence, he became suddenly significant—a man of striking independence, yet about to ask for—something. Presently he lifted his chin and decision crystallized on his lips.

“Like to do someone a good turn?” he jerked out.

Lock stiffened a little. “That depends, doesn’t it?”

“Ye-es, that’s what I’d have said—in this country. It isn’t money, except that there’s money in it.”

“I’ve got a job,” said Lock.

The man leaned forward, put a big hand on his knee, and gave a deep-throated chuckle.

“Exactly why I’m talking—see? No, that’s ridiculous, you couldn’t see, yet. That’s why I hung round at Exeter till the last second and made sure you were alone. Wanted to talk to you. If you hadn’t a job, you’d be no use to me. Strikes you as queer, doesn’t it? Well, it is queer—queerest thing you’ve ever come up against, I’ll bet. You’ll agree with that if we come to terms. Want to make five hundred pounds?”

It occurred to Lock that the man might be mad, but there was nothing of this in the level gaze of those pale-blue eyes. They were, rather, the eyes of one who, after cold reflection, had come to a decision, and was utterly in earnest. This tentative

opening was so deliberate, it carried such assurance, that Lock found himself forced to take it seriously. And the man looked worth the money.

“You say I can make that outside my job?” he demanded.

“I did not: I suggested that because of the job you may make it.”

“And yet do my work as—as it ought to be done?”

“That’s a fact.”

“Then what do you want?”

“Ah—what do you want! You could ask that of a thousand men and get as many different answers, couldn’t you? The thing about what I want is that I can’t tell you until—well, until I feel I’m safe. Oh, no, I’m not sought by the law—you needn’t start up that track, though I see it in your face; and you couldn’t make a cent by giving away what I’m thinking of telling you. Now let’s get down to cases. I’ve been studying you and I’ll take the chance if I have your oath.”

“What oath?”

“That you’ll not reveal to any living soul without my authority a word I say, or that I’m the man who wants help. I’d have supposed you’d guessed that to start with. If you’re going to be the helper—well, right you are; if not, you’ll forget all about it. That’s fair. And what I’ll ask, provided I’m safe, is no more than you’d ask any white man to do for you if you were in the same trouble.”

“Your word on that?” asked Lock, curiously impressed.

“You have it. Call me a liar later if you like; but you won’t.”

“Well, provided it does not affect my loyalty to my job or my employer, you have my oath.”

The stranger nodded slowly, his big mouth taking on an amused curve.

“Navy man puts his job first. I suppose you’re right. Never seen me before, have you?” This with a touch of confidence.

“Not to my knowledge—no—sure I haven’t.”

“Meaning that you’d remember. Well, I didn’t propose you should. Look here; in the last day or two, we’ll say in the last few hours, you’ve heard a good deal about one thing or another, met some new people, eh, and, generally speaking, had a sort of eye-opener. Is that right?”

“What the devil has it to do with you if I have? You told me——”

The big hand went up in expostulation. “Hold your horses. I haven’t asked you anything, have I? I’m just telling you things, and you stop me if I’m wrong.”

“Go on,” said Lock warily.

“That’s better, a lot better. You let me get at what I’ve got to say in my own way. Easier all round. Now I’m going to mention names. You heard, maybe—though I

don't know if you did—about a man called Tarrant. Anyway, if you haven't, you're bound to soon. Well," here the stranger's face took on a look of cynical satisfaction, "that's me—I'm Tarrant."

Lock's chin gave a galvanic jerk toward his chest. He did not speak. All very ordinary in the carriage—the clickless rhythm of a high-speed train—the Devon country swimming past the windows—the odour of stale tobacco one finds in a third-class smoker. The man opposite had his lips pressed tight, his eyes half closed, and seemed to be enjoying the effect produced.

"It's good—darned good," he went on, effusing at the same time every symptom of mental relaxation, "to be able to tell somebody that I'm Tom Tarrant. Haven't said that for a year. And it's a queer job to have to quit being yourself and stand aside looking at yourself as though you were some other fellow. Well, if they mentioned me at Uplands they'd be likely to say that I was drowned when fishing off the coast of Ireland. Fishing! I hate fishing. Anyone who knows me—hold on—anyone who knew me—would tell you that." He slapped his leg and took a long breath. "But, anyway, it seemed the easiest way to work it, so, first, I put a bit of money where I could always get at it. Nothing in this, is there, to affect—how did you put it—your loyalty to your job and—ah—employer?"

Lock shook his head, his brain buzzing. It was all odd, queer, nearly incredible, yet elusively convincing. It seemed, somehow, of a piece with that afternoon, with the two women so strangely and contradictorily assorted, with the incoherency of their plans, with the coming of Jackson, and the sensation, so vivid at the moment, that here was someone destined to be woven into the warp of events. Jackson's scarcely veiled dubiousness on hearing of Tarrant's death—his sudden inquiry for the girl, Hope—Mrs. Tarrant's immediate confusion—and the vague, unfinished—there was no other word for it—finale to the meeting of all four on the lawn of Uplands. Yes, it was all of a piece; and the young man perceived that that meeting was but the introduction to bigger events. Thus it came that as his first surprise dwindled, Lock accepted this new entrant into affairs with something of an appetite. He had established himself as an undoubted factor—perhaps the factor in some impending drama, and now he yielded to a thrill of anticipation. But the thing was to let Tarrant do the talking.

"I'll go back," rumbled the deep voice. "One generally begins that way. I'm going to speak about people you know, because they're at the bottom of it; but you don't know 'em as I do. You're new, and I've been through it. Just remember that if what I say strikes you as exaggerated. There's no stop between here and Waterloo, is there?"

“No,” said Lock.

“Well, here goes—sort of voice out of a watery grave, eh? And just for you. I’d call that privileged. I won’t load you up with what doesn’t signify, and start eighteen months ago when I made my second marriage. Haven’t made your first yet, have you?”

“Not on what a grateful country thought I was worth.”

“Then you owe your country a good turn. I’d just got back from—from abroad, and had a bit of money, though not as much as you saw this afternoon.”

“How do you know what I’ve seen?”

“Look here, I’ve got to tell this in my own way, or not at all. So don’t butt in. It’s all arranged as I want you to have it. You bottle up your questions, and I’ll answer ’em seriatim—that’s the word—later on. As I said, I married again. Know much about women? I’ve heard you Navy chaps——”

Lock had to grin at him. “Afraid that’s been left out of me.”

“Afraid! You thank your Maker for it. Women are——” His voice hung in the air, and he stared about the dingy carriage with its faded photographs of Torquay, Exeter Cathedral, and heavily garbed bathing parties at Lyme Regis. “Oh, what’s the use? You spoke about loyalty just now, so I wonder if you’ll think it disloyal for a presumably dead man to talk about his wife. That’s what I’ve got to do. You’ll say, most likely, that it wasn’t loyal to make out that I was drowned; but seeing that you don’t know a damned thing about her, you’d be talking through your hat.

“There are some women,” he went on, ranging back it seemed through a long perspective of personal experiences, “who have a sort of native flame that attracts men like moths to a candle. The men can’t help it; nor, I guess, the women either. You go—you like the heat at first, then you get scorched—and flop. While you’re still flopping, some other moth flutters up in a hell of a hurry. He sees you, but that doesn’t mean anything to him. Well, it was something like that with me and her. Maybe to be fair I ought to say that my daughter Hope lived with me to start with. I’m coming to her later. Anyway, the day before the wedding I bought Uplands, and, as I thought, we settled down there for good. And just here I ought to tell you that my wife also had a daughter. You know that anyway. So there were the makings of either a lot of trouble or a lot of comfort. Well, it wasn’t comfort. You saw Eva, but you didn’t see Hope. If you had, I wouldn’t be here, or supposed drowned.”

He paused for a moment. Lock, rigidly attentive, said nothing. Irrefutably this man was Tarrant, and he must be allowed to lift the curtain of mystery as he saw fit. His way! But how strange that this affair, whatever it was, should revolve round three women—with no hint of a man! And the allusion to Mrs. Tarrant: a flame—that

described her—whose native fire might singe many a man. Even Jackson—probably Tarrant had not yet reached the Jackson part of his story—had caught a touch of that flame.

“There was money enough, at least I thought so,” went on Tarrant reflectively, “say a couple of thousand a year. It stood for a good deal of hard slogging on my part. She hadn’t anything—then. Pretty soon she decided that my income wasn’t enough, and wanted to start in on the capital. I wasn’t having any, since that was Hope’s, so she started in on Hope, and made life a sort of merry hell for the girl. Hope never told me, thinking it would take the edge off my marriage. Edge! It was all edge! Then one day she ran away—lit out—and not a sign or word from her since. So now, my friend Mr. Lock, you might——”

“How do you know my name?” asked Lock, startled.

“There’s a committee, isn’t there, in Parliament called Ways and Means? That’s what I am, ways and means. If you have got the means, it’s small bother about the ways. Matter of fact, I was at Southampton yesterday, having a look at *Cygnets*. I heard my wife had bought her; and, look here, it’s queer to be staring at your wife’s boat and not be safe to set foot on her. I saw you go on board with Lowther—he’s never seen me in his life—so I went into the office and made a few inquiries. You most always get answered if you look as though you had the means. Then I slipped up to Exeter with you, just to make sure. That’s how I know your name, but this yacht-buying business comes later in my story. And if you’ve any questions at this point, I’ll try and clear ’em up.”

“You say your daughter ran away on account of Mrs. Tarrant’s treatment?”

“Nothing else.”

“Then how could she think you could be happy with that sort of wife?”

“You can search me.”

“And if she knew she was coming into your capital later, why should she leave you ignorant of where she was?”

“Plain as print—she thought I’d try and bring her back. She’s my heir, right enough. Now she must know I’m drowned, or supposed to be, but it isn’t exactly conclusive for another six years. Takes seven, doesn’t it, in this country before the supposed drowned is legally good and dead? You’ll have seen by this time that I went on that fishing trip because I was disappointed and fed up and sick of it. I’d lost what I loved most—my girl. I didn’t mean any more to my wife than a dead fly in a saucer of vinegar; and, besides, she’d better expectations.”

“Oh!”

“Uncle of hers—sort of old hermit crab, and as rich as they make ’em. He was

on the last lap, and sent for her, and told her he was leaving her everything because she'd never kowtowed to him like the other relations. But he wouldn't advance her a cent, and she wasn't to get any of it till he was underground. Well, he finished the lap three months after my fishing expedition, and she got it all—hundreds and thousands of it. So I can't see that she's any the worse off for lack of me. Can you? Suppose I go there to-morrow and say, 'Look here, I'm not drowned—only thought I was,' what sort of a welcome would there be? You think that over."

Lock puzzled over the thing. It seemed that the man had impulsively established his own death and thus lost all chance of finding his own daughter. He could not advertise, nor could he, without extreme humiliation, reappear in life. There were queer unrevealed streaks in him, no doubt of that, and his story was almost certainly incomplete, but, taken with what Lock had seen that day at Uplands, it was perfectly coherent. Then Jackson presented himself, another man who wanted to know about Hope. But Jackson's name must first be introduced by Hope's father. That was the course of prudence.

"Well," he said, speaking very carefully, "assuming all this, I don't quite see where I come in."

"No, you wouldn't—at once." Tarrant leaned forward, an epitome of anxious freedom, so that his big body projected massively over the three-foot space, his face intensely earnest. "But my wife has a pretty good idea where Hope is."

"How do you know that?"

"Said as much one day, then laughed at me. Now listen! All I want of you on this earth is to let me know, quick, if anything is dropped by her or Eva—she's a cat, that girl—but you don't see her claws right away—anything that would enable me to find Hope. Then you get your five hundred. The day I hear from you I come alive again and damn the consequences. Is this asking too much—for a father?"

He had reached his point and sat back, completely disclosed, regarding the young man with eyes in which there moved both challenge and appeal. By his own confession he had manœuvred himself into a position that rendered him helpless. This could be his only excuse for risking all and throwing himself on the aid of a complete stranger.

Pondering what had been said, and putting aside the money part of it, Lock could not but feel that the petition—it was more petition than request—had both reason and justice. Any white man would ask it of another. Nor could he think it likely that at some future time the hiding-place of Hope Tarrant would be revealed to him in confidence. Mrs. Tarrant's expression when Jackson asked for the girl made that most improbable. So, admitting that there might be angles of the truth which

Tarrant had passed over, it seemed reasonable enough to help if one could. The man's simulated death was not his affair. He was about to speak when Tarrant, whose unwinking gaze had never wavered, made a little guttural sound.

"Y'know, now that you know all, there's one thing that maybe hasn't occurred to you. You've met me—you've got my end of it—and before long you're bound to discover that Hope isn't a favourite topic of conversation with my—ah—my widow. So far as concerns that widow and her cat daughter, I'm very comfortably dead—if not exactly buried. That suits her down to the ground.

"Now suppose you get some sort of virtuous jolt—you may think it's virtue, but it's just durned foolishness—and say to yourself, 'Here, it's my duty to tell my employer what I know,' d'you think she'll thank you for it? First thing, your job's a washout. You know too much. Next, and apart from Hope, it's not many widows who want the departed back after they've got used to his absence. You didn't see any long faces about me at Uplands, I'll bet. I haven't mentioned this side of the matter before or it would have sounded as though I'd worked you into a corner and was making a threat. I just mention it now in case it hasn't occurred to you."

Lock conceived a sudden respect for the man's brain. He was right—indubitably right. He knew his ground, had not contradicted himself, and was under no illusions concerning his wife. Mrs. Tarrant seemed more than content with widowhood. After having had little, she now had much, and one could not picture her giving Tarrant any welcome whatever. It was queer that she should have married him at all, and must have been due either to necessity or some passing physical attraction. Her flame for his strength.

"Well," queried Tarrant with a sort of indulgent good-humour, "we'll be in Waterloo soon, so how about it? You've asked me three questions. Any more?"

"No," smiled Lock.

"Then here's one for you. Going on a cruise?"

"That's what the yacht's for."

"Mediterranean—usual places—eh?"

"You're not so far out." Lock could see no harm in this.

"Right. And my proposal is accepted: five hundred in any bank you like the day you can tell me where my girl is. It'll be cash: dead men don't issue cheques. And not a word to anyone else, that's understood?"

"On your assurance that every word you've told me is true, I agree subject to my stipulations."

"There we go again! I've no reason for telling you what isn't true, so you've got the assurance. As to the stipulations, you hang on to 'em; they'll make you feel

easier, and won't affect anything. Now one point more. I don't go round as Tom Tarrant—you'd assume that anyway—but Tom Godfrey. You'll find me second floor, 127, Dean Street—that's in Soho, off Old Compton Street. Know it?"

"Italian restaurant quarter near Shaftesbury Avenue?" said Lock, recalling his last leave in London.

"You've got it. Here's my telephone number—it's not in the book. Godfrey—Tom Godfrey, so put the other name out of your head. Anything more occur to you?"

"No."

"Not very talkative, are you? Well, that's all to the good, and sort of helps me. You'll be busy now for a week or two, and seeing more or less of our mutual friends. Keep your ears open. And, speaking of that cruise, is anyone else going?"

"They said not."

Tarrant sent the young man an exceedingly expressive smile. It conveyed humour, knowledge, experience of a shrewd worldly kind, a complete readiness for amorous adventure, and just a shade of envy. It suggested that he himself would not object, on this occasion, to change places, that he had no doubt whatever about certain aspects of the cruise, and hoped that Lock would make the most of them. All this in a smile.

"You said that so far you'd left women out, didn't you?"

Lock nodded.

"Well, just wait and see whether they leave you out. My wife's a man-eater, and Eva's a cat. Here's Waterloo, and we're strangers, so don't take any notice of me. So lon'."

He slipped out of the carriage, took a swift glance up and down the platform, and was instantly lost.

CHAPTER II

THE FOURTH PASSENGER

LOCK, hands and brain very full, practically lived on the yacht for the next week, and felt as though he were playing with a new and very expensive toy. She was beautifully modelled, perfectly equipped, and had cabin accommodation for seven. His own quarters were immediately aft the charthouse and adjoining the bridge. He was stowing away his own kit when he got a hail from Lowther's slip, and saw the yacht agent waiting with the owner and her daughter. Lowther brought them on board at once.

"We've been shopping in town," said Mrs. Tarrant, "and came back this way to see if everything is ready. Is it? The *Cygnets* looks awfully clean."

"It will be in two days, and—well—she's getting cleaner."

"Goodness! I could eat off the decks now." She peered into the main saloon, and gave an appreciative nod. "You seem to be a regular housekeeper. Do you like her?"

He explained how much he liked her, while she, staring about, let her eyes wander to the gigantic hull of the *Berengaria* that towered over low-lying freight sheds a mile away. *Cygnets* and *Berengaria*, they shared the freedom of the seas.

"It's odd to think that this little midget can take us anywhere that that great liner could," she said presently.

"And a good many other places where she couldn't," nodded Lock.

"It sounds rather exciting, doesn't it, Eva?"

The girl nodded. As usual when with her mother, she had been rather silent, also, it struck Lock, rather anticipatory. This time she did not seem to have anything to say to him, but stood apart, and almost motionless, examining the wide expanse of Southampton Water in a sort of daydream. A Royal Mail Steam Packet boat was coming slowly in from the Solent like a huge bird gliding to its roost, and one could perceive the whitish grey line of faces at her distant rail. She made hardly a ripple, looming massively over fussing tugboats that busied themselves, gnat-like, at bows and stern.

"Mother, have you told Mr. Lock about Mr. Jackson?" said the girl parenthetically.

"No, I haven't. There've been so many other things to remember. Mr. Lock,

we're to have a guest after all. Mr. Jackson is coming with us."

It sounded very casual, and not at all important, but to Lock nothing could have been more astonishing, not even if Tarrant himself had climbed over the rail. Jackson!

"Oh!" he said, unable to say anything else.

"I thought you'd be more surprised," she went on easily, "because I'd told you there'd be no one else. But we've seen a good deal of him since last week, and it seems he knew my husband very well indeed, and was quite lost without him. He really came to England to find him."

It was all very pat. Too much so, thought Lock; too much like something that one had rehearsed, critically, till there was eliminated every slightest word or tone that might strike the wrong note. Yes, she did it almost too well, and the confidence in her large eyes did nothing to displace Lock's instantaneous impression that she was bluffing. Jackson had not been a welcome arrival at Uplands when Lock saw him last. Now he had become an intimate—no other word for it—and a guest. What had happened? Had he learned what he wanted to know about Hope Tarrant?

"Well," said the young man vaguely, "there's plenty of room."

She laughed. "And for four more—but not this time. You'll find Mr. Jackson very interesting: he's been everywhere and done most things. So you'll be ready the day after to-morrow?"

"Yes, Mrs. Tarrant, quite."

"Then we'll be here in time for lunch, and get away at once. And it is just possible we may want to stop at St. Malo, but not for more than an hour. Will that be all right?"

Lock, diverting his thoughts, explained to the owner of *Cygnets* that she could stop when and where she pleased, and for as long as suited her fancy, provided that weather permitted and there was water enough under the keel. It seemed a little difficult for her to grasp this, but the idea was evidently a pleasant one, and she looked contentedly at her daughter.

"You heard that, Eva? It's like having a private train, except that we needn't keep on the track. One doesn't realize it at once. And, Mr. Lock, you won't mind if we change our plans quite suddenly sometimes?"

"Your plans are mine," he assured her, still trying to fit Jackson into the riddle.

"Thanks so much. Now I must have a talk with Mr. Lowther and the steward."

The three disappeared below decks. Eva, who seemed entirely uninterested in anything on board, had mounted the bridge, and was again watching the Royal Mail boat, now quite close. She turned, and, seeing Lock, beckoned imperiously.

“Well,” she said in her husky tone, “I told you, didn’t I?”

“About what?”

“That my mother’s always making experiments.” She waited a moment, regarding him with an expression he could in no way interpret. “You’ve just heard about the last one!”

Why, he pondered, should she unburden herself in this fashion? It was difficult for him to say anything whatever. Then, as though not expecting any answer, and not sure how far one could go on such slight acquaintance, she went on like one impelled to talk about something.

“Wasn’t it queer, his turning up like that, and at that particular moment, and from South Africa? We were three then, with everything settled, and I didn’t dream that so soon we’d be four. He doesn’t talk much, at least not to me, but I’m always conscious that he’s there. Were you awfully puzzled when you left Uplands last week?”

“I was, a bit; but, it not being my affair, I thought best to go.”

“You did just right; mother liked you for that. I wonder,” here she sent him an oblique glance, “how you’ll take to Mr. Jackson?”

“I expect we’ll get on perfectly well. In any case, it doesn’t much matter, does it? I’m merely the captain.”

She smiled, not at what he said, but as though enjoying some private thought concerning it.

“Do you ever have premonitions?”

“I haven’t had time so far.”

“Not even when—when you went into action?”

“Rather not! I was much too uncomfortable, to put it mildly.”

“You’re awfully honest about things,” she said, with a certain unconscious respect. Then, suddenly, “Women aren’t often like that, though men of your kind assume they are.” She put this as though it had been forced out of her, and knew that it might be taken, possibly, as a warning against herself. And in that moment Lock thought he perceived two personalities in this dark-eyed, unexpected girl. One had phases of candour, simplicity, directness, when she talked without subterfuge or second meaning. The other was veiled, elusive, ungetatable, swayed by secret passions, capable of hate and jealousy, a lovely danger, a perilous invitation to men.

“Speaking of Mr. Jackson, you’d have been interested in my stepfather,” she continued musingly. “I never understood him myself. And Hope—you’ll probably hear about her before long. It’s a queer story.”

Into Lock’s brain swam the vision of a red-faced man in a third-class carriage

describing how he had lost the thing he loved most, thanks to two women, one a man-eater, the other a cat. But his story was told without Tarrant being aware that Jackson had appeared on the scene. To what extent, if any, would that arrival have altered it? And if Jackson, also, was looking for Hope, why not let Tarrant know at least this much? No disloyalty to one's employer in that.

"I'd like to hear about it—some time," he said.

That was as far as they got. Mrs. Tarrant emerged from below in great good-humour, paid further compliments on Lock's housekeeping, cast a questioning glance at Eva, as though asking what she had been talking about, and presently the two went off with Lowther.

Later that afternoon Lock took train for London. Reviewing the situation as it now stood, he had decided to help Tarrant to the extent of telling him that Jackson had been inquiring about Hope.

There began to be something droll about this double pursuit. Which man, he wondered, would find the girl first? And how would Tarrant take the idea of his wife cruising the Mediterranean with his old friend?

Dean Street has a cosmogony of its own. With Greek, Frith, Old Compton, and as far north as Soho Square, it forms a little Europe in London. Here the Levant rediscovers itself amongst olive skins, dark eyes, rapid voices, swift gestures and a medley of languages. Succulent odours drift from small white-curtained windows. Grocery shops are entered between hedges of macaroni, casks of black olives and tunny fish. There are tiny "ristoranti" whose padroni are friends and intimates of their patrons. A volcanic shout down a speaking-tube produces from the cellar fritto misto and zabaione. The wine shops are stacked with round-bellied, straw-sheath flasks of Capri Bianco, Orvieto Abbocato and the blissful Asti Spumanti. Blasé Londoners come here for a change from Piccadilly restaurants, and, if they know where to look, find better fare at a third the price. Art students bring their ivory-skinned models by bus from the King's Road when the studio exchequer permits. Professional men with strained faces find here an hour's surcease from the professional manner. The stage contributes its quota, because this is just beside the theatre district and service is swift. All in all, Soho invites exploration and discovery. Once discovered it clings to the perception and refuses to be forgotten. And it has recesses where a man may live within a third of a mile of Piccadilly Circus yet more screened from publicity than on the banks of the Congo.

Thither went Lock, not over-sure of the wisdom of his intentions.

"Who is it?" rumbled a deep voice on the second floor of 127, Dean Street. "Oh, you! Come in." There sounded a heavy tread, and the door opened with a

jerk. "Hullo there! I wasn't looking for you yet. Got anything?"

He seemed expectant rather than pleased, motioned to a chair, and took a bottle and siphon from a cupboard.

"It's maté—South American dope—but you'll like it. Well, anything to tell me—haven't found my girl yet, eh?"

"No," said Lock, "but I think I will soon."

"Eh—how?"

"Apparently it's no secret. Your stepdaughter, Miss Hewson, is going to talk about her after we sail."

"After you sail!"

"So she said to-day. It was the way she said it that—well—made me feel at liberty to tell you."

Tarrant poured himself a drink, twisted his glass without lifting it and shook his big head.

"Pulling your leg—that's all. Where did this happen?"

"On board, this afternoon; she came with her mother. We were together on the bridge and she volunteered that much."

Tarrant, staring at his visitor, knitting his brows, looked undisguisedly puzzled.

"What started her on that—what brought in Hope?"

"She was speaking about Jackson when——"

"Jackson!"

There was an odd, crunching sound. Tarrant's thick fingers, closing over his glass, had crushed it so that the maté trickled across the deal table and his flesh was full of small, glistening splinters. He regarded these with a sort of dull apathy, showing no sign of pain. A flush, mottled purple, was creeping to his temples. Fear, stark naked and unquenchable, had taken him by the throat.

"Jackson! What Jackson?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

Lock, crowding back his own astonishment, tried to speak calmly, but all in a second this secret confidant of his had changed character. Formerly a man, big, helpless, groping in self-created darkness for the daughter he had lost, a man likely to arouse sympathy and assistance, he had now become suspect and perhaps a fugitive. Everything he had said, all the sequence of his story, fell away, so that he sat there in another guise, stripped and utterly shaken.

"Jackson, or so he calls himself, arrived at Uplands a week ago, on the afternoon I was there. I haven't seen him since. I didn't speak of him to you because you hadn't mentioned him. And it wasn't my affair."

Tarrant, steadying his nerves, began picking little glass diamonds from his thick

skin, laying them in a tiny, blood-specked line on the table, as though counting the number he recovered. He did not look up, but appeared to be sorting things out in his secret mind, and discarding one possible response after another.

“No,” he said, after a long, brooding silence, “it wasn’t your affair. But this Jackson—well—I was upset for a minute, not expecting anything of that kind. I suppose,” he added with a sidelong glance, “he didn’t say anything about my girl?”

Lock, more than ever dubious, told him that inquiry had been made, but that was all.

“And then?”

“I felt that I was in the way, and left.”

“H’m—yes—I suppose you had to leave. Sort of awkward pause till you did, probably.” Tarrant frowned deeply, and busied himself over his punctured fingers. “Y’see,” he continued, “I hadn’t intended to mention Jackson because I thought he was a washout. Now it rather mixes things up. He was after Hope, and wanted to marry her. But I wouldn’t stand for it.”

“Oh!”

“Too old,” he went on with a curious mixture of antipathy and rising anger, “and a sight too tricky. All right as a partner in a rough country—we were in S.A. together—but when it came to handing over your own flesh and blood I wasn’t having any. Then he cleared out for a while. I thought that was the end of it. So while your news isn’t exactly welcome, it’s better I had it. Happen to know when he reached England?”

“He landed at Plymouth last week and came straight to Uplands.”

“And met my wife, and she told him I was drowned?”

“Yes.”

That situation, as Tarrant evidently visualized it, was altogether too much for him. He opened his mouth, the fear deserted his features, giving place to a coarse and prodigious amusement, his lips widened into an enormous grin. It was clear that he would have given anything to have been a spectator of that meeting.

“She told him that I had been drowned, fishing, and what did he say then? Didn’t swallow it whole, I’ll bet.”

“Look here, you can’t expect me to retail——”

“No—no—you’re right. I’m asking too much. I admit that. Up against your stipulations, aren’t you? Well, you go on respecting ’em. But Jackson at Uplands! Lord, who’d have thought it? What I’d like to know, only I’ll never find out, is how he took it when he heard that those two were starting off on a cruise without a word about Hope. That would set him back a bit.”

“Well,” said Lock coolly, “you’ll be interested to know that he’s going with them.”

“Oh, my God!”

He breathed this in so large a whisper that it filled the room, and remained quite motionless, eyes half-closed, a slack mountain, vacillating of purpose, fumbling for some stable thing to lay hold on. There was no anger in this attitude, no resentment at the idea of another man cruising with his wife, but it appeared as though something infinitely more important and threatening had been suddenly held over him. He sat in this drab room, a helpless hulk, wrestling with whatever moved through the darkness of his mind.

“The point about Jackson,” he said in a strangely plaintive tone, “is that you can’t trust him round a corner. I spotted that in S.A., and before. Just like him to learn that I was—well—out of the way, then start in again after Hope.”

There were a lot of things that Lock felt prompted to suggest but did not. Tarrant’s manner was too obviously influenced by facts deliberately passed over, facts that he was omitting from his story. That there was bad blood between him and Jackson seemed now firmly established. But whose action had caused it? Their types, admitted Lock, were such as might clash over anything.

“He was your partner?”

“Ye-es. It started here—in England. That’s when he met Hope, and fell for her. She hated him from the first, so I put my foot down on that part of it. Then we fixed it up to go to S.A. He’d been there before, and knew some useful things. I hadn’t. I suppose he thought that if we struck it rich I’d weaken about Hope. In S.A.—well—a lot of things happened, and we broke, finally. Then I came back and married again. Told you that already, haven’t I?”

“Some of it.”

“No reason you shouldn’t know it all. But this cruise! Remember what I said about my wife and that flaming attraction of hers?”

Lock nodded.

“Here’s a sample: but that don’t worry me.”

His voice thinned, ceasing on a note pregnant with undisclosed meaning. Something was worrying him exceedingly. Not Hope—not his wife and Jackson cruising the Mediterranean—but something else. But whatever discomfort it caused, he proposed to keep it to himself, and glanced about the room as though seeking that which would fortify him in Lock’s thoughts. Then, all in a moment, he looked very shrewd.

“There’s this. You know about Jackson and my girl, but he needn’t learn that.

He wants to use my wife to get hold of Hope. You'll see. It's that, not the other thing. She won't realize it for a while, but there'll be a flare-up when she does. I'd like to watch it. That is, of course, unless Julia takes his mind off Hope, which is quite possible if she goes at it. That money of hers will help. Gad, what a mix up it is! Anyway, I reckon you'll tumble on to something to tell me much sooner than if this hadn't happened. Bob and Julia! Phew!"

Lock felt ill at ease. He had no desire to become an intimate observer of a liaison in order to gain five hundred pounds; to listen to what was said, and sift out the right grain of information to be transmitted to this man with the bloodstained hands; and he began to ask himself, whether here and now he ought not to retire from a position that was growing daily more embarrassing.

"Look here," he said curtly, "you seem to be taking me for a spy, but I don't intend to tangle myself up in other people's affairs. You told me a certain story, and on the strength of that, and your assurance that it was true, I promised, with certain provisions, to let you know about one definite thing. Further than that I don't go. These other matters mean nothing to me."

"Ha!" Tarrant, infinitely occupied with his own problem, could not but show amusement. "You're young! You go cruising about the world with these three, or any other three as far as that's concerned, and see if it doesn't make a mark on you. Can't be dodged. But," he hurried on, "that's your affair. I'm warning you to watch Bob Jackson. You say you're able to look out for yourself—or it amounts to that—well, good enough. I tell you the same thing about two women. Same answer, eh? Good enough again. Now we'll bury it. And I don't want any more than I asked for in the first place. Is that clear?"

Lock nodded, but only partially assured.

"I'm going to add this. In the train I told you what would happen if you split on me to my wife. That stands. Now what do you suppose would happen if you told Bob Jackson I was here in Soho?"

"I'd rather like to know."

"Much the same thing: you'd be fired. Now I'm not going to say any more, but you can take it I know what I'm talking about. You've heard all that's—well—necessary. You may never see me again; but you'll hear from me, or of me. You can bank on that. If it's of me, I guess 'twill be from Bob Jackson.

"You've shaken me up a bit to-day, I'll admit, but"—here his face took on a cryptic smile—"I begin to see my way. Now that I've swallowed the news, I feel safer. Thanks for coming in. No, I won't go down with you, but keep your eye on our mutual friend. He'll stand watching. Good-bye."

As though surmising that Lock was in no mood for a handshake, he busied himself over his punctured palm, and it was thus that the young man left him, a pricked bear, nursing his fear and suspicion in a dingy hole in Soho. Somehow, this seemed quite suitable. Everything he had said, and his manner of saying it, made it seem more and more foreign to the personality he had created for himself that he should come into the open and pursue the speech and life of ordinary men. He was exactly qualified to live as he now lived, to move in the mysterious half-way territory he now occupied, and from the realm of the supposed dead put out a groping hand toward what he had deliberately sacrificed. Lock, in short, absolutely failed to picture him ever reunited to Hope, whatever turn this affair might take. And, he questioned, did the girl really desire such an event? He shook his head and walked slowly towards Shaftesbury Avenue.

It was then that he saw across the narrow pavement of Dean Street a tall, sloping-shouldered figure that seemed familiar. The man's back was turned, and he stood apparently interested in the display of flasks in the window of an Italian wine-shop. Simultaneously the street lights were switched on, and Lock caught the reflection of a face. Jackson's face!

He did not stir, nor was his glance reflected so as to indicate whether he was observing Lock or the contents of the shop window. He was only a man who had stopped, as any man would be likely to stop, before this inviting display. Presently he would stroll on. That was what Lock wanted to think—but could not. It was desperately hard to know what to do, if anything. Hating any kind of evasion, and in that moment hating Tarrant also, the young man revolted. For the first time in his life he did not want to be recognized. Thinking very hard about his job, it seemed imprudent to cross the road and bluff out a meeting. After all, he was a free man. Dean Street was not forbidden ground. So, steeped in doubt, he walked on. At the corner he did not look back and disappeared towards Piccadilly, carrying an enormous question with him.

S.Y. *Cygnets* lay at her moorings, anchor tripped, a feather of steam trailing from her escape pipe. The day previously Lock had taken her for a sea run of some hours, and was well satisfied. She knotted better than the promised sixteen, and the note of her turbine was low, smooth and assuring. Hillyard, the engineer, seemed content so far as any mechanically minded man is ever content with the apparatus he controls. Webster, the steward, had the saloon panelling glistening, flowers in the gimbal vases, and the stores requisition he had submitted to Lowther showed him to

be no tyro in the art of provisioning. For the rest of it, Lowther had waved a magic wand at Lock's slightest suggestion, and the thing desired appeared as though sprung from a trap.

It was all so different compared with the past, and money was so unimportant compared with comfort, that Lock found himself formulating quizzical questions about the inequalities of life. They were absurd and unanswerable, but out of them he began to get a better understanding of Mrs. Tarrant. She was a sybarite. She had a great capacity for the enjoyment of physical things. Till a short time ago that appetite had never been satisfied. Now that the time had come she was going about it with prodigality.

She arrived on board with high spirits, expressed herself delighted with everything, and would like to sail at once. Eva had but few words, and Jackson, nodding to Lock with a touch of patronage, took the affair very coolly.

There is a fascination about putting to sea.

It instils a sense of liberation from things static, of merging oneself in the flux of a great unknown. Lock always felt this, even when *Active* stole with darkened lights out of a mine-guarded harbour. Now he felt it more than ever.

Cygnets gathered her dainty way across Southampton Water. From his post on the bridge the yacht's proportions looked fairy-like. She was schooner-rigged, which pleased him, and he proposed to do all the sailing possible. The slow sweep of her deck carried his eye back to her counter, where Mrs. Tarrant had established herself in a wicker chair. Jackson was not visible. Eva was standing by the port rail, watching a motor-boat race off Ryde. Further down the Solent were hulls, big and little, working in from the seven seas. To the north lay the great green carpet of the New Forest. Overhead the sky was infiltrated with pale, clear sunlight, a gentle autumnal glory of the summer's last caress, and the air had a sweet quality gathered from stacked hay and ripened orchards. Ahead lay the wide, wide world.

It was impossible for Lock to merge himself in all this, as he thankfully did, without feeling that he had exaggerated the complications of the past few days. The broad figure of Tarrant assumed another perspective. It dwindled at every turn of the propeller. It moved automatically into the background. At the same time, it seemed that his place was more than filled by another. Without his dramatic appearance and confidence the remaining three would have lacked their peculiar significance. It was Tarrant who brought them into the limelight, and his future was linked with theirs.

As though presenting herself in confirmation of this, Eva came slowly forward, halting with her hand on the bridge companion rail.

"Are visitors allowed?"

“Of course: at any time.”

“I thought perhaps it was sacred ground. One can’t do it on a liner.”

“*Cygnet’s* different, and you’re the owner’s daughter.”

“I suppose you’re very much at home here. Did you come into Portsmouth often?”

“My base for the last two years. Before that—in the war—the way to Portsmouth was like—well—walking down the Strand.”

“Would you care to tell something about that part of it, and here—where we are now? You’ll find me a nuisance later on. Always when we reach a place I’ll be asking when you were there last, and what happened. Do you mind?”

“Not at all, but I’m afraid it will sound rather flat. One does not carry away very sharp impressions. You do your job and forget about it.”

“Try, once. What was it like here in wartime?”

“Rather crowded and messy,” he grinned. “That’s Bournemouth over there, but we didn’t see much Bournemouth those nights. They weren’t allowed to light up. If we went out and came into our own base at night our lights were dowsed. We followed a wire.”

“You’re joking.”

“Too useful to be a joke. The wire was laid on the bottom of our proper channel and electrified. Under the destroyer’s hull was a sort of detector. It picked up the wire’s current and told us if we got to one side or the other. Simple enough.”

“You steered by that!”

“Rather.”

“Didn’t you just creep along?”

“I’ve come in at thirty-knots.”

She was silent for a moment, her face hardening a little, her eyes very keen. Her expression was not that of surprise or wonder. It seemed that she would have liked to have been a part of all that, and showed a touch of envy.

“And what did you do here—in the Channel?”

“Convoy and patrol work, mine sweeping and sinking, which is a sort of marine housemaid’s job, and occasional duty in the North Sea.”

“Mines must be horrid!”

“A bit objectionable till you get acquainted. Floating ones we used to explode with rifle or gunfire, but the submerged ones were twisters. Some of ’em would go off if you merely passed within a certain distance. Sensitive beggars. Others had horns, like a snail. If you touched a horn, up you went. Most of the sweeping was done by trawlers. Corking good work, too. We couldn’t have got along without

'em.”

She thought this over while the Isle of Wight slid sleepily by. The brief picture he had drawn, the more forcible by reason of its curtness, must have suggested something to her. She looked at him suddenly, then shook her head with a puzzled expression.

“Mr. Lock?”

“Yes?”

“Going through all that when you were really only a big boy, has it affected you since? Has it made any difference in the way you feel about people—and things? I don’t want to be inquisitive, but hasn’t it—well—altered you?”

“Perhaps—no—I don’t see why it should,” he said, rather amused. “You grow away from it: you throw it off.”

“I should think it would make one awfully hard,” she ventured. “It would me.”

“Well, if I’m a bit crude sometimes, I’ve an idea”—here he made a gesture at the glistening yacht—“that these surroundings ought to counteract it in time.”

Crude! She, more interested in him than in any man she had ever met, did not think him crude. That was in her eyes. She was finding a new experience, a new sensation. He was more of a man than any of the others. He had no affectation, seemingly very few wants, and too much modesty to see that he was making himself increasingly attractive. He had reserve. And his very coolness gave her an unaccustomed thrill.

“When will we be at St. Malo, do you think?”

“St. Malo—it’s about a hundred and fifty miles from here—say nine hours. We’ll go between Jersey and Guernsey.”

“It’ll be dark when we get there?”

“Yes, quite.”

“You won’t mind that?”

“There are such things as lighthouses,” he laughed. “And you evidently don’t know how clever I am at finding my way in the dark.”

The girl stared at him, stiffened, and lost all trace of friendliness. Her features became a sort of mask behind which stirred a suggestion of disillusionment, as though her mind, being favourably made up, had all at once been shocked and shaken. It was clear that he had said something to which she was attaching a double meaning he had not intended. She gave her head a quick shake as though getting rid of an unpleasant impression, and went down from the bridge in baffling silence.

Lock frowned at the Needles. He was still knitting his brows when perception seemed to rush on him. Tarrant—Jackson—Soho! Had he been seen by Jackson

after all? More—had Jackson found Tarrant? This possibility, so lately and thankfully pushed aside, now came back at him. Going over his own words about the dark, linking one thing with another, he felt forced to consider the worst. Jackson might know about Tarrant; might have told Eva and her mother; might have some private reason for concealing the fact from Lock. This was imaginable, but, he argued doggedly, it should not warrant such marked ill-favour towards himself.

The entrance to St. Malo harbour is tricky. The River Rance comes down between steep and wooded banks from Dinant and the plains of Brittany, debouching at the ancient town, whence, yearly, duly blessed and anointed by mitred Bishops, there set forth the Breton fisher craft for the cold seas of Iceland and Nova Scotia. Approaching St. Malo, skirting shoals and low-lying reefs, one may best lie off Dinard. With a casino and wide curve of yellow sands, Dinard is the haunt of retirement for British admirals and field officers who object to paying British taxes. Established here in growing numbers, they live in the mutually conceded distinction of their past, and turn eyes not altogether of contentment toward the country of their birth.

Lock, feeling his cautious way, had forced himself to stop worrying about the Tarrant affair. Nothing to be gained by that. On the way across, the owner's party had been busy settling themselves, and perhaps discussing what attitude should be adopted toward the young man who had not left the bridge. When anchor had dropped Mrs. Tarrant, who had concluded a long conversation with Jackson, asked that the launch should set her ashore at the stone steps of St. Malo quay, also that the launch should wait.

“And when can we go on?” she added.

“Whenever you wish. I'll hand over to the first officer at midnight. I take it that we don't stop this side of Gibraltar if all's well?”

She glanced at Jackson standing at her elbow, and seemed to find the answer.

“No, please: straight on. And I'd like to start immediately I get back. I won't be long.”

She said nothing more, and five minutes later the launch shot shoreward. There had been no suggestion that either of the others accompany her, nor did they seem to expect it, though the lights of the two towns glistened invitingly across the smooth water and close at hand. Mrs. Tarrant, to Lock's eye full of suppressed excitement, did not glance back. The others stood for some time watching. Under an electriclight swung from the main boom, Eva appeared tense and nervous. Jackson had stepped

to the rail, and stood, hands in pockets, the tip of his cigar making a small fiery spot that brightened and dimmed in the half-light.

From the engine-room rose the rhythmical hum of a dynamo, and *Cygnets* waited like a great glowing, palpitating bird poised for flight. Lock found himself asking what she was flying from—or to. He established himself in the charthouse, made the first entry in *Cygnets*'s log, and talked shop with Maclay, his first officer. Maclay had been third on a Clan liner when he came into a small inheritance. On the strength of this he deserted salt water for a time, bought a cottage on the banks of the Clyde, and watched the big ships passing to and fro till the sea beckoned a vast finger and called him back. But all he could find for the time being was with Lowther. Lock had liked him on sight, a small, taciturn, mahogany-skinned man with cold grey eyes and a body built of whipcord. And if this job was a comedown from a fifteen thousand tonner, he never mentioned it.

Less than an hour later, the launch could be seen speeding back. In a little pool of light she swung alongside, and Lock to his intense surprise made out two passengers instead of one. Also there were two trunks. Mrs. Tarrant seemed very satisfied. Jackson, he noted, was in the saloon companion, not visible from the launch, and wore an expression of furtive triumph. Eva was at the rail.

The second passenger, a girl, glanced up and made an indefinite gesture. It conveyed recognition, but not that which is signalled from friend to friend. Mrs. Tarrant, ascending first, reached the deck with a little nod, followed by the stranger.

“Well, well,” said Eva, putting out her hand, “isn't it strange that we should meet like this?”

The girl did not answer. Her eyes had rounded, and she was gazing at Jackson as though robbed of all power. He might have been a ghost. Her lips were parted, but she could not speak. Jackson, half-way between saloon and main deck, made a little bow into which he put a world of ironical pleasure.

“What a fortunate meeting! How are you?”

His cigar brightened and paled, but he stood, immobile as wax, the smirk of satisfaction frozen on his narrow features. Eva, more uncertain of herself, and perhaps of the part she was allotted to play in this affair, scrutinized the new-comer as though to determine whether between them it was to be peace or war. But Mrs. Tarrant exhibited no doubt, no self-searching. Hers was the attitude of one who, being committed to a given act, has performed it, and maintains a complete assurance as to its outcome. Thus she stood for a fraction of time, till in her bold eyes dawned an indescribable smile.

“Mr. Lock,” she said, coming forward, “I would like to introduce you to Miss

Tarrant. And may we please start at once?"

CHAPTER III

JACKSON TAKES COMMAND

BY noon next day *Cygnets* was off Brest, rolling heavily in a strong westerly breeze. The sky was clear and hard, and Lock, balancing on the heaving bridge, had hourly been expecting orders to take shelter. No orders came and he began to feel a certain sympathy for his invisible passengers in what he assumed was the usual preliminary to every cruise.

That on the surface of things. For the rest of it he was now entirely confused. He had slept but little, and then with chaotic dreams in which he appeared as the rescuer of Hope Tarrant from—what? He woke feeling incredibly foolish and as though the yacht's company had been shouting with laughter at his heroics. He had tried, soberly, to picture Mrs. Tarrant and Jackson as abductors of a helpless girl, inveigled on board in a French harbour at night, but was forced to admit that such things did not happen nowadays; that what had taken place had been in a very modern and public setting, without any camouflage whatever; that he himself had immediately been introduced to the supposedly abducted girl; that there was no secrecy about a Mediterranean cruise; and that opportunity of communication and escape was available in every port they entered. And that was why he could not make up his mind to wireless to Tarrant during Maclay's night watch.

The white pillar of the lighthouse on Île de Seins was just visible on the southern horizon when Jackson emerged on deck and took a long, deliberate survey of the tumbling sea. He wore a yachting cap and white shoes, but otherwise had made no concession to yachting dress. Also he was perfectly at home in rough weather. Presently he glanced at the bridge, pitched away his inevitable cigar and worked carefully forward.

“Good morning,” he said. “Where are we?”

Lock told him and took occasion to study the lean face. He was enjoying himself—no doubt of that—and staring about at the vast circumference of steely blue water and pale opacity of sky in which *Cygnets*, like an animated fly, was reeling courageously across the unknown. His eyes, keen and rather small, had a quality of hardness. His arms, long and prehensile, were typical of strength and endurance. His mouth, with its thin and very flexible lips, seemed never entirely to lose a suggestion of satire. He was, in short, the sort of man who might be capable of experiencing

either extreme pleasure or extreme pain, and keeping it absolutely to himself.

“She’s a nice boat,” he remarked, sliding his fingers along the rail, “and a bit of a change for you from all I’m told.”

“She is rather.”

“I’ve never travelled on a yacht before, though I’ve tackled most everything else that floats. When do you reckon we’ll make Gib?”

“About midday Saturday, with ordinary luck. It’s better not to drive her through this sea—too uncomfortable down below. Has Mrs. Tarrant decided anything definite after that?”

“She doesn’t feel like any sort of decision at the moment. Look here, can I see the engine-room and oil tanks and all that? I’m rather interested in such things.”

Lock sent him down to Hillyard. In half an hour he came back, very bland and, apparently, very pleased.

“Oil!” he said. “I take it that you can get oil almost anywhere nowadays?”

“In practically every modern port.”

“And we carry how much? I mean, full up as we are now?”

“Enough for about three thousand miles cruising radius at moderate speed.”

“What do you call moderate for this craft?”

“Say about thirteen knots. We’re doing that now.”

“In this sea?” demanded Jackson, surprised.

“A beam sea doesn’t affect her much in that way.”

Jackson considered this for a moment. “I suppose,” he continued, “that you could carry a good deal more if you had to; say in drums?”

“We could, but what’s the object? On this cruise we won’t be anything like five hundred miles from a tank at any time.”

“Ah!”

It was an odd unpremeditated sound, and its immediate effect on Lock was as though a corner of some curtain had been accidentally lifted, then at once dropped back. It suggested that Jackson’s curiosity about fuel had nothing whatever to do with a desire for general education about the yacht, such as might be shown by the average uninformed male passenger.

“Then merely as a matter of interest, you could, say, cross the Atlantic and come back without refuelling—that is if you had to?”

“In decent weather I fancy we could,” said Lock, his brows lifting a shade, “but there’d be drums lashed everywhere. Not very comfortable.”

“I suppose not. But,” Jackson for some reason looked pleased, “how about water?”

“We can always condense enough to get along with—but no baths—that is fresh ones.”

“Quite a handy boat for general purposes, eh? Y’know, when I saw you that time at Uplands, I didn’t expect we’d meet again like this.”

“Neither did I,” said the other man laconically.

“Never can tell, can you? Of course, when I dropped in at Tarrant’s place, it was a bit of an upset to hear what I did. More than a year since I’d seen him, and ——” he paused, shaking his lean head, “hanged if I can understand it even now. But, y’understand, I couldn’t talk that way to Mrs. Tarrant. Too darn disturbing to any woman.”

He talked as though with an impulse of confidence, one man to another in a party of women, but in Lock’s ears it was like the setting of a trap. And it was astonishingly difficult for him to speak at all.

“You knew Tarrant well?” he asked warily.

“One might put it that way,” said Jackson with a slow smile. “Then we split. That was in S.A.—the final split. But we’d differed before. Looking back at it, I wonder that we’d stuck together anyway. Tom Tarrant wasn’t what you call sociable. Curious, isn’t it, how often you think a thing is finished and done with, then you find it isn’t? I don’t know if anything is ever finished. This affair—well—now it’s started all over again, and without Tom.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know anything about it,” put in Lock bluntly.

“Ah!” He said it again, and exactly as though such a denial had been expected. “I’ve been trying to imagine him sitting with a rod in his hand waiting for a fish—and can’t. He wasn’t the waiting kind. Too active—too much blood in his body. You’d say that yourself if you’d ever seen him, and—hallo—here’s Miss Hope now! Good sailor, that girl!”

He waved his hand, hurried down the companion, and went quickly toward the slight figure that stood clinging to the port rail.

Lock watched them, a little dazed, aware that most of his preconceptions were being torn to shreds. He felt like a fool. He had been wasting time trying to sort out his assumptions about these people, and now, by one simple and natural act, each one of them seemed disproved. Jackson had slipped his arm into the girl’s, and they stood, bracing each other against the sea, smiling and talking. No animosity there. Hope said something to Jackson at which he laughed, motioned interrogatively toward the bride, and the two, still linked, traversed the pitching deck.

Then, with an extraordinary sensation, behind them Lock seemed to perceive the phantasmal figure of Tarrant, not swaying, but floating suspended and gesticulating,

signalling that all this comradeship meant nothing, and one must not be misled by what one saw, that Jackson was indeed as he had been painted—a menace, and that Hope, in spite of her attitude, hated the man like poison.

“Good morning,” she said, climbing up beside him. “Isn’t it rough!”

“*Cygnet’s* behaving herself very well. Do you mind this?”

“I’m not over-sure of my feet, but I rather like it.”

Her colour was charming, and she looked as though she liked it. Slight and small, she had a sweet and very sensitive mouth. Her fair hair, clustering under a yachting cap, the clear, honest, hazel eyes, the slightly tilted nose and tiny hands and feet all gave her the aspect of a sprite. She seemed to have no weight, but her body was supple and very strong.

“How are the others?” asked Jackson. “I had a lonely breakfast.”

“So did I, in my cabin; then felt ashamed of myself. Eva has lost all interest in life, and wants to go back. She says the Solent will do for her. Mrs. Tarrant is—well—I hope she’ll be better soon. Is this the infamous Bay of Biscay?”

“We’re just getting into it,” said Lock. “The wind is steady, so the sea shouldn’t get any worse. You’re doing awfully well.”

“Thanks. It looks a long way from St. Malo, doesn’t it? Three days ago I hadn’t an idea of this, then got Mrs. Tarrant’s letter saying that I simply had to come. You can imagine the rush. The yacht looked lovely from the launch, but ever so much bigger than now.”

“It’s generally that way,” said he, thinking hard that Mrs. Tarrant had known all the time where to find this girl. “Do you know the Mediterranean?” he added.

“I was at Cannes, once, years ago. Why do you ask?”

“We’ll be there in a few days.”

She sent him a glance, while a faint colour stole into her smooth cheek.

“I’ve never seen any of it, really; not even Gibraltar. It’s more than a year now since I went to live in Dinant—that’s above St. Malo on the Rance—since which I haven’t seen anything.”

This was natural enough, but it sounded a little like an announcement. More explanatory than was called for. But she seemed, somehow, anxious that he should know it, and from her. Then she gave Jackson an undecipherable smile.

“And I haven’t seen you for—how long is it?”

“Getting on to a year and a half. It seems longer.”

“And then you went back to Africa?”

“That’s it.”

“And made a wonderful discovery, didn’t you?”

“It wasn’t bad, in a small way.”

The entire friendliness of this exchange produced in Lock an effect that, he felt, differed from what was intended. It was as though they were united in trying to obliterate any conclusion he might have reached from seeing their meeting the night previously. They meant him to realize that they were old friends and to understand that the little tableau that took place when the launch came back was nothing but a surprise arranged by Mrs. Tarrant for her own diversion. That was how this conversation sounded. But Lock, dogged by nature, sharply observant by training, could not efface his first impressions. The cynical smile of satisfaction on Jackson’s face—the girl’s rounded, incredulous eyes—Eva’s miss-nothing watchfulness—Mrs. Tarrant’s stagy attitude—these things stuck and would not be wiped out. Something continued to warn him that Jackson was not to be trusted, yet here was as straight-looking a girl as one could imagine acting as though nothing out of the usual had taken place. And it was this phase of it that baffled him the more completely.

“I’d love to hear about that discovery, sometime,” said the girl, gazing at *Cygnets* plunging bows.

Jackson gave a jerky nod, then, seemingly oblivious of where he stood, regarded her with a look so intense as to defy misinterpretation. It meant that he loved her. No one seeing them thus could conclude otherwise. That glance, escaping as it were from his tightly shuttered self, passed like a glinting flash, but it embraced and enfolded her. Hungry with an emptiness too long endured and no longer endurable, it desired her. All his simulation, all casual cynicism had been for a fraction of time abandoned, and the inner Jackson came out, stripped and nakedly revealed. In the next instant he was his former self.

“Mr. Lock, will you show me where we are now, and is that lighthouse marked here?” Hope, all unconscious of the revelation in Jackson’s eyes, had turned into the chartroom.

Tracing *Cygnets* course round from St. Malo, he pointed to a red speck indicating Île de Seins, now just abeam.

“We’re cutting straight across the Bay, and pretty soon you’ll lose sight of France. The next land will be Cape Ortegal, in Spain, then Cape Finisterre, and on down the coast till we turn the corner into Gib. After that we’ll have smoother going.”

“I don’t mind the weather, and isn’t it comfortable in here?”

“I believe you’d like to navigate yourself.”

“Could you teach me how to take an observation?”

“Rather! It’s very simple.”

“Then may I come up sometimes?”

“You’ll be more than welcome,” he said.

She was silent for a moment, her manner now rather sober, examining the great chart held flat by leaden weights at each corner. Through the heavy plate-glass Jackson’s back was visible, his tall figure balancing against the heave of the sea. Beyond him there were alternately the empty sky and a long vista of wind-tumbled water.

“I expect I’ll want to talk quite often,” she went on after a moment. “Had you known Mrs. Tarrant long before this?”

“No, it was less than two weeks ago when I took her a letter of introduction. That’s when we met.”

“You went to Uplands, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I lived there once for two or three months. My father bought the place just before he married again. Then I came to live in France.”

A rush of questions clamoured for answer, but he dared not put one of them, then it seemed that the figure of Tarrant again projected itself out of the blue, demanding to know if this did not exactly corroborate his own story. And apparently it did.

“You’ve known Mr. Jackson for some time?” ventured the young man, wondering if this was safe ground.

“Not very long. We—we met less than two years ago.”

She got this out with a sort of reluctance, staring the while at Jackson’s back with an unfathomable expression that implied that he meant something to her, but not of her seeking. She appeared to be questioning both herself and him, admitting that he was a factor in her life, that she was bound to consider him. The effect of this on Lock was to leave him groping more blindly than before. But he wanted to know her better, a lot better.

“You believe in the sea?” she asked with quick transition.

“Believe in it—how?”

“I’ve read that at sea things take place as they wouldn’t on land; realities, I mean. And the sea brings about revelations and hidden corners that can’t be kept dark any longer.”

“There’s something in that,” he smiled. “At any rate, it’s much harder to bluff on salt water.”

“Exactly! Now, wouldn’t it be queer—or would it?—if the sea had that effect on us; and we all came out, just as we really are, with nothing kept back, no

reservations, and by some sort of magic just as honest as when we were small children?”

“It’s an original thought, but stranger things have probably happened. I’m afraid I wouldn’t show up very favourably.”

“Well, I’ve an odd feeling that something like it may happen this time. And here’s another strange thing: I’ve known you, really, for about a quarter of an hour, yet already I’m talking as though——”

“Please don’t stop. I like it.”

“Then soon again, because now I must go. I promised Mrs. Tarrant. She won’t be up to-day, or Eva either. So I’m ladies’ maid and stewardess. Eva doesn’t care whether we sink or float, and Mrs. Tarrant, who is just as ill, is principally vexed with herself for being ill. That’s the difference. What shall I tell them about the weather?”

“It won’t be any better or worse before night; then the wind will probably go down a good deal. And everything else is all right—in my department.”

“Why do you add that?”

“Well,” he said cheerfully, “there are different angles to the same situation, aren’t there, and I can only speak for my own. So the captain’s compliments to the owner, and all is well with *Cygnets*.”

She tilted her small head a little in what he was to recognize later as a characteristic manner, regarded him with silent interest, and stepped out on the bridge. Jackson went with her as far as the saloon, and, returning, settled himself, stretched his long legs, and began to fondle his cigar-case.

“Smoke?”

“Not now, thanks; I’ll have a pipe later.”

“You’re probably right; I smoke too much.” He put away the case, then, as though voicing an afterthought, went on in a dry tone that in spite of seeming friendliness remained without colour: “Miss Tarrant’s had rather a hard time of it. You wouldn’t know that. And it wasn’t her fault.”

“Oh!”

“Her father! I don’t suppose there could have been two people more different. His sort couldn’t understand hers—too rough—too much of a bully. Used to go off into passions. But he was fond of her in his own way, and maybe meant well, but just didn’t know how to treat a girl. I never knew his first wife. After a while Hope couldn’t stick it any longer, and cleared out. Her mother had left her something, just enough to live on. Fortunate, eh?”

“Very.”

“I only heard about it last week from Mrs. Tarrant. Remember when I asked

about Hope that day at Uplands?"

"Yes."

"Well, the stepmother was upset because, as she's explained since, she's been more or less blaming herself in the matter. That stepmother business, y'know. But that's all right now. And when you're talking to Hope, I'd remember that her father is just as well left out. Might as well get these things right at the start. That's my view."

All this rather laboured information was given without any change of expression and in the same flat, unaltering tone, so that it was quite impossible for Lock safely to make any assumptions whatever. It was said for a purpose. He felt that. It might be lies and it might be truth, but it held together, and seemed to fit, accurately, into the attitude of these people to each other. He spoke of Tarrant as of one dead and done with, and the only safe course for Lock was to assume this was what the man really believed.

"Yes, it's much better to start right. I'm glad you told me."

Jackson nodded in faintly satirical agreement.

"Your position on this yacht is not just that of an employee. With the five of us together for months, it can't be. You're one of us, of course, and Mrs. Tarrant wants you to take meals in the saloon just as often as you can, because—well—she likes you. So you'll find yourself knowing more or less of our affairs. And I'm intimating now that there may be more ahead than just the ordinary pleasure trip. Probably that hasn't occurred to you?"

"I haven't thought anything about it. I'm here to run *Cygnets* and carry out orders."

"Ah! that's it, and you're right. Which reminds me." He took from his pocket an envelope, pinched it gently between long fingers and handed it over. "I'd meant to give you that before."

Lock, wondering not a little, tore it open.

"DEAR MR. LOCK,—I won't have my sea legs for a day or two yet, so now at the beginning of our trip I'm sending you this, which I'm sure you'll understand. On thinking things over, and after a long talk with Mr. Jackson, who is a most experienced world-traveller, I have asked him if he will assume the responsibility of arranging everything from now on.

"It's much more natural that you should be taking orders from him. So will you please consider his instructions as coming from me—I mean everything to do with the movements of the *Cygnets*."

Yours sincerely,
JULIA TARRANT."

Lock, sitting very still, read this twice with new suspicion darkening his mind, aware that Jackson's small eyes were watching him closely.

"I don't quite understand. Has anything gone wrong?"

"Not a single thing, nor does anyone expect it to. She wants to feel perfectly free to enjoy herself without anything on her shoulders—that's all, and when she put it that way I couldn't refuse. I can see it. And you've taken orders from other men, haven't you, all your life; so now you just keep it up. She thought of that, too. So I've obliged her by taking over. And," he added, "you'll find that I understand things—little difficulties maybe now and then—that she wouldn't."

"She didn't make any complaint?" persisted Lock.

"Not the ghost of one, and thinks you're the right man in the right place. Any objections to me?"

Lock had to admire the man's poise. There were innumerable objections—clouds of them—non-proven, but all cumulative. His method, whatever it was, had been swiftly and quietly effective. It worked below the surface of things. Ten days ago he had been an unwelcome stranger at Uplands. Now he was in control of *Cygnets*, with *Cygnets*' owner seemingly in the hollow of his hand. A few hours ago Hope Tarrant had stared at him with eyes of frightened incredulity. To-day they walked arm-in-arm, while she smiled at him. Where lay this man's power, and toward what objective was it turned?

That for Jackson. For Lock the matter was serious. He might be under suspicion of knowing more than he had admitted, and he might not. There had been given no word or look to guide him on this point. Nor had he any desire to be landed at Gib. with a month's pay in his pocket. A job was a job. Too many of his kind looking for one. There was left just one single thing to do. Bluff! True, he would be competing with a master of bluff, but—here he felt a certain cynical comfort—perhaps Jackson enjoyed that kind of game better than any other. One's moral scruples seemed for the present out of place on S.Y. *Cygnets*. Much too expensive! And at that he smiled a little.

"Well," said Jackson, "how about it? Reconciled?"

"No objections at all. I suppose you've no orders at the moment?"

"Who does the wirelessing, if there is any?"

"I do, or Hillyard, the engineer. We're not fancy operators, either of us, but we can manage all that'll be needed."

“Well, the only orders at the moment are that there’s to be no wirelessness without my permission. And,” he added suavely, “I happen to understand Morse.”

CHAPTER IV

AN AFFAIR OF WOMEN

CYGNET, behaving like a lady, had curtsied to Cape St. Vincent, and was half-way across the long leg to the Straits. The Rock lay just a hundred and fifty miles ahead. There was no land in sight, and the Atlantic as though tired by its own boister-play, had smoothed itself into a vast phosphorescent plain over which the yacht, lit like a glow-worm, was speeding with a soft, rushing sound. Westward, one could see a liner throbbing toward Southampton, a great winking ghost, her illumination conveying intermittent palpitations that reached *Cygnets* with signals from other humans who journeyed over the starlit void. She rushed up, trampling the sea into foam, her bulk gradually blackening and darkening in a formidable outline, her stern-lights casting a phantom gleam over the writhing turmoil of her wake. Presently she came abeam but a quarter-mile distant, so that one could see men and women in evening dress strolling on her sheltered decks, and there drifted across the strains of a foxtrot. The hot radiance of parallel lines of portholes along her hull might have been from the eyes of prehistoric reptiles late risen from the depths. She loomed up—she passed—she dwindled—she became obscure. Then in lonely power and dignity she vanished altogether, leaving her small sister sole occupant of the patient ocean.

The company on *Cygnets* had subdivided. Hope and Jackson were sitting well forward, chairs close together, talking in low tones. Lock stood motionless on the bridge, keeping the last hour of his watch. Mrs. Tarrant and Eva—they had reappeared somewhere off Lisbon, bearing few traces of the havoc of the past two days—were wrapped up and seated in the deck well, from which one entered the saloon. Here no wind could reach them, and they were completely alone.

Six bells had struck when the older woman made a gesture. "I think I'll go to bed. I'm rather cold."

"No, don't, mother! Take another rug. It's lovely out here, and I've had enough bed."

"We'll have a lot to see to-morrow."

"Yes, but we won't be ashore before noon. Besides, I want to talk—there's a good deal to talk about. Have you told Hope?"

"Told her what?"

“The change of plan at Gibraltar.”

“I didn’t think it advisable—nor Mr. Jackson.”

“I wonder how she’ll take it.”

“Does it matter much?” asked her mother casually.

“It may.”

“Just what do you mean, Eva?”

The girl gave a rather irritating smile. “This—that I think you’ve got to count someone else in when you’re dealing with Hope.”

“And who, please?”

“Your friend Mr. Jackson.”

“Having said that much, I’d like you to say more,” countered Mrs. Tarrant, sitting up very straight. “What has he to do with Hope?”

“Exactly what I’ve been wondering myself. He told you certain things—for instance, that if you could get hold of her she’d be useful in the way of information concerning some of my late stepfather’s affairs. He said that, didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“And on the strength of it you got Hope to join us without saying that he was on board.”

“Well?” The voice had sharpened considerably. “I don’t see what you’re leading up to.”

“Does it occur that he may have had quite different reasons, perhaps stronger ones? Oh, you needn’t be angry; that doesn’t help anything; and, really, mother, I’m not quite a fool. I’ve got eyes.”

“Are you afraid to speak out?”

“No,” said the girl coolly, “not a bit. I know perfectly well what you feel about your guest—and why you asked him—and why you agreed when he suggested that we had better pick up Hope—and why you’ve turned over the yacht to him. Probably there are a lot more whys that I haven’t discovered yet. You see, mother, I’m nearly twenty-three, and for the last few years things haven’t exactly stood still in your affairs, have they?”

Mrs. Tarrant gave a light little laugh. Eva knew that laugh. It was the preliminary answer one got when her mother was suddenly brought vis-à-vis with uncomfortable facts, but it was not preparatory to evasion. It held a touch of satisfaction as well as protest, with an odd mixture of admission. She understood her daughter with absolute accuracy, because to do this it was only necessary to imagine herself twenty years younger. Her flame had been handed down undimmed, her bold courage transmitted. Thus to listen to Eva was to listen to her other self. Never had these

two, each so capable of analysing the other, attempted the slightest mutual deception. It would have been futile. Mrs. Tarrant, therefore, instead of combating the girl's inference, merely asked what there was to back it up.

"I fancy that if you were sitting just forward of the bridge now, and they didn't see you, you'd hear all that was necessary. He hasn't sat with you like that, has he?" Leaning toward her mother, she gave her a friendly little pat. "I'm not trying to mix things up; it's all the same to me who you marry next—it always has been—but what I feel is that your eyes aren't quite open. That may sound cheeky from one of my age, but, as I said, I'm not altogether a fool."

"You suggest there's no fool like an old one."

"I do not, and you're not old, and much handsomer than I'll ever be. Some day I'm going to look like a hawk. And if you wanted a man you could take him from any woman I've ever met—including myself."

Mrs. Tarrant looked rather gratified, then very curious.

"Anything more?"

"You remember that after he heard about my stepfather's death, the first thing he asked was about Hope. Now why?"

"Why shouldn't he—he knew her?"

"Did you notice his face when she came on board at St. Malo?"

"I tried, but it was hard to see—where he stood."

"Well, he was simply licking his lips like a cat over a mouse. Does a man do that because he expects a bit of information?"

"Not exactly," admitted her mother.

"And after he found—which he did this morning—that she has never known anything about her father's affairs, because he would never discuss them with her—the two have become thicker than ever. That information argument was only a bluff. He wanted her—just her."

Mrs. Tarrant's face was in the shadow and quite unreadable. A hiss of water along *Cygnets*' sleek sides and a low monotone from the engine-room were the only sounds that reached her. From forward of the bridge there came not a murmur. Eva took out a cigarette, and the tiny flame of her lighter seemed to concentrate, pinpointed, in the sudden revelation of her large dark eyes.

"Hope ran away," she went on, as though sorting out her thoughts for inspection, "but she never told you why. Or me. We don't know now. She just went without a word to anyone. Three months later, when she read about my stepfather's death, she wrote to you. Till then neither of us had the slightest idea where she was. You'll remember that Mr. Tarrant thought you objected to the presence of the daughter of

his first wife, although——”

“That was horribly unfair,” protested her mother. “I never pretended to love the girl—she wasn’t like me—too cool—kept too much to herself; but at least I was decent. I tried to be more than decent, but she wouldn’t let me.”

“I know that, and Hope would admit it, too. If you hadn’t been, she wouldn’t be here now. But in that case, why wouldn’t she come back to us at Uplands instead of sticking in that French hole? There’s one question. Another is, what does she think of you for concealing the fact that Mr. Jackson was on board?”

“She hasn’t said one word on the subject. Eva, is there anything about Hope that you haven’t told me?”

“Nothing; but now I begin to understand better. At least I think so.”

“You do!”

“It brings in your friend, Mr. Jackson, again.”

“Why harp so much on him? It’s ridiculous.”

“Wait and see. There must have been something between them in the past—she must have been afraid of meeting him, which is why he asked you to keep it quiet. That’s proved by her expression as well as his when they did meet.”

“She doesn’t seem much afraid now.”

The irony of her voice conveyed the admission that Eva’s argument had something in it. Mrs. Tarrant was, in fact, much disturbed. Two weeks since she had met Jackson, and already his lanky person meant much to her. His type had for her a peculiar appeal. Cool, determined, a man of resource, who brought with him all the symptoms of a restless, unusual life, who had proved himself in what he had told her as well as what he had proposed to be, a born adventurer—she thought she had discovered all this in him already.

It was quite enough to fan her natural flame. She, too, was an adventurer, and in their growing intimacy his boldness had gratified her own.

She was at a loss what to do with her sudden wealth, and he seemed to have the ability to use money dramatically. Also he had never been married before, and she felt stimulated to succeed where, she was assured, other women must have attempted and failed. Thus when two days before *Cygnets* sailed he planned something that took her breath with its daring, she capitulated completely. The other side of it, the passionate, human side of it, would, she felt convinced, follow quickly. And into all this the discomfiting conclusions of her daughter crashed like a stone into a mirror. The image was splintered!

“I didn’t think the girl was such a cat,” she said vindictively.

“She isn’t a cat. I feel that she doesn’t like our friend, in spite of what’s going on

—or seems to be—and I don't think she's happy at all. She's bluffing!"

"Why bluff?"

"That's funny from you, mother, when we're both doing it."

"Perhaps—but for a good reason."

"Then why not she, for as good a one, possibly better? She's honest—we know that."

"Well, anything else?"

"I've an idea that there's just one person she trusts."

"Who is the favoured one?"

"Mr. Lock."

"*Your* friend!"

"I wonder."

"Eva, what's the matter with you to-night? You make everything uncomfortable."

"I don't know—perhaps I've been thinking too much."

"About Mr. Lock?"

"More or less." She put her heel on the cigarette with a laugh that sounded a little desperate. "It's all so queer about Hope. She's interested in him—anyone can see that—and that piece of navy ice is interested in her, but afraid to show it. At the same time, Mr. Jackson, *your* friend, is very attentive—he's probably holding her hand now—so it seems that she's just walking in between us two and—well—can't you see it?"

Mrs. Tarrant did see, and so clearly that for a moment words were rather elusive.

"You like Mr. Lock in the same way as—well—I like Mr. Jackson?"

"What is there to make it any different?"

"I'm sorry, Eva."

"Thanks, no compassion needed, and the end isn't yet. Something's going to come out of all this. I feel it."

Mrs. Tarrant also felt it. In years past there had been periodical antagonisms between these two, but, underneath, they had always been genuinely interested in each other. She endured her daughter's vagaries—and they were many—with a sort of good-humoured tolerance, and mindful of the days when she herself experienced exactly similar reactions, while Eva showed no surprise whatever at her mother's haphazard decisions. What in her was a natural, youthful recklessness had, in her mother, matured to a considered and deliberate daring, strengthened by the fact that she knew far more about men. Hewson, Eva's father, had not been her first husband.

"Go on, Eva, if you want to. It's rather a relief, and I don't feel in the least

maternal to-night. What is there about that piece of navy ice that attracts you—and can I do anything?”

“No, and please don’t try. Things are mixed enough as it is. I’m attracted because, I suppose, I’m not used to indifference.”

“My dear, he’s not that at all. He’s just got a job, probably no other income, and he’s an employee. What do you expect?”

“Do you mind if I say something disagreeable—about us both?”

“You don’t seem to fancy yourself to-night; what is it?”

“You’d be furious if anyone else said it.”

“You’re not anyone else, and in my present condition of open-mindedness you can say anything you like.”

“Well, it’s this. We’re not quite ladies, and Mr. Lock knows the difference, while Mr. Jackson doesn’t.”

“Really, Eva. I don’t think you’re quite yourself yet.” This in a tone of languid amusement.

“Leave it that way if you like. We’ve got money—now, but we haven’t anything else, except——” She hesitated, hunting for the right word.

“You might call it a certain sort of attraction,” drawled her mother, in no way upset. “Go on: you’re very diverting to-night.”

“Well, Hope has something else. She got it from her mother, and that man couldn’t spoil it.”

“You mean your stepfather?”

“Yes, I do.”

“My dear, you needn’t be afraid of offending me. He spoiled a good deal, even though I was his wife.”

“But not that, and it’s what Mr. Lock sees perfectly well. He feels at home with her, but not with me, so he freezes up. If you hadn’t been so ready to agree about Hope’s coming, it would have been much better.”

Mrs. Tarrant, considerably more impressed than she had any intention of showing, took a little time before she answered. In the first place, Eva was too impatient. Things didn’t happen—at least, things of the sort they both desired—practically overnight. Aware that psychological moments were bound to come, as they had invariably come in the past, she herself had been content to abide the time. Being something of an artist in such matters, she knew that to anticipate these moments was an error in tactics. Her campaign was not to commence before it was due. And the idea of being thwarted by her stepdaughter was too ridiculous. When it came to her own type of woman, men were—well, men the world over.

“You really want to marry this uniformed glacier of yours?”

“He’s the only one of them all I’ve ever wanted to marry. I knew that the minute I saw him.”

“Yet you’re frank enough to suggest that he’s a cut above you—to say nothing of me! Well, suppose you did marry him—he’d stay different, wouldn’t he?”

“I’d take a chance on that,” said Eva huskily.

It was exactly how Mrs. Tarrant herself would have argued, and she smiled in the dark. A chance! There was no word she understood better. Her whole life had seemed to be one chance after another.

Her first marriage, and rapid divorce; her second, when she and Hewson rushed into each other’s arms almost on sight; the unexpected coming of Eva, child of their passion; Hewson’s death by accident; the coming of Tarrant after years during which she had played with men like toys, yet fearful to surrender her freedom.

Tarrant, rough, crude, violent in his love-making, a man in whose physical virility she found an irresistible attraction; Tarrant’s drowning, in which she believed absolutely, and considered herself free again; the fortune that dropped into her lap; the appearance of Jackson at a moment when she had an intense longing to embark once more on the full tide of emotional life. All chance!

Her impulses were as generous as they were casual. She would at the mere suggestion have given her daughter half her fortune, and the daughter knew it. In a way she was sorry for Eva, because it was perfectly true that some day the girl would look like a hawk. In spite of her present dark and flashing beauty, this was already faintly suggested in eyes and brows. Before very long she would be formidable as well as handsome, and though the money simplified matters enormously, Mrs. Tarrant argued that it was wiser not to wait till money formed too great a part of the inducement. Also, unshaken by past experience, she herself wanted to marry. She had no intention of being left on the doorstep, and Jackson was just the man.

Thinking things over, and watching Eva’s troubled face, she felt convinced that the girl was exaggerating the situation. The immediate present might be awkward, but the future was still unborn, and Mrs. Tarrant had great faith in the future. It had never failed her yet.

“I’ve an idea that you’re taking all this far too seriously,” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “It’s as though things were bound to go on indefinitely as they are now, which is absurd. The whole affair may be changed in twenty-four hours, and probably will be. A Mediterranean cruise is one thing and what we’ve on hand is another. And, Eva,” here she nodded with growing assurance of her own argument,

“what we have now is a real situation, not flat or ordinary, and quite worth while. It has a taste, and I rather like it. I’m not going to worry about Hope or anything else, so why should you? And it would have been a ghastly mistake for you and I to come alone. Just picture me doing fancywork while you were trying to thaw out your iceberg! No, he’s going to get his eyes opened, so is Hope. You’ll see.”

Eva, recognizing the voice of wisdom, felt comforted, and just then came the sound of a rather forced laugh in the vicinity of the bridge. In the next moment Hope hurried aft, her face aflame. Behind her strolled Jackson, hands in pockets. Hope stiffened at the sight of the two, but Mrs. Tarrant gave her an unconcerned and friendly nod.

“Won’t you sit with us for a while?”

“I—I think I’ll go to bed now, if you don’t mind.”

She looked agitated and frightened. Mrs. Tarrant, glancing at Eva, got a little nod, as much as to say, “I told you so,” and knew, instantly, what had happened. Somewhat to her own surprise, she felt amused rather than vexed. Then Eva, with a perception that was not missed by her mother, got up and stretched her long arms.

“I’m going, too. Come along, Hope.”

“I’ll pay you a visit later. Good night, Hope,” said Mrs. Tarrant, already thinking hard.

A transient flood of light escaped from the saloon. The door closed. Jackson’s figure remained outlined against the sky. He did not speak.

“Why not sit down?” said she. “I’m not going to bed for hours.”

He nodded, settling himself with his back in the rounded corner of the deck well, his long legs crossed, his silence expressing the air of easy confidence that had attracted her from the first. There came a gap that he made no effort to fill.

“You’re not very conversational, but you seemed to find my stepdaughter fairly interesting,” she said with a touch of mockery.

“She was—in her own way.” Jackson was quite unruffled. “It’s the first talk we’ve had in a long time.”

The implication this carried was not over-welcome, but Mrs. Tarrant put that aside for the moment.

“Then she really did talk!”

“Sure! Mostly about her father, some about you, and a little, a very little, about herself.”

“You seem to have worked wonders. What did she say about her father?”

“She isn’t quite sure that he’s dead,” answered Jackson calmly.

“Wha-at!”

“So she told me.”

Mrs. Tarrant gave an incredulous gasp. She felt suddenly dazed and buffeted. Thus plunged into a violent mental revulsion, she found herself forced for the very first time to consider the possibility of this thing. It was breath-taking and shattering, and from anyone but Hope she would have flouted it. She gazed helplessly at Jackson as though imploring him to kill the idea.

“What an absurdity!” she stammered. “Where did she get it?”

“She didn’t say—she just mentioned it as being something that ought to be remembered, and couldn’t think he was the sort to commit suicide. She hadn’t any proof, just her own feeling.”

“Supposing this ridiculous thing were true, does she want him back?”

It was put in a sort of uncertain whisper. Jackson’s face, always difficult to read, looked detached, impersonal, as though Hope’s views meant nothing to him, nor did the life or death of his partner. It seemed, too, that he was undisturbed by what he must have known Tarrant’s wife felt for himself, and how this would be affected were Hope right.

“No,” he said evenly, “I take it that she doesn’t want him back. She didn’t give any reasons, naturally. She’d grown away from him before she cleared out. She’s not sure, that’s all. She likes you, and is a bit afraid of you at the same time. She says she’s planned her own life, and doesn’t ask anything from anyone.”

Yielding to a wave of impatience she thrust Hope and her father aside for a moment, concentrating on the man she had selected as Tarrant’s successor. Where did he stand in this affair, and how would he take it if her husband did turn up? That was more important than anything else. There came a chaotic vision of these two confronting each other. How infinitely remote! Then she observed that Jackson was looking at her with an expression of suddenly arrested interest as though they had just met. She knew that expression, and was content. He gave no indication of speaking.

She was quite willing to wait. The semi-luminous obscurity of night enfolded her in a soft cloak that suited her marvellously well. She was wearing a wrap with a large collar of dark fur. This, loose on her shoulders, made a soft and dusky background for the smooth whiteness of her perfectly rounded neck. The classic contour of her head, which was remarkably well-formed, would have attracted any man; her colouring, naturally high, was modified in this atmosphere, tempering her bold beauty, so that in her shadowed corner she became more gentle, though none the less compelling; and her languid grace seemed to combine the delicacy of youth with the more mature splendour of later womanhood. She looked prodigal in physical

appeal, satisfying to the emotions, and serene in the consciousness of charm.

“It’s a perfectly mad question,” she ventured after a throbbing silence, “but what would you say if Hope was right—which she isn’t?”

Jackson caressed his lean chin, then laid his hand over hers.

“I’d ask you to choose between us.”

CHAPTER V

SEALED ORDERS

ALGECIRAS Bay, shimmering in sunlight, dominated by the huge fingertip of Andalusia that stretches toward Africa! From *Cygnets* deck the Rock seemed adrift, so low lay the sandy flat linking it with Spain, across whose narrow belt of neutrality Dutch, French, British, Castilian, Saracen and Moor had swayed in many a battle. In the centre of the curving bay the town of Algeciras looked cool and shining white, with modern hotels, bathing-huts and a scattering of yachts anchored off the sloping sands. But the Rock was grey, wind-whipped, incredibly old—a gigantic, crouching saurian, a magazine of destruction, its entrails crammed with engines of death. At its feet floated the Mediterranean Squadron of the British Navy, motionless, dun-coloured leviathans, speckled with ant-like men, the astonishing solidity of their hulls displaying a sort of vast metallic rivalry with two tripod-masted American battleships that rested near by. The broad decks gleamed. Long tilted cylinders of polished guns flung back the sun in bars of golden light. Further, two first-class cruisers. Outliers of the pack, a swarm of insolent destroyers. Admirals, bullion-mounted, gold-sworded, visited admirals in fussy launches. Salutes shrilled from silver bugles. Uniforms glittered. In the bowels of these monsters hard-fisted men passed blasphemous opinions that would have startled the quarter-deck. And over it all towered the Rock.

For the feminine company of *Cygnets*, this pageant displaced all else, and Lock anticipated something of a stay. He had just dropped anchor when Jackson came up on the bridge with a very businesslike air.

“Pretty good run from Southampton, wasn’t it?”

“Not bad; I’m sorry we had such a tossing in the Bay.”

“That was nothing; just as well to get it over quickly. You feeling all right—not tired?”

“I’m having a holiday.”

“Good! I hope you’ll go on that way. Now I suppose there are certain harbour dues and that sort of thing?”

Lock explained the formalities.

“Anything else to occupy you—I mean ashore?”

“No.”

“Couldn’t Maclay do that part of it?”

“Certainly. Can I be any use to the ladies? I know the place inside out.”

“Thanks, it wasn’t that. I was thinking they’d go with Maclay—he can show them round. Now that we’re this far, I’ve got some things to talk over with you. How that suit?”

“Perfectly.” Lock was greatly puzzled, and not a little anxious.

“Well, we’ll push them off first, then get together.”

That was what happened. The launch dwindled toward the Rock with Maclay at the tiller. Jackson leaned on the rail, waving good-bye in thoughtful silence, brows drawn together, a faint look of amusement on his thin lips. Presently he straightened as does a man who finds himself rid of some petty interruption.

“Let’s go to the charthouse a minute.”

Once there, he pushed aside the great sheet showing the western Mediterranean, lit a cigar, examined its tip, and began to talk in a drawl that immediately struck Lock as being a shade too casual.

“On the map Gibraltar looks a sort of jumping place, doesn’t it? And the Mediterranean—I used to think that from here to Constantinople wasn’t more than a thousand miles.”

“It’s a good bit more.”

“Well, well! And, say, Capetown?”

“Multiply it about four times.”

“That’s a deuce of a long way, isn’t it? Could *Cygnets* make it, with good handling?”

“Why not?”

“I guess you’re right.”

He shifted his chair, and began taking chart after chart from the big drawer under the table till he came to one of a section of the West African coast.

“Big country, eh? Pretty well fixed for such things, aren’t you?”

“*Cygnets*’s made a lot of cruises, and I found a good many of these on board.”

Something about this seemed to please the man, and he nodded to himself.

“Ah! Interesting, aren’t they? I always hold they teach you a lot, even though you don’t go anywhere. Now, talking about oil fuel as we were the other day, I suppose these ports on the West African run haven’t much of that sort of thing?”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Lock was wondering more than ever.

“Well, for instance, and just as a bit of education, supposing I said to you that I want to see a man about a dog down in Capetown, and asked you to take us there, just where could you fuel?”

He put this very blandly, fingering his cigar, scrutinizing its wrapper, and regarding Lock with an expression that suggested that if the young man had any questions to ask, now was the time.

“Oil is much better distributed than you think. You want me to go over an imaginary run between here and the Cape?”

“Sure—just imaginary.”

“Well, first to Teneriffe in the Canaries. Oil there.”

“You wouldn’t follow down the Morocco coast?” Jackson’s eyes were fixed on the chart.

“I’d sooner not. Poor harbours till you get further south. Then Teneriffe to Dakar—that little point sticking out from Senegal. Oil there, too. More at Accra on the Gold Coast. Then you——”

“In fact, you wouldn’t expect any difficulty at all?”

“I would not, though it’s a fairly long run in a fairly small craft. Of course, there’s a good deal to see on the West Coast, especially if you go up country a bit; but there’s not much variety.”

“Ah, variety! I’ve always reckoned people took their own variety with them. It’s not so much what you see as how you see it. Wireless working all right?” he added casually.

Lock looked at him hard. A trap had sprung, but sprung empty, and now these two, with no attempt at dissimulation, exchanged a steady, unflinching stare. On Lock’s side it held a touch of mockery.

“Forgetting something, aren’t you?”

Jackson gave a short laugh. “I guess I did. My apologies. Well, there’s no harm done. Look here, I want to ask you something.”

“What?”

“Do I strike you as being the sort who wants to go sailing round sightseeing with a bunch of women?”

This in a tone entirely good-natured, not a little quizzical, and conveying, it seemed, a quite genuine wish to hear what the other man did actually think about it. It came very suddenly, and the swift transition made it the more surprising. Lock, racking his brain for what might follow next, felt that it was the most honest question that Jackson had ever put to him. It brought a sense of relief, and seemed to establish a sort of meeting-ground, exclusively male, where things—hard, concrete things—were pitched into the open, unmodified by the influence of any woman. He welcomed this.

“I’ve never thought anything about it, but, if you ask me, I’d say you were not.”

“Good enough; you’re right. And I’d say you weren’t either. You’re here because you can’t help it. I’m here because—well—I guess you’ll understand that later. So we’ve got this much between us to start with. Now, just as an opener, I want to take back that order I gave you about using the wireless; I want to change it, and say I just ask you not to do any sending without my knowledge. Later on you’ll see that, too. How about it?”

“Right!” grinned Lock. “That’s understood.”

“Good! Now, I reckon you’ve been thinking quite a lot in what they call the watches of the night. No, I’m not expecting any answer, just letting you know that I’ve not been exactly asleep—and I hated, on my soul I did! to see a man of your cut lifted out of the cast-iron sort of thing he’d been used to and dumped in with a bunch of——”

“I’ve no complaints, and Mrs. Tarrant is very kind.”

“Your make of man wouldn’t know a complaint if he met one. However, all I want to say now is that this cruise may turn out a lot different from just paying harbour dues along the Mediterranean. That—though I guess you’ve jumped at it already—that’s why I got Mrs. T. to turn over this boat to me. I’ll add one thing more. If you’d not been the stiff-backed sort you are, darned if I wouldn’t have asked for another skipper right here in Gib, and you can take that any way you like. Say, forget that pipe and have a cigar.”

The growing geniality in his drawl was unmistakable, as though he were glad to be here, more than ready to talk, pleased that it was a stiff-backed man he talked to, relieved that the women had gone ashore. His attitude had become that of a man who was about to unload at any rate part of a secret he had grown tired of carrying. Lock got the impression that what he was about to hear this time was probably true. That in itself was encouraging. And Jackson, with flexible, leathery skin, his lean frame with its suggestion of power and endurance, and the nameless quietude of nerves and body that seemed for all their calm watchfully to be ready for instant action—with this about him, Jackson did not look the man to find much satisfaction in a luxury cruise in the Mediterranean.

The proffered cigar being accepted, he seemed to relax still further.

“That’s a lot better. When folks smoke different things it’s always struck me they’re apt to think differently, too. I lived in the States for years and hardly ever saw a pipe. Well, getting interested?”

“You suggest there may be a bit of man’s work ahead?”

“You’ve said it—but I’m leaving that end for a while. You’ll draw a lot of mixed conclusions, maybe. Well—draw ’em. They’ll be wrong, but that won’t hurt. Want

to make a bit of money on the side?”

It was so suggestive of exactly the same question put by a red-faced man in a third-class carriage less than three weeks previously that Lock wondered whether he had heard aright. Inevitably, as soon as it left Jackson's lips, Tarrant seemed to leap out of semi-forgetfulness with a soundless signal that here, again, he must be recognized and considered, and the young man conceived the grotesque idea that this time he might be on the daughter's side in a search for the father. But that was incredible. No one, at least no one on the yacht, seemed desirous of finding Tarrant—though the man himself was desperately anxious not to be found. It began to seem that he had over-estimated his own importance to others.

“A bit of extra money would be more than welcome, if——”

“I know, I expected that ‘if,’ ” broke in Jackson approvingly, “but you needn't say another word. I reckon you navy men haven't much religion, but there's a sort of general understanding about certain things. Well, I respect it. This won't interfere with anything you've undertaken to—to anyone else.”

He said these last words with the faintest possible glint of such devilish though secret enjoyment, that in an instant the whole question came up again. Tarrant moved closer still, again important, more solid, more real, and Lock was assailed by the identical question which had harassed him that afternoon in Soho. Then Jackson went on, his voice bland and expressionless.

“What I'm getting at is this. You can take it that anything I say comes from Mrs. Tarrant as well. She's the boss, and I wouldn't think of going past her. She knows we're having this talk, and isn't against your cleaning up a bit of a bonus before we hit Southampton again. Fact is, she approves.”

“You're suggesting a good deal, but telling me nothing,” said Lock.

“The cold facts will come later, and when you signed on as *Cygnets* skipper, you signed on to a bigger thing than you reckoned. Y'know, my friend, you're not exactly easy to—well—can't you unfreeze just a mite?”

Lock had to laugh with him. Never yet had he met a man who provoked so many quickly changing and unexpected sensations. This contradictoriness, the shift of mood, the half-humorous, half-cynical outlook on life, the dry monotone of his drawl, his habitual calm and seeming indifference to personal comfort, all these characteristics made him one to be remembered. They might, as Tarrant had warned, be those of a trickster, but that made them none the less notable.

“I never had much back-chat,” grinned Lock. “Perhaps not enough.”

“You're lucky, and it looks to me as though we might know each other pretty well before this trip is over. There's just one thing: I wouldn't mention the matter to

Hope—she’s always been Hope to me—because it might worry her. She’s got enough to worry about as it is.”

“I don’t know anything about that. She’s been on the bridge more or less, but never said much about herself.”

“No—she wouldn’t. Just the same, she isn’t happy. And you’d hardly guess why.”

“That’s beyond me.”

“She’s afraid her father is alive.”

Saying this, Jackson flicked the ash from his extinguished cigar, clipped off the charred end and relighted it like one who objects to seeing good tobacco wasted. He exhaled a delicate jet of smoke, watched it rise and dissipate slowly against the white-enamelled ceiling, then nodded as though in confirmation of his own extraordinary statement.

“You’re bound to find out some time—matters somehow get to common knowledge on a trip like this—so why not now? It may save you from saying the wrong thing. She’s afraid, right enough. Tom Tarrant never understood women, let alone a girl, even his own. She wasn’t happy with him—ever—and after he married the second time she cleared out. Mrs. Tarrant, who’d been good to her, wasn’t expecting anything like that. Then Tom disappeared. We’ll say he was drowned. Hope read about it, wrote to Uplands, got the details and stayed where she was in Dinant. Mrs. Tarrant tried to get her back, but no use, till finally this cruise tempted her. Nothing was said about my being on board, because that wasn’t settled till a few days before we sailed, so when Hope saw me it brought up—well—a lot of the past, and started her worrying again. I’ve been doing my best to calm her down; so have the others.”

It sounded too suave—too smooth. So much so that on the instant Lock’s course was automatically decided.

“So if Tarrant did turn up?” he asked, wondering at his own voice.

“If that were to happen there are four people on this yacht who would tell him he’d made the mistake of his life. And,” he added sardonically, “if Tom is alive he knows it.”

“Why should a man bluff his own death?”

Jackson made a guttural sound that might have meant anything, then, deliberately:

“I don’t see how you can answer that till you know your man. Take Tom Tarrant! Nothing like his daughter—in fact I used to wonder if she was his daughter—with a big red face that got purple when he was angry, and a temper like hell when

it was roused. He could be gentle as a cat, then like a mad bull before you knew where you were.

“Now as to his bluffing his own death, it’s generally fear of something or somebody, isn’t it? A few might do it from shame, but that wouldn’t fit Tom’s case. Of course, if you make the jump you’ve got to come to the surface again in a new place, which means, more than likely, that you discover just too late certain things you’ve cut yourself off from, maybe some woman, or money, and whatever it is I’ll bet it looks a lot more attractive when you can’t get at it.”

At this point he paused for a moment, glanced at Lock with the faintest possible lift of his greyish brows, and gave an elusive little smile.

“Rather letting myself go, eh? Well, the subject interests me—it ought to interest anyone—and if Tom should happen to be alive, that’s the sort of price he’s paying now. He knows a lot more about us than we do about him, and he’s aching for things he can’t get and,” here the voice dropped, hardening suddenly, “and won’t. His widow—we’ll call her that—doesn’t want him, but maybe he wants her. Same with Hope. Eva doesn’t care whether he’s alive or dead, and never did.”

“You’ve left out his late partner,” said Lock coolly.

Jackson stroked his long chin. “There are partners and partners. I’m not looking for any more. I expect you’re thinking you’ve a queer boatload of passengers. Not very memorial, are we?”

“From what you say, there doesn’t seem much to regret.”

“You’re dead right. Now suppose we two slip ashore and have a look round after I’ve had a talk with the steward?”

He disappeared aft, leaving Lock more in the air than ever. Ten minutes later, accompanied by Webster, who evidently had his orders, they landed and spent the rest of the afternoon exploring cavernous passages in the Rock to which Lock’s R.N.R. gained admission. Then by car to Algeciras, where they found the ladies at dinner.

“Well, well!” said Jackson, taking a place between Mrs. Tarrant and Eva, “feels good to be on solid ground again, doesn’t it? *Cygnets* looks about a foot long from here. Had a good time, Hope?”

“Very: it’s all been rather wonderful.”

“Nothing like that bit of rock anywhere else in the world. And if you look at the map you’ll notice how your country has happened—just happened to pick up a lot of similar useful holdings in various countries.”

“We’ve been at it for a good many years,” smiled Lock. “Did you see anything prettier than *Cygnets* in the harbour, Mrs. Tarrant?”

“Nothing I liked half as much.”

Her voice was contented, she looked very handsome, and the men’s arrival had evidently pleased her. The dining-room was full of the cosmopolitan crowd one finds at Algeciras, and she could see no more striking woman than herself. Jackson, seemingly aware of this, was very attentive. Then the music began, and Lock caught a glance from Eva.

“Will you?” he asked promptly.

As it proved, they both danced exceedingly well, and he saw Mrs. Tarrant, who was watching them, smile and nod at some remark from Jackson. Under ordinary circumstances this would have meant nothing, but to-night the perspective of life had undergone a change and he found significance in everything.

“Are all navy men as silent as you?” asked Eva suddenly.

“I didn’t know we had that reputation.”

“You haven’t, as a rule, so is one permitted to be curious? You’re such a keep-off-the-grass person that I’m a little frightened.”

His arm, tightening, held her a shade closer. He felt very alive, and her nearness, the touch of her had given him a thrill. She seemed to perceive this.

“Much better! Now dance as you’ve never danced before. I feel like it to-night.”

That roused him, and they did dance, their swaying bodies unified in movement, full of grace and strength. She was beautifully supple and seemed to float without weight. She did not speak, but yielded to him with voluptuous ease and readiness, so that he was conscious of nothing but rhythm, motion, music and a kind of toxic delight that ran through his veins like a quick light flame. Her eyes were half-closed, and her light, soft breathing reached his cheek as might the throb of a bird’s wing. In those few moments he seemed to rediscover her. He felt younger, infinitely more carefree, with a sensation of being somehow reborn and released to a warmer participation in life, in emotions, sensations, a thousand things that so far he had never tasted.

“Who taught you to dance?” she said, in a whisper.

“That part of my education was self-supplied. Why?”

“No, it was some girl with whom you danced a lot, and you knew very well. Probably you were engaged to her, or wanted to be.”

“All wrong.” He smiled. “I’ve never known any girl well, but I feel music.”

“Is that all?” she countered.

“I hope not; and one can’t very well dance alone. You’re wonderful. Who taught you?”

“Several people tried to, but I didn’t like it,” she said demurely. “Now I’ve got

an idea!”

“Please?”

“We’re going to dance on deck after this; and oh, wireless!”

“What about wireless?” he asked curiously.

“We have it, haven’t we?”

“Certainly we have it. *Cygnets* is a modern yacht.”

“Then couldn’t we receive music from somewhere, Paris or Madrid? Can’t we do that? It would be perfectly fascinating.”

“I think I may say yes.”

She gave him a little squeeze, her eyes very bright.

“You’re coming on, Commander Glacier; you really are.”

“Commander what?”

“That’s what we call you when you aren’t there—at least, I do.”

“Do I deserve it?”

“Not this evening. I’ve hopes of you now. The fact is,” she added mockingly, “you need to be taken in hand.”

“Your hand?”

“Isn’t that English! Perhaps you didn’t know, but I’m half American. And you mustn’t be so—well—blunt. When you’re talking like that to a person like me you ought to be more deft, more artistic, and use more finesse. In fact,” she went on daringly, “there’s a certain procedure, especially on a yacht. Look at mother dancing with her new beau! Now you ask Hope, but don’t dance with her exactly as you have with me. Understand?”

Mrs. Tarrant, wearing a quietly amused expression, was circling slowly about with Jackson, very observant of everything around her. He had the intensely preoccupied manner of a man whose brain is entirely engaged with his feet. Music was not in him, and the feet were in revolt. There were collisions, halts, apologies, readjustments, and again he attempted the impossible. Presently Mrs. Tarrant laughed in his face and steered him to a seat as Lock came up and asked Hope to dance.

“Thanks very much, but not to-night,” said the girl.

“But, Hope, I thought you loved it!” Mrs. Tarrant was much surprised.

“I’d much sooner look on to-night, really.”

“Do,” put in Lock. “The floor’s just right.”

“Please, no, if you don’t mind. I’m quite happy here. You dance with Mrs. Tarrant.”

That lady nothing loath, they went off, and he discovered that she was not much

behind her daughter in accomplishment. To-night she looked even handsomer, and her demeanour was what Lock could only describe to himself as one of cheerful anticipation. She glanced at him curiously several times before she spoke.

“I think you’ll have other duties than navigation after this.”

“What are they? Mine are very light so far.”

“Social.”

“It sounds very attractive. Your daughter wants the wireless rigged to receive music.”

“Can you do that?”

“I think so, with what we have on board.”

“That’s rather clever of you. And, Mr. Lock?”

“Yes?”

“Something I’ve been meaning to ask: I hope you didn’t mind that note I sent you by Mr. Jackson?”

“*Cygnets*’ yours, so why should I?”

She gave her head a little disapproving shake. “I’d rather you didn’t put it that way.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No; it’s too—well—impersonal. You said it as though I only exercised the right of an owner.”

“But that’s exactly what I meant.”

“Couldn’t you be just a little more human about it?”

“Good lord! What have I done?”

She gave a laugh. “One has to work over you, hasn’t one? When I wrote that note I was feeling perfectly awful, and Mr. Jackson offered to relieve me of something he could do much better than myself; so won’t you please look at it that way, and stop thinking about owner’s rights? I don’t want owner’s rights—I just want to enjoy myself, and to have everything as friendly as possible.”

“You’ve been very good to me,” he murmured.

“I like being good to people, when I can. Mr. Jackson says you and he had a talk to-day?”

“Yes.”

“You never use two words where one will serve, do you?”

“Awfully sorry. I hope I’m not impolite.”

“You’re not—just too polite. Well, what do you think of it?”

“The talk?”

She nodded.

“There isn’t really much to think, so far. He said that I might be put in the way of making a bit extra—which was welcome—and gave me the general impression that something more than the ordinary cruise was intended. I rather gathered that he thought cruising about without some definite object was wasting time. He asked questions about fuel and distances, and I think that’s all. Fact is, he left me in the air.”

“Congratulations on the longest speech I’ve ever heard you make,” she nodded, smiling. “Is there anything you don’t fancy about it?”

“Nothing whatever; sounds most interesting.”

“I’m glad. I don’t know if I look unusually cheerful, but I feel it, and somehow want others to feel the same.”

“You’re succeeding admirably,” he said.

“If I’m doing it as well as you dance I’ll be satisfied.” Her eyes wandered to Jackson, who was talking to the two girls. “Also I feel more free than ever before in my life; which is something at my age.”

Free! She could mean but one thing. Tarrant! Instantly the distance between Soho and Algeciras was annihilated, and Tarrant leaped back into the picture. At this Lock had a revulsion. With his arm round this woman whose natural gaiety was so spontaneous, he felt a hypocrite. There was no breath of doubt about her in this affair. Thankfully, joyously, she believed herself free. And according to Jackson there were three others who would have no welcome for a resuscitated Tarrant. What could one say!

“You enjoyed dancing with Eva?” she went on. “I could see that.”

“I’m just as happy now,” he said.

“H’m—very good for a beginner. Your name is going to be changed after to-night.”

“From Glacier?”

“Who told you that?”

“The lady I’ve just been dancing with.”

“What does a glacier become when it thaws—just water?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Then that won’t do. Tell me, am I unusually frivolous to your mind—for Eva’s mother?”

“Please don’t change.”

“You’re getting on—you really are. And, Mr. Lock, I’ve all sorts of expectations for the next few weeks—quite dramatic ones.”

“Good! Am I included?”

“Very much so, but Mr. Jackson doesn’t want me to say any more, just yet.”

“What have I done to be the only one out of the secret?”

“It’s curious you should ask that, because I’ve been rather wondering myself, but, really——”

“So if the child is good he gets a lollipop later on?”

“H’m—yes—it amounts to that. Now you dance with Eva; I like watching you.”

They went back, and he stole a glance at Hope, who had been very quiet, saying little, her eyes roving about in complete abstraction. As Lock came up she sent him one quick look. It reflected a sort of puzzlement as though he had got into the wrong setting, and she wondered what he was doing there. Then he danced with Eva, continuing till Mrs. Tarrant made a move towards the launch.

Speeding across Algeciras Bay, they were all rather silent. Scintillating around the western base of the great Rock stretched a ring of light, but above sea-level its huge mass loomed darkly, almost amorphous, its frame melting, as it were, into an overcast sky. The searchlight of a cruiser lifted a prodigious finger, brandished it horizontally, snatched Algeciras out of the gloom into a naked crystalline brilliance, then swept eastward along the low shore till the Rock rushed up out of darkness into an unearthly clarity. Other fingers joined it, leaping and swinging through immeasurable space till the whole heavens were transmuted into an illuminated playground across which darted a silver-bodied ’plane with the air mail from Paris to Casablanca. Music drifted from the American battleship, floating over the triple-armoured peace in which this scene was dipped, the lilt of it inviting these grim engines of war to forget war, inviting Lock, to whom war had been a profession, to forget it, to be young, be carefree, and to remember that the quick passions of youth can come but once.

The faces, momentarily revealed in the swooping searchlight, now seemed stamped with new significance. Three women, one man, emerging from the unknown, had stepped into his life, and as Tarrant in his dingy den in Soho predicted, were making their mark. Jackson with his twists, his dry, unexpected allusions, the suavity that might conceal so much, his confirmation, whether intentional or not, of a great deal that Tarrant had already disclosed; Eva, dark, potent, a creature of passion; Eva’s mother, high-spirited, rich, generous and daring; Hope, different in nature, of better breeding, her reserve creating for her a sort of distinctiveness, probably more honest and certainly more proud; all mysteriously linked with Tarrant in his hiding-place. And for their associate the one who was sworn to keep Tarrant’s secret!

In the midst of these reflections, he reached the yacht. No one, it seemed, was ready for sleep, and presently Lock found himself in a deck chair beside Hope. The

others had gone below decks, and a clink of glass came from the saloon windows.

“I’m afraid you’re tired out,” he began.

“Tired—but not out,” she admitted. “And I wanted to talk to you.”

He waited.

“That is, if I can really talk,” she added.

“But why not?”

“I couldn’t explain that without bringing in someone else.”

“Jackson,” he blurted out.

“Would it surprise you?”

“I’m beginning to feel that nothing will surprise me on this cruise.”

“Yes, I understand. Were you vexed with me for not dancing? I will some other time.”

“No, not vexed.”

“I wanted to, but——”

She broke off, dextrously uncertain, searching, it seemed, not only his face, but her own brain for encouragement and guidance. Her wistfulness suggested that there was much she would like to say, but could not. And again he assured himself that she looked supremely honest.

“It’s awfully difficult,” she went on in a low tone, “when one’s instinct prompts one to speak out, and something else holds you back. My instinct urges, but I can’t, without telling you other people’s secrets.”

“Then don’t think anything more about it,” he urged.

“That isn’t fair.”

“To whom?”

“You. It’s all queer and unnatural. To-night I wouldn’t dance because I wasn’t supposed to encourage you in any way. I’m to be polite, but nothing more.”

Lock began to feel savage. “To whom am I indebted for this?”

“No, please, you mustn’t be angry,” she put in hastily, “or do anything to show I’ve told you about it. I’m trusting you, absolutely, by talking like this. You feel you’re being treated oddly—and you are—and I know why—and I can’t tell you. So if you decide that I’m like the others and not to be trusted, well, I can’t blame you.”

He was silent for a moment. She had made no attempt to attract him, no appeal to his strength. Yet she had been terrified when she found Jackson on the yacht at St. Malo. According to Jackson, she feared that her father might be yet alive. Was that fact or fiction?

“There’s one thing I can tell you,” she said under her breath.

“What?”

“I hate Mr. Jackson, but Mrs. Tarrant did not know that when she asked me to join this cruise. She’s never been unkind. Eva doesn’t like me because—well—I’m another girl.”

“That’s a slim sort of reason.”

“About two years ago,” she went on, not seeming to hear him, “Mr. Jackson wanted to marry me. He was forty and I twenty. My father was his partner in some mining ventures. They differed very often, and had hot quarrels, but somehow seemed necessary to each other. When Mr. Jackson asked me, father was furious, and I thought they had broken finally, but they came together again, though Mr. Jackson swore he would never give me up. In the middle of this he heard from some man in South Africa, and the two went off together for several months. Then father came back alone.”

“Where was Jackson?”

“I—I didn’t know till afterwards.”

“Another quarrel?”

“Y-yes. Father had money, much more than before, made out of a mining speculation, and said that this time they had broken finally, and Mr. Jackson had married in South Africa. Then father married again, and we went to live at Uplands. Things were never quite right there from the first, though my stepmother did her best to make me feel at home. Between Eva and me there was a sort of truce. A few months after that my father seemed to change and become very nervous. His whole nature changed. He had never understood me, but now he became suspicious of everyone and everything. Also my stepmother was spending money too fast, and there were rows even before the servants. And then——” Her voice was almost inaudible.

“Don’t tell me anything you don’t want to,” said Lock quickly.

“We’ve come to the point where I must leave something out, even though I know you’re to be trusted. If you weren’t what I know you are, I would tell you. Oh, what must you think of me!” she added in a gust of regret.

“Nothing that you wouldn’t like me to think,” he put in with extreme gentleness. “Won’t you go on?”

“I decided to run away. Perhaps a girl of my age doesn’t run—she just goes—and I went to France. No one knew where. Three months later I read in the papers that my father had been drowned, and wrote to my stepmother, but she had no further details. She asked me then to come back, but I felt there was nothing to come to. Then the other day she wrote saying that she had inherited a lot of money,

bought a yacht, and would I come on this cruise. She did not mention Mr. Jackson, because, of course, he had told her not to. And to-day he's wondering whether he wants me or her, and is afraid of just one thing."

"Glad to hear it," said Lock cheerfully. "What?"

"Bigamy."

The quietness of this made it the more impressive, and she sat, staring at the Rock, immobile as the Rock itself, her fingers knitted nervously, her brows drawn into a fine straight line. Lock heard her take a quick little breath, and she glanced at him, her eyes steady and brave.

"He is not sure, nor am I, that my father is really dead. My stepmother is quite convinced, and what Eva thinks doesn't matter. He had nothing to expect in the future but fear; yet I am afraid that he is alive."

Lock, infinitely puzzled, racked his brain for what he might reply. He ached to come out with the truth, but by this girl's own confession the truth was what she dreaded. And he was under oath to the man in Soho.

"Am I permitted to ask questions?" he ventured.

"Ask what you like, but I cannot promise to answer."

"You say that your father had nothing to expect but fear. Was it of Jackson?"

She nodded apprehensively.

"And you know *why* he feared?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Assuming that he were alive, would you want him to find you?"

"No, no! It's all horribly unnatural, but I don't. He mustn't find me! In his own queer way he liked me, sometimes I think he loved me, but there was a streak of cruelty in him that I can't describe. He only showed part of his real nature to my stepmother, and kept the rest hidden. I know what he hid from, so does Mr. Jackson, but he isn't aware that I know. And please always remember that I mustn't antagonize him. So you see," she added pathetically, "there's rather a cloud over life for me."

All this, given with entire conviction, was like a seal put suddenly over Lock's lips. He had been weighing the whole affair, setting this girl with her honest eyes against the oath given to a shifty-faced man in a third-class carriage, and reached the point where the oath was going overboard. Now she herself had made this impossible. Tarrant alive was harder to bear than Tarrant dead. It was forced upon him that here again the queer jumble of statements and inferences collected from Tarrant and Jackson had been confirmed. They had given him, both of them, most of the truth, but neither of them the core, and that core they indubitably shared. The

whole affair was like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle strewn on the floor with nothing to help their arrangement into the final pattern.

“Can you tell me anything I can do?” he asked with a growing feeling of loyalty toward one so harassed.

“Have you noticed one thing?”

“What?”

“I haven’t asked you any questions. No—I’m not going to, because—well—I trust you. Is that enough? And if——”

She drew away a little as a figure came along the deck. Jackson lounged up, and took a chair. Settling down, he put a hand on the girl’s arm in a gesture familiar and possessive.

“Message for you, Hope. Mrs. Tarrant says you must be very tired, and ought to turn in. It hasn’t been an idle day, and you’ll have all to-morrow for sightseeing.”

“Oh! I thought we were sailing in the morning.”

“It was on the cards, but we’ve changed plans. Did you find Maclay a good guide?”

“Yes, he seemed to know all about the place.”

“Mrs. Tarrant thought so too, so you’ll have him to-morrow. Mr. Lock will be busy. Also I want to talk to him now.” He gave her arm an intimate little squeeze. “So you be a good girl, and get your beauty sleep—though you don’t need it.”

She got up, said good night, and moved aft, while his gaze followed her. To the other man his expression held something of indecision, and he smoked silently for several moments.

“Things are working out as I expected, so let’s get to business. Fuel oil—how much more can you take, comfortably?”

“The amount we have used, say ten to eleven tons.”

“H’m—we didn’t burn much getting here.”

“She’s easy on fuel,” said Lock laconically.

“Lots of everything else you want, I mean general stores? I’ve seen Webster: he’s looking after his own end of it.”

“Do you mean for some given period?”

“Say a month.”

“Yes, we’re well supplied.”

“Good! To-morrow I’d take that oil on and anything else you think of. Needn’t stint yourself. Then we’ll push off.”

“With pleasure; but it’s customary to give the skipper some general idea of the place he’s to make for.”

Jackson laughed at him. “That’s about as British a remark as I ever heard. Well, it’s Las Palmas, in the Canaries. And that’s on the way to somewhere else. And somewhere else—this ought to interest you—is a spot I don’t believe you ever heard of. I guess I’ll turn in now. Good night, Commander.”

CHAPTER VI

NEWS FROM SAVOY HILL

CYGNET, speeding southward, was lifting like a gull to the long slow heave of the Atlantic. There was a good breeze from the north-west, and to steady his ship against the roll of the open sea, Lock had shaken out mainsail and foresail. These, just drawing full, gave her a slight list, and their soaring curve matched the sparkling whiteness of the few clouds that traversed the huge arch of sky. Thus appavelled, the yacht seemed recreated, a man-made thing, but reborn of the sea itself, its life and buoyant motion one with the sheer freedom of the untenanted plain across which it forged.

Five miles away on the port side lay the gaunt outlines of French Morocco, a land of tawny yellow and brown, capped by interminable and tumbled ridges that crowded up over the horizon from the great Atlas Range that bordered the Sahara Desert. Naked under the African sun they stretched beyond vision, parched and incredibly old.

From the crests of the swells one could make out the lighthouse off the harbour of Casablanca and the line of foam fringing this forbidding coast, but in the sliding valleys between, *Cygnnet* seemed lost in a watery world with nothing in sight except her own graceful frame and the slow sweep of filagree spars tracing invisible circles against the deep sapphire sky.

Lock, busy with coils of wire, a medley of apparatus and Eva's portable radio set, divided his thoughts between electricity and the events of the previous day. These were as Jackson had arranged. He had gone ashore with the ladies immediately after breakfast, asking Lock not to leave his ship. The party did not return till nightfall, by which time *Cygnnet* had been refuelled and Webster had replenished his stores. Then he had given orders to weigh anchor, and *Cygnnet*, with clearance papers for Las Palmas in the Canaries, and passing the ordered lines of cruisers and battleships, had taken her venturesome way into the South Atlantic.

After Las Palmas—what? Lock, fiddling with his coils, could not arrive at any reasonable answer. That port lay on the high sea road to Brazil, but there had been no suggestion of journeying in this direction. Also it was four thousand miles from Capetown. Jackson had mentioned Capetown, but that was a jest. In between lay the Gold Coast, the Gulf of Guinea, and the endless, sweating, fever-stricken shores

of Africa. *Cygnets* could hardly be bound to any point on this stretch. He had talked the thing over with Maclay the night before, but Maclay, a man of few words and no imagination, had merely suggested that they wait and see.

Meantime *Cygnets*' passengers had established a sort of mutual relationship. The process of selection began. Mrs. Tarrant and Jackson were much together, obviously enjoying each other's company. Eva, however, paid him very little attention. At times she might have been talking to an outsider, and her manner toward him held a latent suggestion that he was here not by her invitation. But nothing had any effect on his imperturbable poise. To these three Hope appeared to be a sort of satellite, included in their orbits by invisible forces, and moving with them to the same predestined goal. Lock felt drawn to her, but not disturbed, as he now admitted he was disturbed by Eva. And that, he immediately assured himself, was ridiculous. Involuntarily, and smiling to himself, he glanced aft.

Exactly as though she had communicated, he found himself looking straight into her dark eyes. She smiled back, put down her book, came forward, and sat on the deck beside him.

"Obedience isn't usually an instinct with me, but here I am," she said. "I've been watching you for the last half-hour, and you didn't look up once. Are you always absorbed like that?"

"No, but I'm a bit of an amateur at this job."

"Is it going to work—and when?"

"I think so, by to-night."

"Then we'll hear the news and the Savoy band, and probably something very elevating about music or morals."

"You've a good deal of the civilized world to draw on," he reminded her.

"I think I'm beginning to feel a little uncivilized. There's not too much sea for dancing, is there?"

"Depends on you, doesn't it?"

"Well, we'll have a good try." She stared at the filmy aerial overhead. "What would you like to pick up—if you could?"

"Won't you give me time to think?"

"Well, captain, think!"

For a moment their eyes held each other, while in Lock's brain glimmered the thought that an announcement of Tarrant's death would both to him and the rest of them be the most acceptable bit of news. Failing this, that one Thomas Tarrant, supposed drowned a few months ago, had been recognized and identified in London. That wouldn't do. What about Hope?

“’Pon my word, I can’t think of anything. Sounds queer, doesn’t it?”

“What a remarkable person! Is one to assume that you already have everything you want?”

“Not by any means.”

“Then why not make a very strong wish, now, for—for some of it?”

This, in her habitually husky tone, was faintly provocative. She was leaning back, arms stretched over her head, hands locked and pressing on her white yachting cap, every line of her body eloquent of warm and supple youth. Sun and sea had already tanned her slightly olive skin to a delicate brown, against which the rich darkness of eyes and hair gave her a sort of southern glamour. In this attitude, and as though very sure of her own appeal, her lingering glance invited his scrutiny—more—commanded it, till, of a sudden, something swift and significant passed between them. Lock, busying himself hurriedly with his coils, heard a contented little laugh.

“I don’t believe you’re wishing for anything at all. You look far too practical and businesslike. Did anyone ever wish you a strong, silent man?”

“I’ve been called all kinds of names, and I have wished,” he said laughing.

“Am I to know?”

“Isn’t that against the rules?”

“Perhaps. Will you tell me then if you get it?”

He nodded.

“Now, really, you’re becoming quite interesting. Will you know soon, or”—here she hesitated a little—“could you know while on the yacht?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that last, but I’d like to know very soon indeed.”

“Tell me something,” she said, seeming satisfied.

“Well?”

“Are you the sort that goes on wishing without it occurring to make a move and ask for what you want? There are such men, and they generally miss it. They’re generally frightfully decent, and seem to think it a sort of virtue to suffer in silence.”

This with a look that he could not misinterpret. It suggested that he was rather a fool. Also that she liked him very much, and invited him to discover how much. Also that he was inexperienced compared to herself, but lost no attractiveness thereby. At this something waked up in him, and he gave her a very straight stare.

“It sounds rather misguided, doesn’t it?”

“Commander Glacier, you may move up one,” she laughed. “Now you can have a recess and play with your wireless.”

“And the next lesson?”

“When that thing,” she pointed to the aerial, “has brought the Savoy band to

latitude—what did you say it was this morning?”

“Ah, but it isn’t the same now.”

“Do things change as fast as that?” The tone was mocking.

“Latitude does, the way we’re heading.”

“I’m content if you are. What is it now?”

“Say thirty-two north.”

“And by knowing your latitude you know where you are?” Her eyes had begun to dance. “It’s a wonderful idea?”

“That, and your longitude. Yes, it works well.”

“Then to-night, with a perfectly new latitude, one we’ve never had before, I’ll give you the second lesson.”

“Mrs. Tarrant’s compliments, sir, and you’re not to forget you’re expected to dinner.” This from Webster, after a knock at Lock’s door.

The young man sent his thanks, and sat for a while, chin in hand, thinking about Mrs. Tarrant’s daughter. He wished, first, that by nature he were less serious, and able to take that matter with a lighter touch. A pretty girl with time on her hands—himself the only man available—a flirtation on board ship. What of it? Eva’s mother, easy-going and content that her daughter should do as she saw fit. So why worry? That was the sensible view. On the other hand he could not feel otherwise than as he did. There had been no play of this kind in his life. He was born with queer old-fashioned ideas about women. They were out of date, as his friends assured him, but ineradicable. He meant to marry—sometime, but the chances looked slim.

In spite of the formality of his manner he had moments, undiscovered by others, when the man in him cried out, and was only to be silenced by a sort of iron discipline, physical and mental, that had, without his knowing it, hardened his expression and made colder the steady regard of his grey eyes. At times he felt like a human volcano, snowcapped, but very different at heart. Also he was lonely. Lifted out of the companionship of years, he missed it. Plunged into association with women, he was fumbling about, envying other men’s knack of holding their own and a bit more. Some of the back-chat that used to make him a trifle contemptuous would be useful now, with less of the iron-backed Puritanism in which he once took a secret pride. It was all, very difficult. And he had never imagined that he was attractive to women.

Laying out a white mess uniform, he began to smile at himself. He was a booby—a cub—and the world would roll on whatever he said or did. He was free. A few

feet away in another cabin was the girl. Suddenly he felt glad she was so near, and he pictured her in his cabin—now—which disturbed him. He might have been more comfortable had the money been on his side, but the new philosophy—the one he was deciding to adopt—recognized no difficulty there. So, if she was in earnest——? At this he dressed in a hurry, gave himself an unusual scrutiny in the glass and went up to the bridge.

Maclay was on watch, patrolling ten paces each way with clockwork regularity, and smoking a short black pipe that greatly needed cleaning. He emitted little geyserlike puffs, accompanied by a sort of put-put of closely shaven lips, and gave Lock a half-humorous salute.

“Man!” he said, regarding the tall, white-clad figure, “but you’re looking like the Queen of Sheba.”

“I feel rather like her.”

“Dining aft, eh?”

“That’s it. The ladies want to dance.”

“Ay, no doubt. How old are ye?”

“Thirty,” grinned the young man. “Carry on.”

“In a manner of speaking, I’m outside my province. We’re on the high seas, and you’re skipper.”

“Forget that. Proceed.”

“Well, if it’s no liberty, I’m thinking that young lady is in earnest.”

“They never are on board ship. And she’s certainly not.”

“You wouldn’t believe by the look of me that I know aught about women, eh?”

“You probably know more than you let on.”

“I’ve seen ’em in all latitudes,” said Maclay with a dry chuckle, “though third officer on a liner isn’t supposed to see too much, and you take my word, Miss Hewson’s eyes are wide open.”

“They’re fine eyes,” murmured Lock.

“Ay, fine enough for their purpose, but there’s temper behind ’em. She reminds me of—of——”

“A torpedo?”

Maclay slapped his thigh. “You’ve got it. I mind when I saw a torpedo take a twist off its course and come straight back at the ship that fired it. Yon was in the Baltic.”

“Perhaps, but we’re not in the Baltic. Torpedoes used to be special pets of mine, and I like them. Be careful you don’t get hit yourself. There’s Miss Tarrant.”

“Less explosive and a sight more dependable to my mind. Here’s Webster

looking for you.”

Cygnets' dining-saloon was below the lounge, with low ceiling and portholes that in size went to the limit of safety. The late Lord Farramore had had ideas of his own about the interior decoration of yachts, and here they ran to panelling of Circassian walnut, dark green upholstery, and wall lights of dull silver. Lock had been impressed when first he saw this room, but now with the shaded electrics, the sheen of crystal, a bowl of flowers from Gibraltar, and its air of femininity, it was suggestive of new associations, new surroundings. He sat on Mrs. Tarrant's right beside Eva. Hope was opposite, and Jackson at the other end of the table.

It was the first time he had been with them thus, and had no idea that his appearance produced so definite an impression on the women. To Mrs. Tarrant, who observed him with an interest that he never suspected, he looked most acceptable. An officer and a gentleman, she reflected, admitting quite spontaneously that she herself was not of the same class. And it flattered her to have a man of this sort in her employ. Eva was a shade remote. When she touched Lock's arm she acknowledged to a thrill, which in itself was enough to set her thinking. Previously, such things had merely amused her, and she found a slightly callous interest in watching their effect on others. But at last she admitted to being awake, and to her mother's frank surprise had refused to discuss Lock any further. So she bided her time, wondering what a man of this type was like when thoroughly roused. She proposed to rouse him, and the prospect had a sort of perilous attraction.

“We're how far from Las Palmas, now?” asked Jackson in a pause of the conversation.

“About three hundred miles.”

“That will be to-morrow evening?”

“Yes, but the first thing you'll see will be the peak of Teneriffe. It's about twelve thousand feet high. Last time I was there there were sea clouds nearly to the top, so you got that floating in the sky—sort of phantom mountain without any base.”

“How long have you been at sea?” This from Mrs. Tarrant, who had no interest whatever in geography.

“Off and on about fourteen years,” he said.

“Isn't it queer to have passengers?”

“Do I look unhappy?” he smiled.

“No, I can't say you do now, but I was just a bit afraid of you when we met first. I've got over that. Why so silent, Hope?”

“I was thinking how much nicer this is than Dinant.”

“Bless you, and here's your health.” Mrs. Tarrant seemed greatly pleased. “Mr.

Lock, that young lady decided a while ago to lead a solitary life, and I'm glad to say she's given it up. Hope, are you sure there wasn't a man in Dinant?"

"Not my sort: I read hard, and studied French, and, really, it wasn't so bad. Is the wireless going to work, Mr. Lock?"

"My reputation seems to depend on it, but there are such things as atmospheric. A confusion of waves may spoil our reception."

Jackson gave a slow smile. Up to this point he had spoken seldom, but sat, very observant, wearing an old-fashioned, square-cut box coat, his nearest approach to evening dress. His soft collar and loose black tie showed a good deal of sinewy neck. He looked active, tough and out of doors. At Lock's remark he nodded to himself.

"A confusion of waves," he repeated with an odd smile. "Something to be avoided on board ship, eh?"

It was offhand, but subtly significant, and to Lock's ear carried a touch of double meaning. It held the tone of one to be reckoned with, and there was that about the man which compelled attention. Without acting, he gave the impression of having played many parts in many places. One could hardly imagine him being at a loss. Tonight, with his queerly cut clothes, and in a company that must have been strange to him, he was perfectly at home, and his lack of any social grace gave him a certain distinction.

"Are you expecting trouble?" asked Eva, languidly.

It sounded provocative, but he only laughed.

"For the first time in my life, I can't think of anything to make trouble. Things go by contraries, don't they?" he went on, fingering his glass. "Here's Mr. Lock could tell us of times when, say, he was up against too much water, and I the other way on. Not enough! Don't know which is the worst."

"When was it you didn't have enough?" said Hope, looking at him very straight.

"That happened a few thousand miles south-east of here. I was prospecting with—with a friend, and we ran short of water. Then we ran clean out of it. But the prospects were so good that we hated to move on. Hunger—well—hunger's bad enough, but thirst is worse. I've been up against them both, and know. You can't stay where you are—you haven't strength to get out—the sun burns you by day—and you freeze at night because where there's no water there's no fuel. Your lips crack, your body dries up, and you see visions."

"Where was this?" she asked earnestly.

"South Africa, in a desert all yellow and red and brown. Sort of place that God forgot, or else it was built of stuff left over from the rest of the world."

“And was your friend as bad as you were?”

“Yes, but we didn’t talk about it—our tongues were too swollen. We just mumbled a bit, and made signs.”

“But you were saved, obviously,” put in Mrs. Tarrant cheerfully.

“Ye-es, though I was unconscious when that happened.”

“By whom?” asked Hope in an odd, far-away tone.

“Another pair of prospectors who knew the country better than we did. There was water in a small pool under a big rock not a mile away, but we’d never have found it. It’s like that, often. You’re hunting for the thing you can almost touch, but don’t see it.”

“I should think you’d never forget that, or perhaps,” here she hesitated, then went on with a sudden lowering of her eyes, “perhaps you want to, and can’t.”

“It’s like yesterday,” he said.

“Was the other man my husband?” demanded Mrs. Tarrant in a very clear voice.

“Yes, ’twas Tom. I can see him now, stumbling over the rocks, trying to tell me to hang on till our fortune was made, and that we were bound to strike a spring soon. It was just one long mumble.”

“It’s queer, but he never mentioned it to me. Did he to you, Hope?”

“No,” said the girl in a half-whisper.

“Ah! Tom was that sort,” went on Jackson, apparently quite ready to explain the man to his own wife and daughter. “Very apt to keep things to himself, he was. He carried it too far—sometimes. But I’ve seen him stand on the ragged edge of death without turning a hair. As for strength, I’ve to find his match yet.”

He nodded again, compressed his thin lips, and relapsed, it seemed, into further reflections concerning his late partner. To Lock, now very ill at ease, this turn of the conversation had sounded premeditated, as though Jackson had satirically twitched a corner of a curtain behind which he had screened the bulky figure of Tarrant, and, as the curtain hung steady, the man himself stepped round it, and stood amongst them with a sort of adhesive significance, signalling that he was not to be obliterated even on the high seas.

“Well,” said Mrs. Tarrant, with a shade of impatience, “I don’t want to sound unfeeling, but, thank Heaven, there’s plenty to eat and drink here. Is there much to see in the Canaries, Mr. Lock?”

“I’ve only landed twice at Las Palmas and once at Teneriffe. It didn’t strike me as being very interesting.”

“It isn’t; I’ve been reading about it,” put in Eva. “There’s a mountain no one wants to climb—if one could, and the Cathedral of Santa Ana with the musty bones

of a lot of saints, and some vestments that came from St. Paul's in London, and the towers are a hundred and sixty feet high, and that's everything. I'm not sure that I want to go ashore at all. What about you, Hope?"

Hope murmured that it seemed a mistake not to see what was to be seen, and just then Lock caught a glance exchanged between Jackson and Mrs. Tarrant. It suggested understanding and mutual amusement, and seemed to indicate how completely these two were suited to each other. Jackson appeared to be two kinds of a man. When he talked to Lock he was one of the herd as in Gibraltar, using the language of the herd, an uncompromising sort with little regard for others, not over-scrupulous and displaying few of the qualities that ordinarily attract women. Again, as to-night, he was in an effortless way dramatic, stimulating to the imagination, a man of action and courage, at home in better company than his own, with the rougher side of his nature tucked out of sight. The woman who faced him was something of the same kind. Her ambitions seemed to be those of action, and not social. At heart, thought Lock, there must be a good deal of the man in her, with a man's force and courage, and her beauty had a touch of ruthlessness that made her seem the natural complement of Jackson, whom, on a few days' acquaintance, she had admitted to this present intimacy.

"Let's go on deck," said Eva restlessly. "It's stuffy down here."

They went up. No land in sight, only a flat, oily-looking sea, in which the stars, mirrored and magnified, took on a softened largeness like bits of floating phosphorescence. There was no wind, and an almost imperceptible swell from the south-east, over which *Cygnets* thrust her sleek hull with a gentle, regular lift. From her bows rose a low, steady hiss of crumpled water, and through her frame spread delicate pulsations of whirling turbines. She felt alive that night, a sentient creature taking her contented way, and one with the star-spangled plain she traversed. Maclay's head and shoulders were outlined against the darkly purple sky, and a wraith of steam pattered from the escape pipe. Many a time had Lock acknowledged the beauty of the sea, but never had it lent itself more completely to human imagination than to-night.

"Well," said Eva, in her husky, invitational voice, "what about that reputation of yours? We're all waiting."

He nodded, busied himself over the portable set, and switched on.

All in a breath *Cygnets* ceased to be isolated. Out of the air came music, a waltz, sensuous, languorous, the lilt of it swaying, rising, falling with the yacht's motion.

"Madrid, I think; shall we leave it or try for London?"

"Don't touch it."

“Will you dance, Mrs. Tarrant? I’ll guarantee that you don’t fall overboard.”

She shook her head. “No, thanks; this is Eva’s party. Go on, you two.”

They went on. He had wired an extra small light or two in the main and fore shrouds, but in the opaqueness of night the lamps were only pin points. Forward and beneath the bridge there was no light. Above, where Maclay paced, it was equally dark. The lounge curtains were drawn, the door closed, and when one rounded the deck it was passing from semi-light into obscurity. The two danced on with little pauses when they held each other, balancing against the slow heave of the sea.

Lock felt stirred. The nearness of this girl, the sense of aloneness with her that the nearness gave him, her silence—so throbbing that it could not be misread—the way she had slipped into his arms, and, now that she was there, the fragrance that came from her, all this took hold of him. His arm tightened involuntarily, and she was drawn close to his breast, her hair just touching his cheek. The music ran through them, lighting something in their veins, and their bodies moved through the darkness, animated by a thousand inarticulate sensations, tracing the pattern of unspoken desires of youth for youth. They were under the bridge when the music stopped. Lock’s arm relaxed, but she put it back round her waist. His heart began to hammer, and they stood still, holding each other.

“Well,” she said in a low voice, “do you like your second lesson?”

“It’s—it’s rather wonderful,” he stammered, his lips dry.

“Only rather?” She leaned back against the pressure of his arm.

“Very wonderful!” he whispered.

She gave a little laugh, then slowly lifting her head, looked him full in the eyes. Her own were very large and luminous, and had gathered in reflected starlight from the sleepy sea. He saw himself in miniature there, a tiny white-clad commander with a bit of twisted gold on his shoulders. As he gazed he stooped, the image came nearer, and their lips met. At once she drew back a little, frowned at him mockingly, then laughed in his arms. Lock could not laugh, and felt more breathless than ever. Something extraordinary had happened—and to him. He wondered how she could be so unimpressed. She did not speak for a moment, but stood regarding him with a sort of approval not devoid of invitation.

“Well,” she said demurely, “shall we go on?”

A foxtrot had begun, but he could not be quite sure what she meant, and her baffling glance gave no help. They continued to dance, but this time she yielded to him less, talking with a nervous gaiety till they came round and halted at the same spot. Here she turned away, leaning on the rail and watching the curling foam of *Cygnets* bow wave.

“You’re an awfully queer man,” she said presently.

“More queer than most of us?”

“I never met anyone just like you. In one way it’s rather refreshing; in another—well——”

“It’s something to be refreshing, isn’t it?” he hazarded, not very sure of his ground.

“Don’t you feel anything—ever?”

“You made me feel just now,” he replied, startled at her directness.

“I wonder! It was rather—perhaps—automatic, wasn’t it? The time, the place and the girl.”

“My first experience of them all coming together.”

“That’s the standard thing to say, isn’t it? When you kiss a girl do you lose the power of speech?”

“If you’re talking about that sort of thing in the abstract——”

She laughed outright. “How perfectly wonderful! Can you—in the abstract? Do go on.”

“I was going to say I didn’t think much speech was necessary.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “How serious you are! It sounds like an analysis of what can’t be analysed. And,” she continued, “I wonder what a man of your sort is like when really roused—with no abstract about it. I’ve never met one before. Do they feel like conquering the world to lay at the girl’s feet, or killing giants, or what?”

“I’m not particularly murderous to-night,” he parried, trying to talk as he imagined most of his friends would talk.

“And I’m rather pointedly aware of it.” She looked out at sea, trembled a little, then, turning in a great gust of passion, flung her arms round his neck. “Kiss me again!” she whispered huskily. “Can’t you see?”

The fire of it, the uncontrollable swiftness, the warm pressure of her arms, the sudden contact of her clinging body, went to Lock’s brain like wine. His own arms went out, enfolding her. For once in his life the man was awake. He leaned over her, their lips approaching.

Then, close at hand, a scuffle—an exclamation—a man’s laugh—Jackson’s—and Hope’s voice, high pitched, trembling with anger.

“Let me go—let me go! Oh, you beast—you——”

The rest was lost. Lock, stiffening, heard her running aft, heard the bang of the lounge door, Mrs. Tarrant’s quick “What on earth’s the matter?” After this a silence. Eva had drawn away a little. Furious with Jackson, he experienced a revulsion, with a chaotic idea that, somehow, he should have prevented this.

“You seem very much upset about something.” Eva’s voice was cool and distinctly amused.

“I don’t like it,” he growled. “You heard it?”

“I fancy most of the ship’s company did, but what of it?”

He stared at her. “It was a rotten thing to do.”

“Oh! And why?”

“She can’t protect herself, and Jackson knows it,” he blurted, unthinking.

The dark eyes fixed on him steadily. “Really! How interesting; and how do you know?”

He had said just a little too much, and cursed his own impetuosity.

“She seems to have confided in you more than she has in us,” went on the husky voice. “Congratulations, and I’d love to know why she can’t protect herself.”

“So would I.”

This was very curt, but, recognizing it as entirely truthful, she was too shrewd to press the point at the moment. Curiosity must wait, and time might serve later. What rankled the most was this man’s interest in the other girl.

“A chaste salute by moonlight on board ship isn’t such an earthquaking affair, is it?” she asked satirically. “And Hope’s too old-maidish by far.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” Lock felt very awkward. Who constituted him the girl’s guardian? “But he’s too old for that sort of game, and besides——”

“I’m rather interested in the besides.”

“It’s nothing.”

She shook her head, then laughed at him.

“I think I could tell you what you were going to say—but I won’t. Some day you’ll tell me yourself, and I’ll agree. I know that already. To-night there seems to be a lot of those atmospheric about; certainly in Hope’s case. As for Mr. Jackson, he’s in no real danger. I think before long he’ll be asking mother to marry him.”

“What!”

“That’s how it looks to me now, and it ought to be a relief to Hope—unless he claims the privileges of a stepfather. Mine never did—I saw to that. So you needn’t look quite so—well—protective, as you did just now.”

Lock’s brain began to swim. Jackson a suitor for Mrs. Tarrant! Then he didn’t, after all, know about the man in Soho! There flashed back what Hope had said about his not being sure which he wanted, herself or her stepmother, and his fear of just one thing—which was bigamy. Now, to Eva’s belief, that fear had passed away, and Jackson was making love to his partner’s wife. At this the phantom figure of Tarrant seemed to rise up beside the rail, chuckling, and signal that he did not

propose to be thrust aside in this fashion.

“How would you feel if they did marry?”

“I don’t think I’d care either way. Mother and I understand each other well enough not to interfere. I’ll be quite independent of her. It’s just the sort of thing that might happen on a yacht. So many things do.”

They went aft. Hope was not visible. Mrs. Tarrant lay back in a big chair, Jackson beside her. He was smoking, his expression a shade amused, while her reflections were, apparently, the reverse of pleasant. He looked as though he had been trying to humour a captious child, and a certain stiffness was noticeable between them.

“Mr. Lock’s going to try to get London,” said Eva. “It’s just about time for the news.”

“Yes, do.”

He adjusted the dials, and presently, faint but very clear, came the rich voice of a man talking into a transmitter in a padded room on Savoy Hill. Here, under the stars, and with the wash of water hurrying along *Cygnets*’ glossy sides, it sounded unearthly. It was the spirit of modernity, annihilating distance and breathing over the vast emptiness of sea. Mrs. Tarrant sat stiffly attentive, Eva displayed a languid curiosity, while Jackson, shrugging his shoulders, stretched his long legs and seemed to dissociate himself from this performance. News from the outer world had, it appeared, no interest for him.

The voice talked on. The bulletin at Buckingham Palace stated that the King had passed a good night, and his condition was regarded as satisfactory. The Government had passed the second reading of the De-rating Bill. Then, after a little pause:

“Union of South Africa. An important decision was arrived at in Capetown yesterday with regard to certain very rich diamond-bearing areas in Namaqualand, on the coast of what was formerly German West Africa.”

At this Jackson made an extraordinary sound, and sat up straight.

“The uncontrolled output of precious stones from these areas has become so great as to threaten the market value of diamonds the world over, and in order to prevent further prospecting two large blocks of land are being partially enclosed by barbed wire.

“Also there is being organized a patrol of armed and mounted guards with orders to prevent by force any further exploitation. Great excitement prevails in the district, with a considerable amount of lawlessness, which will be put down with a firm hand. The boundaries of the prohibited areas will be announced later.”

“What!” exclaimed Jackson in a loud, rough tone.

At first it seemed ridiculous. He was on his feet, staring at the instrument as a man might rise in an audience to challenge a statement of the speaker. He was alive, as Lock had never seen him alive before, jaw thrust out, face hard and set. Mrs. Tarrant and Eva were glancing at each other with startled eyes. The voice went on about American destroyers holding up Canadian rum-running vessels.

“Shut that thing off!” said Jackson harshly. Lock snapped the switch. The man was frowning, lips pressed tight, his gaze wandering till it rested on Mrs. Tarrant. She only shrugged her well-formed shoulders, and it was then that Lock caught from Eva exactly the same signal that had reached him weeks before on the lawn at Uplands when Jackson, new come from Africa, had asked where he could find Hope. At this the young man closed the set, caught a murmur of thanks from Mrs. Tarrant and went off to join Maclay on the bridge.

“Know anything about Namaqualand?” he asked, lighting his pipe.

Maclay grunted. “All I want to: some shipmates of mine were wrecked on that coast five years ago.”

“What did they say about it?”

“Nothing.”

“They don’t seem to have been much impressed.”

“Aye; I’m thinking they were impressed right enough, but you’ll understand they were dead when found.”

“What killed them?”

“Their tongues were all swollen and sticking out,” said Maclay grimly. “’Twas thirst!”

CHAPTER VII

INFORMATION WANTED

IN the lounge a sort of council had begun. Mrs. Tarrant looked disillusioned and distinctly cool. Jackson was leaning forward, very earnest, and his usually dry, metallic voice held a touch of appeal.

“I don’t see that it’s going to make any real difference,” he argued, “and they can’t wire in the whole coast. It’s hundreds of miles, open to the sea. You can’t imagine that country. Why, a man can lose himself in ten minutes.”

“Wasn’t that the trouble last time?” she said pointedly.

“What of it? We had a bad start, which made all the difference.” He paused, eyes contracting, as though visioning something he proposed to keep to himself. “You see, Ju, you don’t know what you’re talking about, and I do.”

“I only know what you’ve told me. Tom never spoke of it.”

“N-no—I reckon he wouldn’t, and I’ve paid to know. And if this yacht was advisable before, she’s downright necessary now. Without her—well—there isn’t a chance. We’d better drop it.”

“We!”

“That’s what I said. You’ve never had the feel of the things—like me. Big as marbles, some of ’em, like two little pyramids, point up and point down, with their bases stuck together. That makes a sort of double star with six corners, as though they’d been cast in a mould. Smooth in the hand as though they’d been soaped, and sliding over your skin like water. When they are cut! My God! What won’t they be like! You could have a whole necklet, and plenty left over.”

She sat very still, measuring him, her head a little tilted, chin a little forward, apparently very sure of herself, but making no pretence at concealing her interest. Diamonds! She loved diamonds, but, like many another woman, hesitated in sinking so much capital in things so small. Diamonds ought to come from someone else. Why not from this man? She had first heard of the affair at Uplands, a week after he had made a solicitous inquiry for his former partner, and during that week something else had happened, at which she first scoffed, then frowned, and finally capitulated. Jackson hardly realized it, hardly realized that he had walked out of Africa and straight into the life of this woman whom he had never seen before, and by some strange trick of destiny made himself an important part of her future. At the sight of

her he had discovered that he wanted her. He liked her type, her looks, her sort of physical appeal, and a certain suggestion of restless daring that she carried with her. But she had taken care that he should not know—not yet—how much she wanted him. Eva knew—from Eva one could keep nothing privy—but Eva was like herself—and understood.

She had thrilled to the diamond story when first he told it. Her colour rose, and a dark light dawned in the fearless eyes, and, watching her, Jackson flattered himself on making an impression. This was true, and he had made it, but could not guess how much the boldness of his adventurous scheme had heightened the desirability of his own lean person in her thoughts. Thus, when he proposed that he should contribute his knowledge and she the use of *Cygnets* to recapture the diamonds he and his presumably dead partner had been forced to leave hidden in Namaqualand, the alacrity of her agreement had amazed him.

Tom Tarrant's wife! There was something pointedly suitable about that. It appealed to him enormously as the one thing Tom had never counted on, so he told her enough of the truth to salve his conscience, such as it was. Beyond that he did not propose to go, and from this moment he was absorbed in the double objective.

Tom's wife and Tom's diamonds! He reflected with cynical satisfaction that they ought to go together. They had something in common. They both glittered. Both showy. They appealed to him—he could not tell which appeal was the greater, and could imagine nothing more gratifying than to exhibit this woman to the world decked with the very stones she had aided him to rediscover. Tom Tarrant himself! Drowned! On this subject he had expressed no further opinion. When he thought about it, he used to smile a dangerous smile. Tom was not really to be feared in this affair.

Tom's daughter! On this point Jackson admitted that he did not quite understand himself. She had attracted him enormously, made him feel that he wanted to conquer and whirl her off in a storm of new emotions, new sensations, make her more alive to her own sex and more conscious of his. He had wanted her to discover life—real life—through him, which made the difference between his feelings for her and for her stepmother. No discoveries left for Julia Tarrant, he reflected cynically. Remaining herself so unmoved, Hope had but sharpened his hunger. And he had never guessed that this aloofness was but the chill of mortal fear lest she be forced to yield. They had both suffered in this matter. He had made another mistake about Hope in assuming that Tarrant had given the girl his confidence in the affair of the diamonds. When her stepmother, in a moment of confidence, divulged the girl's retreat, the rest of the scheme developed automatically. But within twenty-four hours of leaving St.

Malo, Jackson had not only discovered his error, but sight of the girl had reawakened something that surprised even his own calculating soul. Hope could not help him. He knew that now. Yet he found himself in the curious condition of wanting both women.

With this and much more in his mind, he faced Julia Tarrant across the lounge, wondering how best he might meet the situation revealed by the man in the padded room on Savoy Hill.

“I don’t see how you’re going to do it—now,” she said, with not a vestige of her former enthusiasm.

“Only one way. The place is near the coast, about seventy miles south of Luderitz. I go ashore there, y’understand, and disappear. This yacht disappears too; can’t have her hanging about. Four days later you pick me up at the same spot. That’s all there is to it.”

“It sounds like an adventure story. Suppose you don’t get back?”

“Discount that,” he said, with a sort of steady patience. “I could get into the country, or near it, by rail from Capetown, but couldn’t get out—not with that lot of stones. I’d be searched. They’re mine, naturally, and I’m not a smuggler because I found ’em before the areas were proclaimed, and left ’em on deposit, as it were. But that wouldn’t go for anything now. I couldn’t prove it.”

“You could if my husband were alive,” she remarked shrewdly.

He blinked at her, then shook his narrow head.

“We can wash that out. If he were, those stones wouldn’t be there now.”

Mrs. Tarrant, watching him closely, was aware of a new sensation. Here sat the man she proposed to instal in the place of her husband. Till now there had been no thought of comparing the two, but to-night another matter was rankling in her mind, and she did feel comparative. Tom, big, bluff, a bit coarse and something of a bully, had, at any rate, shown no interest in other women, and been content with her, till, one day, he seemed to be going mad. She knew this by the queer intuitive instinct that women possess in such affairs. Could she say the same for Jackson? Also she had now a faint sense of being used as part of the adventure story. Were she not rich, were there no yacht, where would Jackson stand?

“I wonder if I’ve gone a bit too fast in this business?” she murmured.

His pulse gave an irregular beat, and all in an instant he was forced to the ragged edge of decision. A gambler, born a gambler, low stakes had never interested him, and now, playing higher than ever before in his life, he was compelled to risk all on one blind throw. It all depended on whether she really cared for him or not.

“Well,” he answered coolly, “that’s for you to say.”

She glanced at him, startled. "I—I suppose it is."

"If you feel that the thing is too crazy—that I've talked you into it—and you'd sooner drop out—why just you tell me. That'll be all right."

"Sure?" The tone was incredulous.

"Of course, I'm sure. All you've got to do is say so."

"Then we'd go back to the Mediterranean, and make the cruise there as—as I first meant to?" Her voice was rather thin and uncertain. Perhaps she had misjudged the man.

"Just as you and Eva decided. First thing," he added, deliberately, "I'd ask you to drop me at Gib.—with Hope."

The suddenness of it made her gasp. Hope! A wave of jealousy swept over her, and in its choking depths came the discovery that she cared enough to forgive this effrontery and feel nothing but a cold anger with the girl he found so irresistible. He meant what he said. It was discernible in the cool regard of his eyes, the gravity of his lean face. She pictured him alone with Hope, and, all in a breath, vowed that this thing must never be. But there was, too, enough of the gambler in her not to lay down her cards so soon.

"So that's why there happened what—what did happen to-night," she said, unsteadily.

He nodded. "Look here—let's be sensible. I used to be fond of Hope. Fact is I wanted to marry her, but couldn't bring her to the point. Tom was against it—I don't mind telling you that. Then I went off with him, and he came back without me. You know the rest. I met you, and felt—well, perhaps I'd no right to feel it, but I did. Then Hope came along."

"You wanted to marry her!" stammered Mrs. Tarrant.

"Sure! Why shouldn't I?" Jackson was now playing his game with reckless assurance. "I didn't speak of it before because you'd put it out of my mind. Also I thought she'd have information that—well—she hasn't. To-night two things happened. We heard about those damned guards protecting that territory and, feeling a bit frisky, I thought I'd try and pull Hope out of that refrigerator manner of hers. Nothing in that, is there? Lock was kissing Eva at the same time, so it seemed quite the thing to be done. Now one of these points is important and the other isn't, but from your expression this minute you seem to have them reversed. I thought you—well—cared a bit. I did, the minute I saw you, but I've never begged for anything in my life, and I won't now. So if you're for the Mediterranean, it's your yacht."

She was watching him closely, and before he finished had come to the conclusion that she was rather a fool, and old enough to have known better. He had

cared the minute he saw her! So had a good many other men in the past, and it was thrilling to know that her power of attraction had not diminished. Then why overestimate a harmless experiment with Hope? Also had he not told her that if the supposedly drowned husband proved to be alive, she would be asked to choose between them? At this she got a vision of Tarrant, and through the haze of dissolution he seemed not as difficult as before, and she experienced an odd pang of regret. So it was not repercussion from him but the thought of Jackson landing at Gibraltar with Hope that decided the issue, and she dealt with this in her own way.

“You said that Mr. Lock was kissing Eva?” she hazarded, with a nervous little laugh.

“Nothing experimental about it either.”

“We—ll?”

Jackson was no woman’s fool. He jumped from his chair to the sofa beside her, put his arm round her waist, and kissed her with exceeding heartiness.

“Darn it, Ju, why do you scare a man so? You lift me up, then drop me with a thud. I thought you’d gone back on me just now. Is that only devilry?”

“Perhaps,” she said. “Am I to take it that you still care, in spite of attractions elsewhere?”

He snapped his long fingers. “Forget that! It’s just as I said—I wanted you the minute I saw you. If I hadn’t, we wouldn’t be here now. Can’t you see? And it’s because you’re different from any woman I’ve ever known. We can do a lot, you and I. You weren’t built to sit in a chair up-country in Devonshire.”

“I was getting a bit tired of it,” she confessed; “but, Bob, that trip frightens me. Don’t go alone.”

“Why not? I’ve had worse.”

“I don’t want you to.”

“It’s rather private business. I’ll be all right.”

“But I want you to take someone. Give him a few diamonds if you have to, but take him.”

“Our iron-jawed commander?” he grinned.

She seemed struck by this idea. “Well, why not? He’s young and strong, and you can trust him, if anyone.”

“He’s to be trusted all right. I’ve discovered that already.”

“But how?”

“Tell you some day. You fancy him for a son-in-law, don’t you? Eva’s evidently for it.”

She nodded. “He has no money, but she might do a lot worse, and poor old

Tom would approve. Bob?"

"Yes, Ju?"

"How far is it to Nana—Nama——?"

"Namaqualand—say ten days from the Canaries."

"Has Mr. Lock any idea of the truth? Not that it matters much."

He kissed her, slowly, possessively, while the blood came and went in her cheeks, and her heart beat fast. It was good to be alive again. Presently she pushed him away.

"Please go now: I—I want to think things over. I'm not going to tell Eva—yet."

"Shall I tell Hope?" he laughed. "No, not yet: but I will tell our friend Lock just enough to keep him interested."

Lock had relieved Maclay before the first officer's watch expired, and leaned, an inert figure, in a corner of the bridge. He was alone save for the quartermaster, whose form, equally quiet, could be seen in the wheelhouse. The sea was calm, *Cygnets* answered readily, and there was only an occasional shifting of a polished spoke. Always it had seemed that this transitional hour near midnight was conducive to thought, and there was no doubt about it this time.

Where did he stand? He approached this with the cumbersome gravity of youth, tried to work the thing out, and failed. He admitted to wanting Eva Tarrant, but was by no means sure that he loved her. He felt pleurably scorched—thrilled, as any man would be thrilled—but—and here lay the strange part of it—he was just as conscious of Hope. And this puzzled him. Was it written that he should marry one or the other? Was this how men became engaged only to discover later on that they had been fools? He tried to picture himself asking Mrs. Tarrant for Eva. Ludicrous! Equally absurd was the thought of going to the man in Soho and asking for Hope. The affair, whatever way he looked at it, was unreal, and should be forgotten.

But not Jackson. Jackson declined to retire. He had brought mystery with him, and the voice from two thousand miles away had been like a flashlight in the dark. Jackson was bound for Namaqualand, where men died of thirst in the search for diamonds, and *Cygnets* was his tool. Yet in all that forbidding coast was not one single harbour, and to the South Atlantic it presented a rocky and unbroken front. What was a captain's duty in such a case?

"Hullo! Reflecting on your sins, eh?"

Jackson appeared on the bridge, not smoking this time, cast a glance towards the wheelhouse and gave a nod.

"I wanted to talk a while. Here or your cabin?"

"Whichever you like."

"That fellow," Jackson jerked his head. "I guess we'd better go down." Once there, he sat on the edge of the bunk and put his long finger-tips together. "Sort of surprised to-night, weren't you? I certainly was."

"You mean about guarding that diamond area? I didn't know anything about it before."

"No, you mightn't. The insiders did their best to keep it quiet, but it isn't the sort of thing you can hush up. Diamonds are diamonds. I've been there, y'know."

"So I gathered at dinner."

"Well, I'm going again."

"Bit of a contract now, isn't it?"

"It might be—then again it mightn't. Big country. You can't put a guard behind every rock, and diamonds have been found over a stretch of four hundred miles. That's going some."

This with a sharp glance as though to ascertain whether the news had wakened any sign of interest, any spirit of adventure. It suggested, too, that here was man's work, man's hazard, and it was for Lock to take a hand if he desired.

"You don't light up as some fellows would. What I'm talking about is the wonder place of the world, where niggers have been walking over fortunes in bare feet for thousands of years. Doesn't that stir you? I'm forty-five—how old are you?"

"Thirty."

Jackson gave a little sigh. "I'd like to swap with you for the next few weeks. Ever been down that coast?"

"I've made the run from St. Helena to Capetown, but nowhere near land."

"That's no use—does Maclay know it?"

"Only what he's been told," said Lock guardedly.

"Been talking it over, eh? Well, that's natural, too. Now listen! We'll stop at the Canaries just long enough to fill your fuel tanks and get anything else you need, then make straight for a spot I'll show you."

"Right; but it's my duty to tell you something."

"I was sort of expecting that. Fact is, I could see you with just the identical sober expression you've got now, saying just about the thing you're going to say—responsibility—other people's lives—smallish boat. Well, cough it up!"

Lock smiled in spite of himself.

"You're not far out. It's a dangerous coast—there's no harbour we could get into—the prevailing gales are from——"

Jackson lifted his long hand. "Fine! Now you've got that off your chest, we'll proceed with business. I've been warned. That lets you out, doesn't it?"

"Yes, that lets me out." The cool recklessness of the man was becoming contagious.

"Then forget it. Your job is to take this yacht to the spot I'll indicate. When we get there—well——" he paused, measuring Lock with a keen eye, "then I've a mind to give you the chance of your life."

"That sounds interesting—chance of what?"

"I guess I'd sooner wait a bit. Lots of time. Mrs. Tarrant was talking about you just now: you're solid enough with her, and elsewhere too. In fact," here Jackson looked particularly knowing, "I shouldn't wonder if you and I saw more or less of each other in the future. You might think that over in—what d'you call 'em—the watches of the night. And, oh, where is that portable radio set?"

Lock pulled the box from under his bunk. "I was going to try for America tonight: what about now?"

"I wouldn't bother."

With this he stooped, lifted the box, strode swiftly to the rail, and dropped it overboard. Lock, gaping at him, heard the splash, jumped and just caught the sheen of vanishing mahogany. Jackson was staring at the spot with complete satisfaction.

"Why the devil did you do that!" barked the young man.

"Ah! that would be telling, wouldn't it?" the voice was acidly cool. "Maybe I don't like radio, maybe it gets on my nerves, maybe it's none of your darned business. Look here, Lock, you're entitled to think anything you please, and I don't give a curse, but if you're wise you've got an opening most men would give their boots for. You'll conclude it has to do with diamonds. Well, it has, and that's all I'll say except that I've got a hundred thousand pounds' worth and I'm going after 'em. Details later. *Cygnets* coming—so far. Your part of it will keep. Meantime, fill up at the Canaries as quick as the law allows, or quicker. I've an idea that time is going to be the essence of this contract. Good night."

Mid-forenoon on the South Atlantic. The sea a plain of vivid sapphire, flecked with a myriad sun-smitten points of dancing foam, light as lace, restless as thought. The sky a solid inverted bowl without measurement or dimensions. In the south the slowly hardening outline of the jagged island of Lanzarote. Further south, and just visible, the larger bulk of Fuerte Ventura. *Cygnets*, decks gleaming, brass like gold, her ports diamond bright, a dainty mechanism, flirting with the vast space she traversed. Mrs. Tarrant, Eva and Jackson in big chairs astern. Lock on the bridge, wondering if he would see Hope before long. He wanted to see her.

His mind was clearer, and he found himself able to smile at the events of the previous evening. This because of something that had intervened. He had turned in about three, slept intermittently, and at last sat up and grinned in the dark. He, Norman Lock, late active list R.N., had the whiphand of one Robert Jackson. And he had never seen this till now. He lit a pipe, and went over the points with growing satisfaction. Jackson was in pursuit of treasure of which Tarrant, undoubtedly, was half-owner. If Jackson believed Tarrant dead, this meant that he proposed to rob Hope. If he knew the man to be alive—and Lock felt there was little doubt about this—his game was equally crooked. He wanted to marry Mrs. Tarrant, but could he? Also he was depending on Lock for something more than transport to a given spot.

That was what it all came to, and a sort of grim contentment came with it. What had got under Lock's skin of late was the necessity of swallowing what it pleased Jackson to tell him in his half-cynical, half-elusive fashion, and trying to piece the thing together afterwards. No opening was given him to talk back, or ask questions, and he had ceased to expect anything straightforward from that quarter. But it seemed that shortly there would be opportunity for action, infinitely preferable to any talk.

Here, inevitably, there arose the oath to Tarrant. If, without disloyalty. . . . From his present angle he could see none. He did not propose to cable where the yacht was going, or why. Tarrant must help himself there. Tarrant! The scene came back—the punctured palm—the blood oozing in a trickle of ruby drops—the pale, suddenly terrified eyes—fear grinning at the man, reducing his resolution to pulp. Not a pretty picture, but, curiously enough, Lock now questioned whether, perhaps, he was not less objectionable than the other. Less brains, less courage, afraid of the light, yet, for all of that, moved by one human understandable longing for sight of his own child. Were the circumstances reversed would Jackson, to whom Mrs. Tarrant had already surrendered the yacht, and to whom she seemed about to surrender herself, have a similar hunger? Lock doubted it. He was immersed in thoughts such as these, when Hope's voice sounded close by.

“Good morning. Do I make any difficulties in navigation by being here?”

“You do not,” he smiled. “You simplify it enormously. Now look ahead-no-more to starboard in the middle of that cloud, and tell me if you can see anything.”

She looked. To the south-west a great fleecy mass lay above the horizon in deep parallel layers like huge bars of vapour drawn across the wall of lower sky. One rested on the horizon's rim. Between its almost intangible surface and the upper superimposed layer was the hard blue of an infinite background split by another

mass of more solid white. The effect was as though the lower cloud had erupted, billowing and mushrooming into a gigantic growth that spread above it like an umbrella.

“That queer thing?” asked Hope, pointing. “What a curious shape—what makes it?”

“A very substantial mountain, and what you see in the middle is a bit of Teneriffe, snow-covered. It’s the next island to Grand Canary.”

She stood, silent and watching, till there came a disturbance in the upper air. The great parallel bars lost their tenuous rigidity, their lines softening, melting, no longer parallel. The intervening space became gradually filled with swirling feathery wraiths. Trailing shreds were torn from the greater masses, and flung into a sort of aerial mêlée that formed 10,000 feet above the sea. The cloud shapes mingled, building themselves into a vast mound. While the girl stared, the westerly side of this mound was flattened as by an invisible hand, and its summit torn off, sheared, whipped away, leaving a lofty tableland from which projected a huge cone, sparkling white, incredibly high. It floated in mid-heaven, breathing into the blue a faint film of vapour, the exhalation of its glowing heart. Thus for an instant, till again the sea clouds closed in, and the mountain withdrew itself from sight.

“I’ve never seen anything so lovely in my life; it was like a—a revelation,” she said breathlessly. “Aren’t we going there?”

He shook his head. “Afraid not; I got my orders last night.”

She took a swift glance aft. Three chairs were drawn close together.

“I assume you know what that little tableau means?” he said curiously.

“I think I can guess—but—no——” she came out with it in a gust of frankness, “I’ve known all the time. And it’s odd, but—but nothing except the truth seems quite suitable up here. Is that the effect of the trade winds?”

“One can depend on the trades,” he said, thinking how honest were her hazel eyes. “I’m glad you feel that way. Jackson’s drawing a map of Namaqualand, isn’t he?”

“That’s it. You remember what he said at dinner last night?”

“Very distinctly; so, later, I wasn’t surprised when my orders came.”

“I wonder if one thing has occurred to you?”

“So many that I’ve lost track of them. Tell me.”

“Those diamonds he hopes to find—half of them belong to my father.”

“I assumed that: so if your father were dead they’d belong to you.”

“*If* he were dead!”

The voice was low and strained, and Lock, watching her closely, cursed himself

in secret. But, by her own evidence, it would not comfort her to know the truth, and he found a certain relief in that. Queer to be thus wedged in between father and daughter, yet find oneself committed to silence. And, it seemed, they were both counting on him.

“Isn’t that the wisest way to look at it?” he ventured.

“I—I suppose so.”

It sounded so pathetic that he had a great desire to help, and this was welcome, because it displaced a lot of disturbing thoughts about another girl who certainly needed no help. Also a contrast was suggesting itself. Hope was a creature of the day, of light and sunshine and space, while Eva seemed to move in a half-light that multiplied her sensuous appeal. Hope had done nothing, looked nothing, said nothing to rouse him, but the other girl had put a deliberate match to his passions.

“I’d like to go back to France from here,” said she under her breath.

“Alone!”

“Why not?—but they won’t let me.”

He was completely surprised, then, in a flash, realized that he didn’t want her to go. No reason that he could see for this, but it was unmistakable. He felt confused—and selfish. He meant nothing to her.

“Listen!” he said quietly. “You do exactly what you want to, and no one shall stop you. We’re going to dock in Puerto de la Luz to take on fuel oil. We’ll be there for quite a few hours. If you want to get out of the way till we clear, and be perfectly safe at the same time, all you need do is to go to the office of the British Vice-Consul, and put yourself under his protection. Of course, you’ve your passport?”

“Yes.” She was staring at him hard.

“A British one?”

“Yes; I got it last year before going to Dinant.”

“Then that establishes your identity. Have you money?”

“A little. Mrs. Tarrant told me I wouldn’t need much, but I can cable for it.”

“Let me make up the shortage till you do get back. I’m rich—my gratuity from a grateful country when she sacked me. And, please, don’t worry any more. You’re of age, a British subject—this yacht is British, and no one shall keep you against your will. Now don’t look like that, and leave the rest to me; I’ll fix it.”

“Wouldn’t this make it very difficult for you—afterwards?” she said, her eyes very soft. “I can’t see why you’re doing it.”

He could not tell her. All he knew was that it seemed the only thing because, of the passengers on *Cygnets*, she now appeared to him as the single one who was perfectly honest, and—though it sounded oddly—just his own sort. He could not

understand her, and she moved what he knew to be the best in him. And he would miss her very much.

“I wouldn’t worry about that either,” he said gently, “and there are things I needn’t explain—to you—which make all the difference. Jackson has had to tell me his plans, so my position isn’t in danger. To a certain extent he’s in my hands, and that’s important. Also, he has suggested that I can do well out of this affair—or, in other words, he expects to buy me.”

“He was always like that.”

“Well, I’m not for sale—this time—but I haven’t told him. Now I’m glad. If he finds what he seeks, he won’t get away with more than his own half; I’ll answer for that. So when you reach England, write to me care of Lowther, the yacht agent in Southampton, and tell me where to find you. I’ll hope to bring you a pocketful of diamonds. If Jackson pulls the thing off, I fancy they’ll come straight back to England, too, or if they’ve had enough of this life, and I fancy they will before then, they’ll go to the Cape and catch a liner home. That would leave me to take *Cygnnet* back where she came from.”

“Alone!”

“I’d have Maclay. He says very little, but it’s always to the point!”

“I don’t like to think of it.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” He said this with a cheerfulness that sounded a bit forced. “Now I’m going to ask you a strange question. Don’t answer if you’d sooner not.”

“I can’t think of any question I wouldn’t answer—now.”

“This is about your father; if he were alive—of course, I speak of it as a supposition—would you want him to know that you were well—and perfectly safe?”

“From——?”

“From Jackson,” he went on steadily, watching the swiftly changing colour in her cheeks. “I know what happened last night, also that he hoped to marry your stepmother, and you’re safe now, either here or ashore.”

She sent him a look of extraordinary intelligence. He had told her nothing, but she understood, and he felt an enormous relief. It was like having one’s conscience liberated from chains. She asked no questions of her own, and her silence was eloquent of her faith.

“If my father were alive, and could know just that, I would be very thankful.”

Then, to bridge a difficult moment, she waved a hand to Eva, and went quickly toward the others.

Lock checked his bearings with Lobos Island, got a glimpse of the lighthouse

that guards the northerly tip of Teneriffe, and relapsed into serious thought. For once in his life he had acted on impulse, and now stood committed. To what? Perhaps being left in Puerto de la Luz with Hope, and watching *Cygnets* steam away with Maclay for skipper and a new first officer. He hardly thought it would come to that, but the future was now wide open. And, certainly, he would cable to the man in Soho.

The flattened cone of the Peak dominated the southern sky, and, speeding past Fuerte Ventura, there formed a little gathering in the yacht's bows gazing at these islands, fragments, perhaps, of the great land bridge that in the days of the megatherium had linked the coasts of Africa with Brazil. Here, under their keel, was the lost city of Atlantis. Suspended miles high above the Peak hung a prodigious cloud of vapour, and one could mark the level timberline beyond which were only rock and snow and hidden fire. Santa Cruz was clearly visible, but not till *Cygnets* had rounded the northern point of Grand Canary did the white walls of Las Palmas come in sight, crowded to the curving shore, and dominated beneficently by the twin towers of Santa Ana.

Lock glanced at the group in the bows. Hope was talking to Mrs. Tarrant. Bluff, he concluded, and immediately remembered something she seemed to have forgotten. Her luggage. She could not have packed, possibly, without it being known. Evidently she was sending for it. Much wiser. He was getting absurdly wrought up over this affair, admired her courage, wished that she had less of it, and perceived that she was doing her best to prevent him from being involved. But *Cygnets* would be a different ship without her.

He set the bridge telegraph for reduced speed. Came the answering tinkle, and *Cygnets*' bow wave died to the merest whisper of troubled water. Helm went over, and she moved toward the mole, reversing half a mile off. Signals fluttered from her forepeak, and a few moments later a launch darted out, made fast, and vomited a Spanish pilot to whom Lock, surrounded by his amused party, made it finally clear that what he wanted was fuel oil, and at once. Then on, with the Spaniard gesticulating like a human semaphore, through a maze of tramp steamers, dhows from the African coast, fishing-boats and a collection of local yachts, till *Cygnets* nosed gingerly up to the quay and was made fast.

Lock, leaving the bridge, apparently to inspect a fender lashing, but really to find Hope, discovered her standing amidships.

"Now!" he said quickly. "We're all off together to see the sights while Maclay looks after the oil. I'll steer you past the Consul's office, and then—well—the rest is up to you. Good luck—and—and——"

“And what, Mr. Lock?”

“Oh, nothing, but I hate to see you go.”

“Well,” she said with an odd little smile, “I’ve changed my mind: I’m not going.”

On the mole of Puerto de la Luz, Mrs. Tarrant looked about with growing interest.

“I thought it would be old and musty, but it’s quite modern. What do we do now, and how long have we got?”

“Not less than two hours,” said Lock, “and possibly more. You never can tell in Spanish territory.”

“Well, since we’ll never be here again, why not make the most of it? I’d like a drive.” She waved a hand toward the high-ridged mountains further west, a wild country of jagged peaks, tortuous ravines and purple shadows. “Why not up there; it looks perfectly fascinating? Can’t you come, too?”

“Very sorry, but my job is fuel oil.” He stole an oblique glance at Hope, but she seemed to have forgotten him.

“Why don’t you three go?” put in Jackson, “but don’t try to inspect the whole island. Here—you!” He beckoned to the inevitable interpreter, already hanging at his elbow, signalled to a car, tucked the ladies into it, and gave a satisfied nod. “I’m going to loaf about here: I like harbours better than scenery.”

Mrs. Tarrant was quite content. The car shot down the length of the mole, and they saw it dwindle along the isthmus that connects the Puerto with Las Palmas. Jackson shrugged his shoulders, and gave a short laugh.

“Enthusiasm’s a great thing, isn’t it? Sometimes I wish I had more, but I guess I’ve seen too much to be curious. Look here, I want to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“The minute those tanks are full, we’re for Namaqualand.”

“So I understood.”

“And you say there’s no harbour along there?”

“Not to my knowledge. The Orange River has its outlet, but that’s a long way south of Luderitz, which is the only decent shelter on the coast. There’s a bar across the mouth of the Orange, and we can’t get in.”

“H’m, I’m for north of the Orange. Well, we’ll take care of that when we get there. Now, why not let Maclay look after this fuelling business, and we’ll have a drink?”

Lock nodded, and they made their way to a restaurant facing the harbour. Jackson pulled chairs beside a table, ordered the wine of the country, a sort of dry sherry, and sat twisting his glass, seemingly content with the company of another man

after an excess of feminine society. He stared at the crowded shipping, watched the deliberate movements of stevedores, to whom a cigarette was the necessary preliminary to any activity, then sent Lock a sidelong yet searching glance.

“Out-of-the-way corner, isn’t it? A fellow could be pretty well lost here if he wanted to, eh? I’m thinking of Tom Tarrant.”

“Anything occurred to suggest him?” asked Lock cautiously.

“Nothing special, but he sticks in my mind. It’s funny, but I wouldn’t be surprised to see him coming along here this very minute with that slow, catfooted walk of his and a face like a sunburned moon. Have some more of this stuff, it tastes better than it looks.”

“Right. You were talking about Tarrant.”

“I suppose I could go on for the next hour, but what’s the use? When I think of him from one angle, and look at Mrs. T., I wonder how she came to marry him. From another, it seems reasonable enough. I guess they just mesmerized each other. Can’t tell with a woman, can you? But now—well—I’d give a lot to know whether he’s actually drowned or not.”

He said this looking past Lock at a German freighter, whose main boom, swinging derrick-wise, was dropping hogsheads of Canary wine into her yawning hold, but it was a look that missed nothing on the way. His expression was perfectly blank, and his manner not that of one expecting an answer.

“That day at Uplands,” he continued presently in a measured voice. “I reckon I was a bit abrupt when I heard the news. Last time I’d been with Tom there wasn’t any water—not a darned drop—and to learn that he’d died of too much of it gave me a jolt. Knowing him as I did, I couldn’t believe it—at first. And Hope cleared out, too! Something fishy there, it struck me, and too much of a clean sweep to be entirely natural. But when I heard that that was a year ago, I sort of felt that even if Tom did have something up his sleeve, he couldn’t have laid low so long without a break of some kind. Too darned reckless and—yes—inquisitive.”

“Rather difficult for you under the circumstances.”

“You’ve said it. The circumstances! Not exactly ordinary, are they? So difficult that I’d give a lot to know more. Of course—and I’m telling you no particular secret—I’m interested in Mrs. T. She’s sure Tom’s dead, and I’m not. That’s how it stands.”

“Not the sort of thing in which an outsider can be of much help,” ventured Lock, with a faint perception of what was coming next.

“N—no, not an outsider—I wouldn’t class you that way—not by a long chalk. You’ll remember I told you Hope was afraid—afraid, mind you—that her father was

alive. Now what put that into her head? She's a friend of yours, I'd gamble she hasn't talked about much except Tom, and well, you'll assume the rest. You know my cards—where I'm going, and why—and what I look forward to later. And the only fly in my ointment is old Tom, half living, half dead. Damn it, Lock, I'd give five hundred pounds this minute to know the truth of it."

He came out with this in a sort of bluster that sounded perfectly genuine; but, this time, his method of approach had been too circuitous. He wanted his partner's wife just as he wanted diamonds, adventure, anything that brought a thrill with it. As before, everything he said was fact, but he had arranged the sequence of his facts in such a way that the effect was void of truth. Everything he said would have fitted equally well had he been an eye-witness of Lock's meeting with the man in Soho. Again, were he ignorant of that meeting, the argument would have been just as plausible. The truth, in short, as used by Jackson, was dangerous. The young man, smiling inwardly at a second offer for confidential information, saw this distinctly. Money seemed plentiful in these circles, and five hundred pounds appeared to be the customary figure. The whole affair made him feel utterly cynical, and stiffened his decision to make sure at any rate of Tarrant's proposal. A year's salary at the price of a cable, and no disloyalty anywhere. Then, meeting Jackson's eye of bland inquiry, he wondered for the thousandth time how much the man actually knew.

"If Tarrant were not dead, where would you stand?" he asked, enjoying his own temerity.

"Stand! Why exactly where I do now. It's just a matter of personal comfort to me and the lady. We've hit it off—you'll have seen that yourself. At the same time there's an ugly word—I don't make any bones about it—called bigamy. Now she mustn't commit bigamy. Not that it makes any practical difference to the outcome, mind you. That's settled."

"I don't quite follow you there."

"She'd divorce him on the grounds of desertion. That's all fixed. You can't run away from your wife, make a bluff with an empty boat on the beach, let her put it in the papers that you're drowned, then turn up a year later and suggest she's made a mistake. On the other hand, you just picture us getting married, the parson asking 'who giveth this woman away?' and old Tom stepping out and saying 'lay off there—she's mine.' So that's the one real difference it makes to us whether he's alive or dead—just a matter of convenience and—er—comfort."

Lock marvelled at the man. He had, apparently, no soul, or, if possessed of such a thing, was quite ready to hang it on a line for general inspection. There was a sort of straightforward unashamedness about his duplicity that made it unhealthily

attractive. It had points, character, boldness, imagination and a devilish suavity. Evidently he cared not a jot what anyone else might think of him. Having acquired his partner's wife and his partner's treasure, he proposed to leave Tarrant high and dry in his half-world of obscurity.

"But if you did marry, and Tarrant turned up afterwards—what then?"

Mrs. Tarrant's new lover smiled contentedly. "Ah! that's just what he wouldn't do."

"You seem very sure of it."

"That's right—I am. Reasons? Well, they're good ones, but you'll have to take my word for 'em."

Lock shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's your affair. I'm obliged for your confidence, but there's nothing I can tell you."

Jackson's features stiffened a shade. His fingers contracted, snapping the stem of his wineglass. Its bowl, rolling to the tile floor, tinkled into fragments. He did not stir, but sat looking at the stem, and gave a little sigh, half regretful, half reflective. Lock, equally motionless, recalled a similar scene—a heavier man, a heavier glass, stronger fingers, larger fragments, another native wine on another table. The only difference was the scale of the thing, and this time there was no blood. Perhaps Jackson had less blood. He looked it. These two, partners in the past, and hating each other now, seemed fated to express themselves in the same way. How different they were, yet how startlingly alike! Then Jackson's voice came in again, dry as usual and without a shade of feeling.

"No, I don't suppose you could know anything, but I felt like getting the thing off my chest. If you happen to be in a position to drop a hint at any time, you know what it's worth. No harm done, I take it?"

"None whatever. I—well—understand better, that's all." This was true enough, and the understanding was so illuminating that it cast a clear light on what must be done at once. He took out his pouch, pinched its flatness and got up. "There's a shop near here I struck last time where you can get navy cut tobacco. I'll be back in a minute—will you wait?"

Jackson, nodding, called for another glass, and the young man lounged out, his gait very casual. From the quay he dived through a maze of white-walled, low-roofed buildings, and presently found the Puerto post office. Fuming at the deliberation of the clerk, he finally made his desire clear, and was given a yellow pad on which he printed his message in block type, hard and solid.

THOMAS GODFREY, 127, DEAN STREET, LONDON. HOPE

SAFE AND WELL.

He did not sign it, thrust the money over the counter, regained the street, and had gone but thirty yards toward the quay when he saw Jackson's back. The man was peering into a shop window, exactly as he had peered two thousand miles away, and again came the reflection of his narrow face in polished glass.

Lock smothered an exclamation, halted, retraced his steps and hastened round the first corner he reached. He was furious, and dared not look back. For the next few moments he pushed through lanes, streets and squares with no apparent pursuit till, regaining the restaurant, he seated himself as before, and ordered another drink. Presently Jackson lounged in with a bored expression.

"Not much of a hole, is it? Get what you wanted?"

Lock displayed a pound of navy cut. "Yes, but I had to hunt for it."

"You're lucky. I can smoke anything, but not through a pipe. Do you suppose we could get any weather forecast in these parts? I'm thinking of the run across the Gulf of Guinea."

"We ought, in some shipping office, or I can get them by wireless on board; that is,"—here Lock grinned widely—"if you don't object."

"Forget it! There's a wireless station here?"

"Yes, I saw the masts as we came in."

"And a cable?"

Lock, more or less ready for this, nodded easily. He was getting accustomed to the man's tactics, which, when one began to understand him, were not difficult to read.

"Well, I guess there's no cable where Tom's gone to. The ladies will be back soon, so suppose we have a turn, then make for the yacht."

He continued to talk in a semi-quizzical vein, pointing out things that struck him, leading the way insensibly till he reached the post-office building. Here he paused.

"Don't happen to collect stamps, do you?"

"No, I gave that up at Dartmouth."

"I think I'll get some for Hope; she used to like 'em. Come along."

They entered. At the desk was the man who had taken the cablegram. He glanced up with a slight nod. Jackson, appearing to have noticed nothing, bought Canary Island stamps, largely, lavishly, while the yellow pad lay a few inches from his hand. The collection complete, he tore a sheet from the pad, folded up his purchases, and strolled out.

"I'm glad I thought of that. The last thing I bought for Hope was a ring, and she

wouldn't have it. Got it now somewhere.”

CHAPTER VIII

JACKSON SPEAKS OUT

THE sun was low behind the Peak of Teneriffe when *Cygnets* turned her sharp prow toward the open spaces of the South Atlantic. The white walls of Las Palmas lay for a little while blurred on the horizon, and when they dipped out of sight, leaving only a vast congregation of phantom summits populating the western skies, it seemed to Mrs. Tarrant's company that to-day for the first time they were really venturing into the unknown. Africa was shrouded in the east, a land of mystery, invisible but ever present; southward waited the Cape Verde Islands, Ascension and St. Helena. And after that, who could say?

This final setting forth had on each of the yacht's passengers its individual effect. Mrs. Tarrant felt breathless, admitting that till now she had not fully visioned the scope of her venture. A month ago on the lawn at Uplands, wondering what to do with sudden wealth—to-day on the high seas and committed to an attempt which, when she thought of it soberly, looked fantastic, and vitally interested in a man of whose previous existence she was unaware. It was the suddenness of this affair, its unlikeness to anything in her past, and Jackson's unlikeness to any man she had ever known that had captured her. She confessed, sometimes, to feeling a little frightened. Jackson had made no attempt to rouse her physically, but she perceived in him the ability to do so when he chose, and knew that she would respond. The fact that he had not yet chosen made him, oddly, the more attractive. She did not trouble to analyse him, her disposition being such that once she decided what she wanted, the time had passed for analysis.

But now, in this empty ocean, and perhaps because Jackson showed no signs of becoming more of a lover, she had moments in which she found herself comparing this new man with the last, and it was a little surprising that Tarrant should rank as well as he did. She had been poor when she married him, but he cared nothing for that. He was generous in his own clumsy way. He had settled Uplands on her for life. He had had moods, but so had she. He used to be rather patient, she thought, with Eva. He adored Hope. He had fits of silence, but most men had, and from these he would emerge with a burst and sweep her off her feet with his passion. Later, the change. His silences lengthened into dark moods that lasted for days. His bluff confidence seemed to evaporate. He grew furtive and secretive, removing himself

from the small human things of ordinary life, cultivating, it appeared, some secret and unhappy existence of his own. She would find him looking at Hope with an extraordinary and almost agonized expression, the prey of suffering, a huge, helpless, groping man from whom could be drawn no hint of what he concealed. Then Hope's flight and, soon afterwards, his own obliteration.

She believed him dead, and was quite honest in this. He had had some reason for wanting to die, and it wasn't her fault. But now while the future invited her adventurous spirit, and Jackson with physical appeal and satirical confidence intrigued her more and more, the figure of Tarrant signalled that he did not want to be forgotten, and there were things he hadn't told her about himself which, if he could only tell her now, would give her memories of him a kindlier colour. It was into such reflections as these that Eva, hot with anger, projected herself on the second evening after leaving Las Palmas.

"What do you think! I've just heard that your friend Mr. Jackson has dropped my wireless set overboard!"

"Yes, I know."

"You know!"

Mrs. Tarrant rather dreaded the next few moments.

"Listen!" she said patiently. "He told me about it, and said he'd done it on impulse, and he's sorry now, but——"

"Impulse! Why should impulses destroy my property? It's insulting!"

"He didn't mean it to be. It has to do with—well—the whole venture. You know what came in the other night from London?"

"Of course—we all do."

"That's just it, and he's perfectly ready to replace the set as soon as we reach Capetown."

"Thanks—I wouldn't take it! I wanted to dance, now, and I'm going to tell him exactly what I think." She had reached the door when Mrs. Tarrant stopped her.

"Eva!"

"Well?"

"Sit down a minute; you don't understand yet."

"I understand that you've been mesmerized," said the girl bitterly. "What is it now?"

"That's what I want to explain. It concerns Mr. Lock."

"It was Mr. Lock who told me, and he thinks the man is mad."

"Perhaps he does, but he's wrong. It's about Namaqualand. You'll remember it was broadcast that certain details were to be announced later?"

“Yes.”

“Mr. Jackson doesn’t want——”

“You might as well call him Bob—you do to him.”

Mrs. Tarrant smiled faintly. “He doesn’t want those details on account of Mr. Lock, who is to go with him.”

“But aren’t details exactly what he would want?”

“No. As he explained to me, there might be something that would make Mr. Lock unwilling; and he won’t trust anyone else.”

“Is that all?” asked the girl curiously.

“Those diamonds were found before the area was closed, and, he says, outside its boundaries altogether. At the same time, if anything is broadcast, and we get it, Mr. Lock might feel that he is doing something that as captain and naval man and all that, he shouldn’t do. It’s a sort of tribute to his conscience, if you like to put it that way. And Bob is sorry, and sees that he might have arranged it some other way, and that’s the explanation.”

“He’s afraid of Mr. Lock’s conscience!”

Mrs. Tarrant shrugged her shoulders. “Something like that.”

“But not of his own!”

“What do you mean, Eva?”

“Oh, a lot of things that have come into my head lately; and I think diamonds have gone to yours.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Just as you like. But, Mother——”

“I happen to be feeling charitable to-night. Go on!”

“If by any chance he should find them, half are yours. Is that understood?”

Mrs. Tarrant stared at her, frankly astonished.

“I never dreamed of such a thing.”

“I thought you were a better business woman, and it’s perfectly clear to me that when the break took place between this man and my stepfather, it was over these diamonds. Partners go equal shares, don’t they?”

“I—I suppose so.”

“Then it’s equally obvious that your husband didn’t get his. You’d have known it if he had. Your next intended hasn’t touched on that, has he?”

“He’s told me that I can have whatever of them I want—which is reasonable enough,” protested Mrs. Tarrant. “I don’t ask any more from the man I’m going to marry.”

“Yes—but——” the girl paused with a dubious shake of her dark head, “you’re

going to it blind, Mother—you always have. And I don't altogether like the idea of Mr. Lock joining in."

"But why?"

"You're interested in one direction, and I in another. I don't see why he should risk his life for other people's property, and perhaps die of thirst."

"I want him to go, Eva."

"Equally, I don't fancy it at all, and I'll tell him so, and I haven't forgiven Mr. Jackson yet."

Mrs. Tarrant was confused. New and disturbing ideas had complicated this affair, and Jackson had carefully avoided the subject of Tarrant's rights. And at this the figure of Tarrant presented itself again, assuring her that he, too, had toiled and striven and looked death in the face for the sake of these small shining stones about which his partner talked so lavishly. She pondered over this. Mesmerized—yes—perhaps. She didn't mind that. Also it had been her own suggestion about Lock because it made her feel safer, which meant that, subconsciously, she could not have been quite certain of Jackson, while the other man, whose formality and stiffness often amused her, could be counted on. It was queer that all this should arise because a twenty-guinea wireless set had been dropped into the Atlantic. Finally she felt thankful that she understood her daughter so well.

"I wouldn't talk about it to either of them," she said smoothly. "Later on I'll help you in every way, but first it's your turn. Two men are much safer than one in that country. Mr. Lock hasn't been told in so many words that he's going, but he's certainly guessed it, and knows there's something in it for him. And," she added in a burst of generosity, "you can have your stepfather's share of whatever they find, though I don't think you realize what that means."

"How can you promise what hasn't been promised you?"

"I think you can trust me for that part of it."

"What a night, and isn't it breathless?" This from Eva as she settled down beside Hope.

The night did seem breathless. Instead of sky there was an inverted black pit, roofless, unbounded. Scattered through it the stars looked large, soft and milky, hanging so closely above the ocean plain that they might have been arranged for theatrical effect. No moon was visible, so that the eye gradually became aware of an effusion and interchange of light between these myriads of heavenly bodies crowded thickly into space, their population leaving, it seemed, no room for a moon. From beneath *Cygnets*' stern rushed a bubbling contorted pathway stretching across the slow lift of Atlantic swells, a phantom trail that gleamed with a light that was all its

own, while below the surface slid whole areas and masses of phosphorescence, rolling, expanding, writhing into constantly changing forms and luminous with ghostly pallor.

On the eastern horizon brandished a gigantic beam from Cape Verde. This, sweeping the quiet sea, cast over the yacht a cold, periodic glow so that her spars reflected it with a fleeting sheen, her shrouds sprang into life like taut spiderwebbing, and the canvas housing of her bridge flung back for a fraction of a second the transient illumination. It lit the faces of the two girls as though the migrant ray were mischievously revealing them to each other, then flung itself over leagues of ocean to vanish and return again in unearthly rebirth. There was no sound but a choking gurgle as the split wave swam together again under *Cygnets*' polished stern.

"I'm glad you brought me out," went on Eva after a long silence that seemed not to be of their own making. "I wanted a talk. Things have been rather mixed lately."

"Have they?" smiled Hope.

"Yes, for me. Now I feel that this is the sort of night for confidences. Do you mind if I talk out?"

"Why not?"

"Well, to begin with, I've been thinking a lot about you."

"Oh!"

"My better nature has been reminding me that I wasn't awfully nice to you at Uplands."

"But, Eva, that was more than a year ago, and I've forgotten all about it. Perhaps I wasn't very nice either."

Eva gave her a little pat. "Just like you, but the fault was mine, and I certainly haven't forgotten. Perhaps it's the phosphorus at work!"

"Do you think it's wise to go back to what's done with?" asked Hope thoughtfully. "I was worried at Uplands."

"Hope, you're a dear! I suppose," here she gave a nervous laugh, "I'm feeling the reaction."

"Oh! from what?"

"Don't you know?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"I'm frightfully happy, Hope. Can't you see it for yourself?"

"Engaged?" said the other girl in a low voice.

"Not yet, but I feel we're going to be."

Hope was quite motionless. Six bells came from the bridge, each stroke sounding more definite and final. She would always remember those bells.

"I'm sure you'll be very happy," she said.

Eva felt for her arm, giving it an impulsive squeeze.

"That's dear of you, but it isn't finally decided yet. Mother knows all there is to know, and approves. She's always wanted me to marry someone she thinks steadier than myself, and this has all happened so suddenly that there's been no time to think. Didn't you notice anything—really?"

Hope shook her head and managed a smile. "I suppose I wasn't dreaming of anything of the sort."

"You never were sentimental in that way, were you? What attracted me first was that Norman seemed different from any man I'd ever met. I laughed at him and called him Commander Glacier, but that's all changed now. I think he was just lonely and didn't realize it. And, Hope, he's never been in love before. Think of it!"

"How do you know?"

"It's quite true—he told me so—and said he's always felt awkward with women." She gave a contented little laugh. "He's a great, big, strong ignoramus about that sort of thing. With me it's different too. I've had plenty of slight attacks but nothing like this. Hope, do say something!"

"Is it a secret?"

"Yes, absolutely. Norman would be frightfully embarrassed if he thought you knew. He was engaged as captain, and—well—you can imagine how a man of his sort must look at it. He's very quiet, and awfully sensitive, and being in mother's employment makes it difficult. But I liked him the minute I saw him."

"When did it happen?" asked Hope, staring blankly out to sea.

"That evening before we reached Las Palmas. We'd been dancing; of course we'd danced before at Algeciras—you remember the night you wouldn't—and after that we had a long talk and I understood him as I couldn't have done otherwise."

"Things happen quickly at sea, don't they?"

"Don't they! And during that rough weather before we reached Gib. when I couldn't come on deck, I kept thinking of you."

"Rather rough for love-making, wasn't it?"

"I hoped it was: really I did."

"You weren't in any danger from me. Is anything else settled?"

"Not yet; but there's another interesting probability." Eva paused for a moment with a faint doubt as to her own judgment in talking thus, then decided that *Cygnets* was too small for the successful keeping of secrets of the sort. "Mother and Mr. Jackson!" she announced.

"What!"

“Perhaps I’ve no right to tell you, but to-night I’ve simply got to talk. Even more of a surprise, isn’t it?”

“But, Eva, she can’t!”

“Why not?”

“You know as well as I do.”

“Oh—that! You mean it’s too soon after——”

“Not at all; but she isn’t sure that my father is dead. Eva, she mustn’t—she can’t!”

“I thought you’d say so, but one must think of her. After all, why should she go on year after year like this? It’s not fair to her.”

“She can know nothing—for certain.”

“It’s rather difficult to express,” answered Eva a shade stiffly, “but she’s convinced that your father is dead.”

“I’m not.”

“Is there any definite reason?”

“I—I can’t say any more than that. Of course, it’s very difficult for her, but——”

“Well, it’s quite natural you should feel as you do, and I suppose I’d say the same if it were my father; but mother’s too young to have the rest of her life spoiled. She doesn’t know that I’m telling you this, and probably wouldn’t like it at all, but I can see it coming, and it seems much fairer that you should know.”

“I can’t imagine it,” said Hope dully.

“My dear, very soon it won’t need any imagination. Do you argue that Mr. Tarrant is really a part of our lives now?”

Tarrant’s daughter could find no words to answer. This thing, looked at impersonally, as she tried to look, had its points. But the balance, the degree of reasonableness it possessed, was upset by the imminent figure of Jackson. That was where she herself felt helpless. Had it been any other man, the affair would have a different aspect. And, strangely enough, the prospect of this double marriage gave her a sensation of loneliness. Julia Tarrant and Eva were not her own people, but, at any rate, they stood nearer than anyone else. Should they marry, she knew in her soul that she would never meet them afterwards. She objected too strongly to Jackson. And Lock she could not bear to see.

That was her admission about Lock. He had given her so little cause for feeling anything of the sort that the news, if it had not wounded, would have amused her. She had had her own dream, but could not picture it coming true. Too much like a fairy tale! But still less did she anticipate what she had now been told. Since the impulsively cancelled escape from Las Palmas, her thoughts had turned to him much

more often than she realized. That escape had been cancelled, because—well—he would never know now. What fools some girls were about men! she reflected desperately, and how much wiser was Eva—who had the results to show! She gazed at Eva, and a wave of recklessness engulfed her.

“No,” she said without a trace of feeling. “I suppose you’re right, and the sensible people are those who look after themselves.”

This, from Hope, gave the other girl a glow of satisfaction.

“You’re perfectly right; and you’ll find your man before long.”

“I’ll have to get ashore first. When do you think all this is going to be settled, because it rather affects the rest of the cruise. In any case, I’d better go back by a liner from Capetown.”

This suited Eva exactly. “Isn’t it queer, but mother was talking about that very point! I’m assuming, of course, that we’re both married in Capetown.”

“So soon!”

“Is there any particular object in waiting?”

Put in this way, there was no object, and Hope said so.

“You’re taking it like a trump!” exclaimed Eva, vastly pleased. “Now I wonder why I didn’t understand you better long ago?”

“Perhaps there isn’t much to understand. What was your mother talking about for later on?”

“She made a sporting suggestion that she and I should toss for the use of the yacht, and whichever wins will have the choice of going back on her or a liner.”

“On a liner—with me?”

“That’s what she thought of. If I win I’ll take the yacht, and persuade Norman to go up the other side of Africa, stopping at Zanzibar, and on through the Mediterranean, which last part of it was what we intended before Mr. Jackson turned up. Wouldn’t that be a marvellous honeymoon! Just think of it!”

Hope did think, but it was almost too much, and she watched *Cygnets* gleaming wake for some moments without speaking. Such things, naturally, were not for her. Also she had been a little fool in persuading herself that with Lock she shared something in common, and they understood each other in a way that didn’t need explanation. On that account she had trusted him, talked about her father, said that she feared he might be alive, talked about Jackson who was to marry this girl’s mother, said that she hated him, and the one thing he shrank from was bigamy. At thought of all this her cheeks burned.

“It’s so—so unexpected that I don’t know what to answer,” she said vaguely. “I feel in everyone’s way.”

“But you mustn’t. We don’t feel that. And, you know,” she went on in an amused tone, “it shows how far anything of the sort has been from your own mind. I was rather afraid you were falling in love with Norman yourself.”

“What an imagination you’ve got,” parried the girl.

“If you go on looking as you do now, I wouldn’t trust either of you. But, really, it’s all rather exciting, especially when one adds this diamond business. Mother wants Norman to go with Mr. Jackson—I mean, into the desert. It’s supposed to be very dangerous for a man who’s alone.”

Hope was finding it difficult to think clearly. Jackson proposed to retrieve a treasure of which she herself was legally half-owner, though he had made no reference to that fact. With him was to go the man whom she believed she could have loved. Involuntarily she shook her head at this, and tried to be practical. The man was on the other side now.

“Mr. Jackson was talking about it last night,” went on Eva, “and says it’s the roughest country in the world. Life is—well—it seems to be very cheap. Men go about with fortunes in their pockets, all armed, a good many of them criminals, and there’s very little law in evidence. They’re all diamond mad—and no questions asked. Mother wanted to go ashore herself and have a look at the place, but he wouldn’t hear of it. He’s working out his plans on the map now.”

“Is Mr. Lock being paid for going?” asked Hope bluntly.

“He just knows that he’s to have the chance of a good thing. No details yet, but, naturally, he must have guessed. He’s exactly the man, and mother’s greatly relieved about it.”

“Eva, tell me something!”

“Yes?”

“Did your mother know that this was intended when she left England—that this was to be the real cruise?”

“Yes, we both knew,” said the girl candidly. “I can’t see any reason why you shouldn’t be told—now. She and Mr. Jackson seemed to hit it off from the very day he came to Uplands. Then she asked him to stay the week-end. They talked for hours, and of course the first thing he heard was about this yacht. He was struck with that, went to Southampton to have a look at her, and came back with his great idea. It appealed to mother’s hunger for adventure—she’s always had it—and she agreed. But there was one queer thing about it.”

“Oh!” It seemed to Hope that there was more than one.

“He insisted that Norman should not know where we were going till we got well on the way. For some reason I couldn’t make out, he didn’t seem to like him. He

was—well—suspicious, and didn't think that he was quite to be trusted. But that's all over now."

"And then?"

"Oh, a lot of things happened. Mr. Jackson is clever, and one has to admit that he's interesting, but just who or what he is, except your late father's partner, why, nobody knows. I suggested that to mother, but she's satisfied, and it's her affair. Rather different from the other one, isn't it? No questions to be asked there."

"I suppose not."

"You're not frightfully enthusiastic, my dear."

"I didn't mean anything of that sort. I'm sure you'll be awfully happy."

It sounded mechanical. Hope's brain was whirling, and she longed to get to her cabin and be alone. The night had lost its beauty because of a deadening conviction that Lock, at Las Palmas, had only been too ready to get rid of her. She was forced to admit that this violated everything that he looked and seemed to be, but she could not escape it. Then she felt resentful that he had entered her life at all, and against these others for having re-entered it. Dinant had been lonely at times, but she loved her books, and long walks, and the placid reaches of the Rance, and the gnarled apple orchards and kindly Breton folk who lived so near the soil. There she was beginning to detach herself from scenes and memories she was anxious to forget. Why had she ever come away?

"Does a mere navigator intrude?"

It was Lock's voice. He had come aft without a sound, and stood between them, very tall in the starlight, his peaked cap on the back of his head, a smile on his deeply-tanned face.

"Rather bright to-night, isn't it?" He pointed to the shimmering wake. "Just hereabouts there's always a lot of it—little animalculæ—you can see 'em under a microscope."

"It's lovely! Like a fairy ocean. Do sit down," said Eva.

He lay on the deck, his lean cheek cushioned against a big, strong hand. "It's my unpleasant duty to tell you something. The glass is going down. Notice any difference in the last half-hour?"

"It seems closer, with not so much air."

"That's it; probably nothing serious, but I hardly think you'll be sitting here this time to-morrow."

"What cheerful news!"

"Well, it's authentic. Miss Tarrant won't mind."

He sent her a smile, but no smile came back, so that he was puzzled and not a

little hurt. She looked, he thought, oddly distant. Since leaving Las Palmas they had had several talks, they were beginning to know each other better, and he wanted to keep on knowing her. Unlike Eva, she gave him the impression of having much in reserve, and he liked that. But there had been offered no explanation of why she changed her mind at Las Palmas.

As for Eva, there had been no repetition of that passionate moment. It was still vivid—he believed it always would be—but in his secret soul he did not want it to recur. He had knocked and been knocked about the world for the past fourteen years, but the mind of the man was still oddly virginal. He was only relatively aware of his emotional self, and it was in this respect that he had been struck by the difference between the two girls: Eva with her flame and ardour, Hope with the kind of modesty he welcomed, thus setting on herself, as he thought, a much higher value. But, he admitted, he knew nothing about women.

“No, I don’t mind head winds.” It was Hope’s voice, cool and laconical. Her face was turned, and he could study her expression. Then he noted that Eva was watching him with a touch of anxiety.

“*Cygnets*’ good for anything we’re likely to meet,” he went on. “She’ll jump about, of course, but that’s all.”

“In which case you won’t see me till it’s over,” said Eva promptly. “Hope, you’ll have to play nurse again.”

The other girl nodded, and there fell over the three an involuntary silence. The tension was inescapable, and Lock wondered what had happened. He glanced covertly at the two, wanting some excuse to get back to the bridge, his trained senses increasingly aware of a coming change in the weather. Like the present atmosphere, wordlessly awkward, it gave him a sort of warning, though not of anything he could predict with certainty.

By invisible degrees, the larger stars were becoming misty, losing shape and hanging, slightly blurred, like fortuitous and shaded lamps dispersed through the opaqueness of night. Beyond and behind them spread a dwindling luminosity from more distant bodies, outliers of the major galaxy. No breath of wind was stirring, and the yacht appeared to move on through a prodigious vacuum, the vapour from her funnel streaming back at the exact centre and speed of the vessel itself.

The sea, too, had begun to change. It lay even flatter, more glossily oily than before, the ridges of the long parallel swells ironed out, till there survived no pattern or form but only an irregularly surfaced plane. Marching across this there appeared at times small flattened mounds, irrupting from surrounding space, like scouts from some not far distant disturbance. These passed occasionally beneath *Cygnets*, giving

her a casual heave, then allowing her to settle again to her own swift onward rush.

"I feel a million miles from anywhere, and too insignificant for words," said Eva suddenly. "Can't we do something—make a four at bridge—anything?"

As though in answer to this, a flood of light streamed from the saloon door, and Jackson came out. He stood, smiling to himself, watching the three, then took a chair beside Lock, fondled his cigar-case and discarded it for a cigarette.

"Well, Skipper, how's the night?"

"So far all right, but prospects are doubtful."

Jackson narrowed his eyes, staring at the sea.

"Is the weather going back on us?"

"It will probably be a bit uncomfortable."

"Well, I guess we can stand it now."

Lock, with the first touch of uncertainty he had yet felt, did not want to discuss the matter before the others. For the last hour or two something in the changing character of the sea had been reminding him of his responsibility on this cruise, and that it was a very different matter from handling a thirty-knot destroyer manned by a tough-skinned, hard-fisted crew to whom the deeps and all that dwelt therein were a very old story. One could not drive this dainty and miniature ship into the teeth of a gale. The swinging beam from Cape Verde had ceased to reach him and, he reflected, this was the last shore light to be seen till they made the landfall of Ascension, fifteen hundred miles to the south and a thousand from the African coast. Queer that to-night the ocean should seem so unaccountably large!

"Isn't mother coming out?" asked Eva.

Jackson shook his head. "I think she's gone to bed. Why so silent, Hope?"

"Something in the air, perhaps: I don't know."

"Lord, but it's close!" He loosened his collar with the crook of a lean forefinger, and nodded toward Lock. "I'll be glad of a run ashore—when we come to it. We'll talk about that later."

Lock jerked his head in the direction of the bridge. "If you have a few minutes to spare, I'd like to show you something. Will you come forward?"

The other man got up at once and followed. In the charthouse Lock shut the door, glanced at the glass, and unrolled a big chart.

"Look here," he said, "there's Ascension Island, where we're heading as arranged; and if this yacht were a thousand tons bigger I'd be a lot more contented."

"Well, she isn't. What of it?"

"I think, so does Maclay, that we're in for a spell of bad weather."

"Afraid of it?" asked Jackson sardonically.

"I suggest that you put that some other way," snapped Lock.

The other man laughed at him. "Sorry—carry on."

"Then why not run in behind the Bissagos Islands—there—off the Guinea coast—and follow south not too far out?"

"Ever been there before?" Jackson was frowning over the chart.

"No, but that doesn't matter."

"You mean, get in there and anchor till this thing clears up?"

"Or make for Dakar, in Senegal, which is on our quarter. Fine harbour and lots of room. It's a port of call for the French liners."

Jackson considered the matter, then ran his long finger down past the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast, past the mouth of the Niger, and on round the great curve of the Gulf of Guinea till it rested near Luderitz, just north of Capetown.

"That's where we're for—just about there."

"Well?"

"Remember I said that time was the essence of my contract?"

"Yes."

The finger started again at Cape Verde, slid this time direct to Ascension, on to St. Helena, where it angled off, pausing at the same spot as before.

"What's the difference in time between following the coast and making straight across?"

"Perhaps three days—it all depends on the weather. But I'm bound to tell you what I think we ought to do. After that the responsibility is yours."

"Ah—responsibility!" At this he gave a dry smile. "Commander, you're dead right on that point. Equally you're dead wrong on the other. Three days! Now, if this were the ordinary pleasure cruise, I'd say take your three days, and as many more as you like; follow any course you please and see Africa on the way. Sure—why not? Trouble is, it's not a pleasure cruise, as you know already. And three days—well—I've seen fortunes lost for the lack of three minutes." Here he paused, with a quizzical look that might have meant anything. "How long is the average run from Southampton to the Cape—I came on a slow boat?"

"In the fastest, say two weeks."

"Precisely! Now, we're not going to make Luderitz any short of that, are we?"

"No," said Lock, with dawning suspicion.

"And this yacht, I take it, is as sound as they make 'em?"

"I don't think there's anything sounder afloat."

"Then we push straight on—Ascension, St. Helena, Luderitz. And the faster we go the better I'll like it."

“I wasn’t thinking about the yacht, but my passengers.”

“Sure! I know you were. Anything else on your mind?”

Lock, with difficulty, repressed a smile. It was exactly as though Jackson had said, “Here—you know Tom Tarrant’s alive—and where he is. I know, too, and saw you there, so why not come out with it and put an end to this mutual bluff?” That was what Lock thought he saw in the other man’s expression, a sort of invitation that here and now they should join hands and decide what had best be done in connection with the supposedly dead.

But, as always, there remained the lurking, unanswered doubt. Did Jackson know? He had said many things, and made many half-veiled allusions. If his purpose had been to leave Lock in doubt, it had succeeded completely. He had talked a good deal, but actually disclosed nothing.

“No, there’s nothing else on my mind. *Cygnets*’ good for all she’s likely to meet, but, I warn you, she will be uncomfortable.”

Jackson gave a little nod. “Darned if I don’t admire you—for some things. You don’t reckon to be uncomfortable yourself?”

“No.”

“Though we’re tossed round like peas in a pillbox?”

“Something like that.”

“You do sort of remove yourself, don’t you? I couldn’t be impersonal like that if I tried for a month. All taken into account, I guess you’d better go diamond hunting with me.”

He had come out with it at last, and Lock could only admire his method. And it was an unconscious compliment from a man like this. But at the remembrance of Jackson’s last partner, the compliment dwindled.

“Sort of fetches in Tom Tarrant, doesn’t it?” continued the dry voice. “Well, Tom didn’t pan out just right, and we split. Later on, when I know you better, perhaps I’ll give you the details of that split, and on the very spot. You’d understand better. The main thing is that I’m going after what we left there.”

“More than a year ago?”

“You’re thinking I’m too optimistic, eh?”

“Doesn’t it sound that way?”

“Perhaps, from your angle. You’ll ask how I know it’s there now. Well, I just know. If it weren’t, why——”

He broke off with a little grimace, half amused, half reminiscent, and made a gesture as though inviting Lock to speak, then went on himself, his eyes very keen, talking in a toneless but arresting fashion out of the corner of his mouth.

"I reckon it's forty miles from shore, and maybe fifty north of the Orange. North-east from the mouth of the Orange should fetch it. The stones—no—I'll come to that later—anyway, thirty miles east of 'em again is what we call the blue country, where you find water, a little of it. Now, assuming that we get the stuff, you'll be asking what I want with a yacht on a coast like that. Is that right?"

"That's one of the things I'd ask."

"Right! And I'll answer the others before you ask 'em. Well, first of all, the yacht takes me—takes us—within forty miles of the spot, and you haven't any idea, not the faintest, of what that saves. Next—equally important—it gets us away.

"Now, I could sell those stones—for cash, mind you—ten minutes after I reached Bullington—I'll show you that on the map—but not for half their worth. You can't catch me doing that. What happens to 'em afterwards is quite a story, but 'twill keep. Your next question was going to be something like this: 'According to what we heard on the radio, that area is closed, and prospecting is against the law.' Am I right?"

"You are," said Lock stoutly, "and I don't see how you're going to get round it. Also I know what an I.D.B. is, and I'm not having any."

"My friend, you're so plumb full of ideals and character, I wonder it don't hurt."

The young man shouted with laughter. "Go on—many thanks. But I haven't too many to be interested now."

"Bully! And as to getting round this business, you tell me what areas are closed."

"Hanged if I know. How could I? But——" He stopped short, his eyes rather round with sudden comprehension. "You're a clever fellow. I'll admit that."

Jackson looked faintly pleased. "No, I'm not clever, but sometimes I get a hunch what to do, and do it right there and then. And that wireless set—well, she'll have another soon. So there isn't anything to get around, and I'm as innocent as any prospector has any right to be. Anything else disturbing you?"

Lock filled his pipe with deliberation and looked the other man very straight in the face.

"You say those diamonds have been lying there for more than a year?"

"I do. Maybe I ought to tell you that where they're cached is not in the belt proper. At least, it wasn't the belt then. We were on our way to the blue country, and ran out of water—and, I guess, friendship, too."

"All right, but is it usual to leave such things for a twelvemonth? It's a bit difficult to——"

"Swallow?" put in Jackson coolly. "Sounds like a fish story, eh?" He said this without the least trace of annoyance.

“Frankly—yes. You put yourself in my place.”

“My friend, I don’t need to, and your point is good. The plain truth is that I didn’t know I was leaving them.”

“What!”

“It’s the truth, however queer it sounds. I got hurt about that time—a bang on the head in a scrap—and hanged if I didn’t lose my memory. Some day I’m going to prove that to you. Well, it all went because I was looney, and for a year I worked for a Dutch farmer. He didn’t pay me, just fed me. Then things began to come back in a sort of mist. I could make out the figure of Tom, and believed he was mixed up with me in some diamond deal. I couldn’t remember where, or how, or where the stuff was, but knew if I could find Tom it would be all right. So when I got round again I started for England.”

“Well?”

“I reached England feeling better all the time, went to his place, and I guess you know the rest—except one thing. Talking to Mrs. T. about Tom seemed to wake up memories that had gone to sleep, and the whole thing came back. Funny what association will do, isn’t it? There I was, getting wiser and wiser every minute, talking to a woman I’d never seen before—Tom’s woman, and old Tom drowned. Can you beat it?”

Lock did not think it was beatable, but the amazing thing was that the story hung together. No flaw that he could find. There had stuck in his memory most of what Jackson had said at other times, and it all linked up with this. It was not humanly possible to relate a story such as his, and fit it so neatly to the coincident occurrences of the past unless it had a ponderable element of truth. There were too many pits into which the man would have fallen—unless he were content to be considered a liar.

“Remember what I told you about Hope?” he went on presently, “that I wanted to marry her, and Tom wouldn’t have it—well—there’s another thing you might as well know. I’ve switched. I’m going to marry Tom’s wife instead of his daughter. Better arrangement all round!”

It was extraordinary to listen to him thus opening his mind with apparently complete indifference to the impression he might convey. The tone was very even, entirely without colour. He showed no particular feeling, and might have been announcing his choice of one kind of car in preference to another. But Lock, though keenly aware of this, had already turned his thoughts elsewhere. Tarrant’s wife might safely be left to take care of herself, but not Tarrant’s diamonds, and was it possible that Jackson could not realize how completely he was putting himself into another man’s hands? Nor could he contemplate any such course as this, had he any

conception that Tarrant was still alive. And that seemed to answer one long disturbing question.

“I suppose I should offer the prospective bridegroom the——”

“Forget it—as yet. Time enough for congratulations then, and,” here he gave a slow smile, “I suppose I’ll be able to hand ’em right back to you. That’s what makes me comfortable about our little trip!”

“What do you mean?”

Jackson’s brows went up a little. “Mean! Well, just that old Tom’s family is getting married off in a bunch—if two make a bunch.”

Lock blinked at him, utterly confused.

“Are you referring to me?”

“Am I barking up the wrong tree?”

“Who gave you that impression?”

“Impression doesn’t exactly describe it. Sorry if I’m butting in where I’m not wanted, but I certainly gathered it was on the cards.”

“From Miss Hewson?” said Lock sharply.

“No—not Eva—certainly not. She’s never said a word about it, maybe because she doesn’t like me, and never did. But her mother—now—look here—don’t go off the hooks—I’m not exactly insulting you, am I? And don’t think it would be good politics to say a word to Mrs. T., either. She wouldn’t fancy it. If there’s any putting to rights to be done, let me do it for you later on.”

“But Mrs. Tarrant wouldn’t have mentioned it if——”

Jackson lifted a long hand. “You might as well cut that out. When you know more about women you won’t try and dig up reasons why they did this or that. Generally there aren’t any—that’s my experience. Mrs. T. likes you—she’d like you for a son-in-law—and she’d be certain to do the right thing. So I guess the wish was father to the thought. Anyway, it hasn’t gone any further, so why worry?”

Lock felt immensely uncomfortable. This had made him nervous—which was absurd, and vexed—which was useless. Then he decided to treat the matter lightly, so shook his head, and managed to look amused.

“I can’t imagine myself at the altar for a long while yet. In any case I haven’t got the money.”

“Sea’s rising a bit, isn’t it?” Jackson glanced at the brass chronometer over the chart desk.

“Yes, it’s more lumpy.”

“I’m going to turn in. Hope it won’t be too rough to-morrow. As to the money, you come with me, and that will straighten itself out. Y’know, friend, you haven’t

exactly invited confidences, probably you don't—from anyone, but hanged if I don't feel safe with you. Later to-night you may be asking yourself why I took the lid off as I have. Darned if I can tell you. I guess it's just instinct. So lon'."

CHAPTER IX

STORM

WHATEVER conflicting thoughts his interview with Jackson may have aroused in Lock were displaced before morning by the change in the weather. The stars, by imperceptible degrees, became veiled, their glow reduced to the merest flicker, while the dome of sky seemed to contract to a bowl of dark purple that lay on the sea almost with weight. It looked solid, infrangible, almost touchable, and with established dimensions. Clapped down over the yacht as though from a great height, it appeared to be travelling with her, shutting off all suggestion of outer space and distance, establishing a sort of oceanic theatre or stage on which she was the focal figure.

Within this bowl the sea was not yet rough, though traversed more and more frequently by masses, turbulent and isolated, that broke through from elsewhere, ramped across the visible area, suddenly reared their black crests alongside, and with a dislocating jerk lifted *Cygnets*' dainty hull. With a low washing sound they passed on into immediate obscurity. The air was cold, rather thin, and, in a curious fashion, fine-drawn, as though part of it had been sucked off, and through it came faint palpitations as of some cyclonic disturbance not far away. This breathlessness brought with it a sense of imminence.

Lock, who had turned in, tossed about and could not sleep. In the small hours he joined Maclay on the bridge, and the first officer appeared to be glad to see him.

"What d'ye make of it? The bottom's fallen out of the glass."

Lock shrugged his broad shoulders. "We'll get it presently. Seen Hillyard?"

"Aye, he was up a while back, and all's well down with him. So we're making for Ascension after all."

"Those are my orders."

"Orders! Yon signpost of a man doesn't know what he's ordering. You told him the forecast wasn't exactly fair an' warmer?"

"I did, but he's for pushing on. It's his responsibility and he knows it."

"Responsibility! Perhaps, but——" Maclay scratched his grizzled head. "I've said nothing till now, but where's the man making for anyway?"

"Namaqualand." Lock put it bluntly, for the man must know before long.

"Diamonds, eh?"

There was no answer to that, so he grunted understandingly and stowed the matter in the back of his brain to be considered later. Then he glanced at *Cygnet's* rocking masts.

“Her canvas is sound?”

“Yes, I saw to that. Why?”

“I was thinking that if she gets too saucy a fore and staysail would steady her.”

“They would, but we haven’t come to that yet.”

There ensued the silence that characterizes men of their kind to whom the sea is always talking in her low mysterious whisper, and *Cygnet* drove on through the rest of the night. Sunrise was heralded not by the molten line that previously had gilded the horizon but a slow broadening of light filtered from an invisible focus through air charged with a fine moist vapour. The skies had now descended to ocean level, lying on it, cloud suffusing the water, limiting the sight to a much-shortened radius. At the same time there grew a sound, hollow and inchoate, that issued apparently from all around, and, of a sudden, *Cygnet's* pennon stood straight out. The storm was upon her!

At first only wind, wind with weight. It ironed the sea to a dead flat, snatching from it little tatters and wreaths of spray that hit the face, stinging like a whip. Enormous and shuddering wrinkles began to run across the surface, creases and folds that spread from every direction, through which the yacht ripped her sharp stem with a tearing noise like that of escaping steam. Above the misty blanket enfolding her appeared fragments of torn clouds, hurried through space with startling rapidity, changing shape and volume as they fled, diaphanous fugitives from the wrath to come. Maclay, shoulders hunched, hands deep in pockets, sucked at a badly drawing pipe and regarded the heavens with a sort of detached interest.

“I’m thinking we’ll soon be seeing what *Cygnet* can do with it. Man, but it’s going to be a snorter! I’ll take a turn round to make sure that all’s fast.”

Lock nodded and watched the short alert figure making its way round the decks. He felt rather glad of Maclay and asked himself whether he had been not at fault in this matter. It would be a snorter, and by all the rules of prudence *Cygnet* at this moment should have been lying snug in Dakar harbour with the Atlantic pounding ineffectually outside. He thought of his passengers, their ignorance of the sea, and the blind obstinacy of Jackson. Presently he found himself saluting the oncoming gale like an old friend, with whose quips and cranks he was well acquainted. They inhabited a common country where he was very much at home and the meeting had often taken place before. But this time there was a difference. One could jam a destroyer at top speed through head seas, could listen to the whine of her rivets and creak of straining

hull, because one knew how she would take it and what she would stand.

It was otherwise with *Cygnets*! So far, she had encountered nothing more than a fresh breeze in the Bay. That did not test her; and her previous owner had been a Sybarite, not likely to push his gilded toy through heavy weather. Lowther had said—but Lowther was an agent. So, decided Lock, it was put upon him to prove the yacht, and he was the more ready to prove her since the process would blow his brain clear of uncomfortable thoughts. Mrs. Tarrant's son-in-law! At this he laughed in the face of Maclay, who was climbing back to the bridge.

"You look as if you'd a month's leave, full pay," said the little man. "What's up?"

"Nothing but the weather. Things all tight?"

"Aye, she'll do."

They stood apart, watching with keen professional eyes the sea's changing aspect. By now the encompassing bowl had been obliterated by aerial pressure from without, but the atmosphere, saturated with flying spray, made visibility low. The sea was assuming a pattern, being furrowed by parallel waves, not yet high, but very short and deep, advancing tumultuously from the north-west, their tops constantly whipped off by the wind. Their dimensions increased while one watched. It was not eight o'clock, but the sun was only a chastened luminosity suspended over an uncertain horizon.

Maclay, walking as though his feet were successively glued to the deck, came over to his chief.

"Still for Ascension?" he asked.

"Why not?"

"Oh—nothing."

Lock laughed at him. "Go on, let's have the rest of it."

"Come into the chartroom."

It was warm there, with a soft light, shaded so that no single ray escaped to the bridge. The wind snatched at the door as they shut it. Maclay knocked out his pipe, unrolled a South Atlantic chart, and studied it intently. Then he ran his finger along the Ivory and Gold Coast.

"Ever put in there?"

Lock shook his head.

"It's bad water as you draw into land. Not much of it. With a blow like this there's a sea that would shake the sticks out of *Cygnets*. She's not built for it."

"Well?"

The voice was a little curt, a shade impatient, and Maclay, with one swift glance, shut up like a trap.

“Well?”

“That’s all—sir,” said the little man, and went out.

Lock felt no impulse to recall him. As yet he did not quite understand Maclay, nor did he guess how long it had taken him to make up his mind to speak thus. But the truth was that he knew far more about the whims and limitations of passengers than did his commanding officer, and had correctly concluded that Lock did not realize what he was doing. Lock was to him a fine chap, just out of a very disciplinary job, to whom orders—from whatever source—were the written book. To disobey, to vary them in the slightest degree, was unthinkable. He had gone half-way in putting the responsibility for this venturesome attempt on Jackson, but no further. Maclay, with his more mature experience, would have made forthwith for Dakar harbour, whatever the orders, and taken his chance for the rest of it. As to passengers, be they owners or not, Maclay regarded them as transients on the sea. They came, they stayed a little while, they passed on, and the less they learned of certain dangers and difficulties the better. In this respect *Cygnets* was to his mind the same as any other ship, and her human freight no different. And to-day he had gone as far as he intended.

Lock, alone in the charthouse, spent half an hour over charts of the West African coast, then, for no special reason, made his way aft. In the lounge he found Webster. The steward saluted.

“Good morning, sir. Getting a bit dusty, isn’t it?”

“Yes, a bit. How are your passengers?”

“Haven’t seen any of ’em yet, sir; but I don’t suppose they’ll want much breakfast.”

“I do, Webster. Isn’t it ready?” This in a very clear voice from Hope, who stood, steadying herself, at the door that led into the cabin section of the main deck.

Lock touched his cap.

“Good morning. I’m glad to see you up. How are the others?”

“Oh, I didn’t see you at first.”

She looked extremely well and quite unaffected by the pitching floor, but her manner, in a sense, had changed.

“Rather different, isn’t it? Mrs. Tarrant says please will I leave her alone; Eva has her face to the wall and won’t speak and I don’t know anything about Mr. Jackson, but there’s no cigar smoke coming from his cabin. Have you had breakfast?”

“Not yet.”

“Would you care to have it with me?”

“I’d like to very much.”

“Then in ten minutes if you can, Webster.”

They went out. She gave a little cry of surprise, and stood clinging to the lee rail.

“You were right, weren’t you?”

“Not far off,” he admitted. “Do you mind it?”

“Not a bit. But we certainly won’t sit where we were last night.”

“Hardly—not for a day or two yet.”

“Did you think it would be as bad as this?”

“It will be worse before it’s better,” he said.

“Gracious! I mustn’t tell Eva that.” She glanced at him, noting that his eyes looked hard and dry. “Do you ever sleep, Mr. Lock?”

“Rather, but not much last night. It was too—well—interesting, seeing this coming on. Maclay and I told each other fish stories.”

“Mr. Jackson stayed up a long time, too, didn’t he?”

“Pretty late.”

“Do you like him?” This with a straight look from the hazel eyes.

“He’s interesting, sometimes.”

“Was he talking about Namaqualand?”

“Yes, a good deal of the time.”

She did not speak for a moment, while he perceived that without any effort on either part they seemed to understand each other amazingly well. He felt that anything he might say was said to her alone. But did she feel the same about him?

“It was about what is proposed, and how it’s to be done,” he went on. “Also why he hadn’t tried it before. I asked him that. Also,” here Lock smiled a little, “he said he felt safe with me. Why—I don’t know.”

“I wonder,” she said. “Mr. Lock, can you tell me something?”

“I’d like to, if I can. What?”

“Why he never tried before. I’ve been wondering about it since I came on board. I knew that he and my father were interested together.”

Lock reflected a moment. Undoubtedly Jackson must have told Mrs. Tarrant, and Mrs. Tarrant her daughter, and since half the diamonds in question were the property of this girl’s father, there appeared no just reason why she should not also be told. At this the young man had an absurd vision of himself restoring to Tarrant both the man’s daughter and his jewels. Then he repeated the story of Jackson’s loss of memory as it had been given. She listened, her eyes fixed on his, and nodded.

“I believe that’s true. It explains so much.”

“So much of what?”

She bit her lip in confusion. “I—I can’t tell you—it’s not my secret. You’ll say

I'm only giving you scraps of the whole. That's also true, but I can't help it. Just when one wants to come out with everything, one can't."

"I wouldn't worry," he said gently. "For me it's quite enough that you do want to."

"You mean it—really—even now?"

"I do, but why even now?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Breakfast is ready, miss," announced Webster at the lounge door.

They went in, Hope rather silent. At the table she recovered her spirits, smiling at him, and he glanced over her shoulder at the solid green of the South Atlantic climbing up over the large, tightly-sealed portholes. The yacht was jumping, but she did not seem to mind it, and he regarded her with growing admiration.

"Webster," she asked, "what about Mr. Jackson's breakfast?"

"Just been there, miss, and he's not wanting any."

"Which means," she said demurely, "that Mr. Lock will have to put up with me for the next few days. Thanks, Webster, you needn't wait."

The eyes of the two met, and something flickered across the table. Queer, thought he, to be here breakfasting alone with the girl so earnestly sought by the man in Soho, and the other man in this riddle stretched out in his bunk a few feet away. But the ocean was always thick with surprises.

"Eva told me it's settled you're going into the desert with Mr. Jackson."

"He's keen on it, and it's something new."

"I wonder if you will find those things after all this time?"

"It's a toss up; but I'm not forgetting that pocketful of diamonds I promised you."

"Is the promise still good?" she asked curiously.

"Why shouldn't it be—if we get them?"

She sent him a dubious little glance, making no reply.

"If Jackson trusts me, can't you?" he added.

"I thought your interests were elsewhere."

"Miss Tarrant," he said very earnestly, "will you please tell me who suggested that?"

"The lady."

"Which lady?"

"The one involved. My congratulations! I couldn't help being a little astonished, though perhaps I shouldn't have."

"Well, I'll be——" It ended in a whistle.

“You mean there’s nothing in it?” Hope was examining her cup with sudden interest.

He gave a mirthless laugh. “I told you I didn’t get much sleep last night, and that’s why. It wasn’t the weather. I had had the same story from Jackson.”

“No girl minds being accused of keeping a man awake,” she said wickedly.

“I tell you there’s nothing in it.” He was feeling hot and angry. “It has no foundation at all.”

“Quite, but, really, you mustn’t shout or Eva will hear you. Tell me, weren’t you just the least bit flattered?” Her eyes twinkled with provocation.

“No,” he grunted. “I was flabbergasted.”

At this she nodded sympathetically. “Speaking confidentially, so was I—and we’d better talk about something else. Begin with the gentleman next door?”

Lock nodded also, relieved that the air should be thus clear. But he wasn’t in love with Hope, he assured himself. Just friends.

“I’ve been thinking a lot about that expedition, and the principal character,” she said, “and wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out very different from his programme—that is, the end of it.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t see him settling down as the husband of my stepmother, or even any other woman’s husband. He’s a wanderer, and has always wandered. Father told me enough about him to prove it, and it’s one of the reasons why father wouldn’t hear of him marrying me if I’d been willing—which I wasn’t.”

“I couldn’t imagine it either,” said Lock candidly.

“Thank you. He hasn’t changed, because he can’t. He wants diamonds—really. That’s in the front of his mind, and if and when he gets them, I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s a case of good-bye to all of us.”

“Then and there?”

“Yes, then and there. I rather expect to see you coming back alone, looking very disillusioned. I’ve a feeling that he’s just using this yacht—my stepmother—everything and everybody, for his own purposes. Once those are achieved it may be a different thing.”

“You suggest that he’d make off with the stuff, yours and his?”

“I do.”

“I’d like to see him try,” rumbled Lock. “But, against that, why does he want me?”

“Please don’t go,” she said earnestly.

He gaped at her, completely puzzled. “Why?”

“It’s only part of the bluff. He’s deceiving both my stepmother and you, but I can’t prove it. I feel it. I think most of his life has been like that. He doesn’t want you for help, or protection, but just because it looks better. It suggests his return.”

There was something intuitive in her manner, and he was impressed. Viewing Jackson in the light of the last few days the thing seemed credible. But it was also a trifle amusing.

“You’re thinking about my pocketful of diamonds,” went on the girl evenly, “but please forget them. I never expected anything of the kind and don’t now. And I want you to let Mr. Jackson do his own prospecting. Apart from the danger——”

“Danger!” he blurted.

“I’m not thinking about thirst, or about your getting lost.”

“You mean danger from him!”

“Yes,” she said in a low voice.

Lock, both amused and touched, assured her that he was more than able to take care of himself, and Jackson too, if need be. Also that Jackson must realize this. Also that inviting company in this fashion was but putting himself and his affairs into another man’s hand.

“And,” he continued, “I really want to go. It’s an experience that no man would turn down. At the same time what you’ve suggested is useful. You haven’t mentioned it to anyone else?”

“Who is there?” she said with entire simplicity.

The directness of this was so eloquent that his face must have reflected his thoughts and she went on hurriedly:

“You’ll think I’m an alarmist, but it’s exactly as though I can see that man going on and on making and losing fortunes, so keen on his own game that he’s not any real part of life as ordinary people live it. He can be both cruel and kind, generous and perfectly devilish. He’ll use anyone for his own purposes, just as he’s using my stepmother now. She’s infatuated and won’t hear a word against him. Eva doesn’t care either way—she just wants some diamonds. I’m not infatuated and don’t expect diamonds and—well—there you are. And, isn’t it getting much rougher?”

“Yes—a bit. Think you could stand the bridge for a while?”

“I’ll have to see the others first: please wait. Shall I tell them that everything is absolutely all right?”

“Certainly.”

“I rather like the way you said that,” she smiled.

Webster came in from the pantry, and began to gather dishes, balancing them like an equilibrist. A man of much seafaring experience, he had missed little of what

was transpiring on board, and it would have astonished Mrs. Tarrant's party to know the freedom with which their persons and plans were discussed between decks. This was mostly due to the fact that by leaving the pantry door off the latch in calm weather, and wedging it, a great deal of what was said in the saloon was quite audible in the box-like enclosure where he held sway. But not in rough weather. Things that were not anchored slid about, plates rattled, woodwork squeaked, the steel frame of the yacht had a note of its own, and when her propeller thrashed clear of the water she trembled like a living creature. So this morning Webster's gleaning had been scant.

In the fashion of all stewards, he had classified his passengers, and Hope was at the top. She gave him no trouble, insisted on doing her own cabin, and obviously liked doing it. He did not expect much from her at the end of the cruise, but it would be the sort of tip he liked because of the giver. Mrs. Tarrant did a little for herself, and that spasmodically, but she was indulgent. Eva did nothing, and was exacting. She dropped things and left them where they fell. There was no stewardess on *Cygnets*, and when Webster reached that cabin, he used to feel lost. But both mother and daughter would, he reckoned, behave with the casual lavishness he had learned to expect from their kind.

Jackson, he confessed, puzzled him. A minimum of personal clothing, with white shoes and a yachting cap his only concession to the approved outfit. No dinner jacket, unless one could so describe the Victorian coat he affected at night. No photographs of anyone in his cabin, no books, but quantities of cigars. These were always kept in their original layers, and Webster knew that their owner was exactly aware how many remained in each opened box. And what would be forthcoming here in the way of a tip was a conundrum.

Yet Jackson was the outstanding personage. He was on top, it was his cruise, and he was after diamonds. Nothing more needed. Queer tales about diamonds were rehearsed in fore-castle and boiler-room. Many an eye followed the long lounging figure with hungry curiosity. It was known that Lock would share in the adventure. This had leaked out of the pantry only one night previously, and the news was swallowed avidly by the yacht's crew. Now, with *Cygnets* reeling towards the Gulf of Guinea in front of a gale that promised to be all she could stand, Webster was aching to get some additional tit-bit out of her captain.

"Getting thicker, sir, isn't it?"

"Y-es, a little."

"But she takes it well for her size."

Cygnets gave a heave that sent him staggering, and Lock smiled.

“I’d make everything fast, if I were you, Webster. We’re not really into it yet.”

“Thank you, sir; I will. We’re making for Ascension, I’m told? I’ve never been there before.”

“If this goes on much longer, you may not get there this time.”

“Indeed, sir!”

“Quite possible. We might put in for Accra, and lie up.”

“And after that, sir?” ventured the man hopefully.

“After that you’ll see for yourself. We’re for the Cape, ultimately.”

The steward, baffled for the moment, turned to his table and cast about for some other opening. Just then Hope came back.

“I’m awfully sorry for the poor things, especially Eva. Mrs. Tarrant is like she was in the Bay, angry at being so uncomfortable. But she’s not the least frightened. Shall we go up?”

“Yes—better hold on to me.”

The wind had veered more to the west and now came in over the yacht’s quarter with a hard solid pressure that whipped the breath from the lips. Hope braced herself against it, and, hanging to Lock’s stiffened arm, made a hazardous way to the bridge where she was received by Maclay with considerable astonishment.

“Better turn in,” said Lock at once, “I’ll take over.”

The little man nodded, gave him the course, glanced curiously at the girl’s pink cheeks, and moved to his own quarters just aft of the captain’s cabin. Then, save for a red-faced man at the wheel, the two were alone. Hope huddled herself into a canvas-screened corner and stared about. Never before had she seen anything like this. Her chief sensation was one of surprise that Lock should be so unimpressed, because it did not appear possible that *Cygnets* could survive much longer. How, indeed, had she survived thus far?

She was the merest midget in a tumbling waste of water—lost—forgotten by the rest of the world. The sea had become a great tortured sapphire, its marching crests thinning to a pale translucent jade green where the light struck their ragged summits. The wind came in huge scurries and gusts, driving vast oceanic wrinkles before it with increasing velocity. Between these wrinkles yawned sudden watery crevasses, foam-streaked, with precipitous sides down which the yacht plunged as though to bury herself in the opposing and oncoming wall. At times the crests overtook her, dallying at her own speed in a sort of elephantine gesture, balancing her slim hull on their hurrying crowns, cradling her so that the surrounding scene was visible for miles round as from a vantage-point, suspending her as they raced forward for breathless seconds, then allowing her to settle down—down—till Hope could have screamed

with the tension.

Gradually in all this tumult it came to her that the yacht was living through it by virtue of a kind of intelligence that was her own. Her framework seemed alive—and sentient. Constantly escaping annihilation by a hair's-breadth, she rose, dripping, almost rejoicing, and by some marvel addressed herself to the next threatening mountain. She did not struggle, for amongst these elements her strength was too puny, but manoeuvred with a sort of instinctive usage of the forces that opposed her, undaunted by all the distortion of the sea, its pits, its ridges, its weight and pressure. The thing was fascinating, and with Lock close by Hope managed to rid herself of fear.

She was not aware how long this abstraction went on, or how sharply she was being watched. Lock knew what she was feeling. He could read it in her bright, intelligent eyes, the slightly parted lips, the expression that changed as subtly as the ocean itself, and, definitely this seemed to bring her nearer. He felt proud of her, proud that she was so fearless, that something in her could thus meet the sea he loved. Presently she beckoned and he moved close.

"Well," he asked, lips almost touching her ear, "what do you make of it?"

"I never felt so insignificant. Is it a bad storm?"

"It isn't a storm, but a gale," he grinned. "About eight on the Beaufort scale."

"The Beaufort what?"

He explained that in a gale the wind went up to fifty-five miles an hour, in a storm to seventy-five, and anything over that might be called a hurricane.

"And what's the wind now?"

"Say fifty."

"Is that all!" She tried to be mocking, but the voice was a shade uncertain. "When do we reach Ascension, and is it going to be like this all the way?"

That was difficult, and he could not tell her that at the moment *Cygnets* was standing rather more than she was meant to stand—with comfort. Sea and wind were with her, but if the wind held its strength and shifted to the south of west, there would remain but one course left, a run for safety.

Already he had begun to consider it, but hesitated at the chances of making a landfall at night with this weather behind him. Dakar Harbour, or the Bissagos Islands, that was where he should be, and he was forced to admit it. But from his present position it was out of the question. *Cygnets* would roll herself to pieces.

"Mr. Lock," repeated the girl nervously, "is it going to last?"

He shook his head and took a long stare to windward. Then, of a sudden, he jumped to the man at the wheel, shouted something, darted back to the girl and put

his arm round her.

“Hold on to me tight, and don’t be frightened if you get wet.”

His expression startled her. Following his fixed gaze, she half-turned, and saw ramping toward them across the tormented sea what looked like a dark pyramid, its crest toppling over into a white wind-torn ruin. So lofty was it above the surrounding waste that it assumed a domination over lesser waves, dwarfing and trampling them till they were incorporated in its own prodigious bulk. It swept nearer, and Lock, measuring it, felt a little cold. He had seen a minesweeper about *Cygnets* tonnage in the North Sea that——!

“We get a few like that in every gale,” he said gruffly. “Steady now—keep hold!”

The thing was at them like some insensate prehistoric animal. Following closely on the dwindling lift of its predecessor there was not left a valley of any width but a yawning yeasty pit into which *Cygnets* settled as though she were indeed a swan. It just fitted her length, and from it she could not rise in time to meet the oncoming giant as such giants must perforce be met. At her stern there was thrust up a wall of water, solid like the face of a cliff, above which the great crest ramped and raced. *Cygnets* quivered with her own effort, but too late. The wall seemed to walk over her. For a moment Hope could see the stern, the wooden gratings on the poop, the dripping life-preservers, the yellow curve of streaming deck.

In the next breath all this vanished. The South Atlantic walked on board as though trying to flatten her. There was no deck any more. The after part of the yacht was blotted out, held down by superincumbent weight, beneath which she struggled like a terrified thing, an insect writhing under an animal’s pad. Followed the crest, green, blue and livid white, seething as a cauldron, swamping the bridge, so that Hope, robbed of breath in the flood and unable to cry out, felt herself tugged at, while Lock’s arm turned to iron around her waist. She shut her eyes. She could hear a great crashing roar. It was the end of the world, and she and Lock were alone to meet it.

The yacht was lifted high now. Never since her launch had she been lifted so far above the plain of sea, her funnel and filmy masts projecting from the smother of foam, vibrating with the thrust of her turbine, more of a submarine than surface craft. Thus she was carried on, hurtling drunkenly almost at the wind’s speed for an indescribable second, in the next breath her stern overhung a suddenly opened abyss. But there was nothing under her stern! At that moment, as though at a signal, there rose from the engine-room a rending sound of mechanism gone mad. The yacht shook in agony, her spars vibrated, and she seemed about to fall apart. It was a metallic revolution, and this clamour from within rivalled the tumult without. Then

just as suddenly it ceased, and with it there departed from the yacht's straining hull all sense of life and power.

Hope, trembling, her body like ice, opened her eyes. There was another man on the bridge—Maclay—in shirt, trousers and bare feet. His grey eyes were alight. Lock waved an arm. Between them they got the half-fainting girl into the chartroom and laid her on the pitching floor. The door closed. Lock shouted something, Maclay nodded and the younger man, descending from the bridge, fought a perilous way to the engine-room hatch and disappeared.

At the bottom of the iron ladder he found Hillyard, his face chalky under the sweat, gripping the wheel of the main steam valve that controlled the turbine.

"Propeller?" snapped Lock.

"Two blades gone out of three as I make it. Governor out of business! That last one did it. I'll have to check her by hand now. What next?"

"Got any spares?"

"Yes, a whole set; we can fit them when we get a chance provided the rudder post isn't bent. How's she steering?"

"All right, I think—what speed have you left?"

"Say six knots in calm water."

Lock wiped the salt from his eyes. "Not enough to hold her before this breeze. We'll go about and put her into it. Think the other blade's safe?"

"God knows, but there's no shake in it so far."

"We'll get a sea anchor ready in case. Good luck."

Climbing back to the bridge his eyes met Maclay's, and he made a swift, semi-circular motion. The little man nodded.

"Aye, it's the wise thing. She'll be pooped again if we don't."

Lock took the wheel, for in those few intervening seconds the yacht's speed was greatly reduced, and again she stood in imminent danger. Measuring the sea, he gritted his teeth and put the wheel over a few spokes.

She answered at once, and at that he felt a vast relief, but instantly, instead of the former violent pitching, there set up an equally aggravated roll. He dodged the heavier seas as best he might, and *Cygnets* became a crazy rocking-horse. Caught on the flank of one wrinkled mountain, she leaned from it at a sickening angle to be balanced precariously on its turbulent crest, and, half-way down the opposing slope, took the opposite incline. Robbed of her light, quick vigour, she was for arduous moments the plaything of the sea, but, struggling on, jerked and dislocated, humoured as much as Lock dared humour her, she rose well and came presently into the eye of the wind. And at that her master took comfort.

“Keep her as she is,” he snapped to the quartermaster, “and nothing off it. Understand?”

The man saluted with a sort of respect for the thing had been done in good deep-sea fashion, and the rest depended on the single propeller blade.

“Stand by, will you, Mac?”

Maclay nodded, and Lock wrenched open the chartroom door. Hope was sitting in a little pool in a corner, her back against the wall, her eyes very large and round. But, he noted, all fear had left them.

At sight of him she took a quick breath.

“What has happened?”

Thinking her the sort who could stand bad news, he paid her the tribute of telling all. At the way she took it he had again that warm sense of pride in her courage.

“I’ve been an awful coward,” she said, trying to smile. “Did I faint?”

“You did not, and you’re not a coward. You just had the wind knocked out of you. We took it green that time. *Cygnets*’ all right.”

“All right?”

“Certainly.”

At this she did manage a smile. “It’s always certainly with you, isn’t it.”

“Perhaps I spoke a bit too fast last time. Do you know you’re soaking?”

“I—I suppose I must be. Isn’t everything?”

“Wait a minute!” He disappeared and came back with a flask. “*Cygnets*’ behaving like a lady. Take a good pull—don’t be afraid of it.”

She put the thing to her lips, choked, gulped and shook her head.

“That’s worse than the storm.”

“Now you’ve got to do one of two things—either go to my cabin and get between blankets, or get back to your own—pronto. Which?”

“Oh, mine, please!” A faint colour crept into her cheeks. “And my throat is on fire.”

“Splendid! Burn away!”

“Those poor others—I must get back to them—please!”

“Thinking of Jackson?”

“If you want me to—not otherwise.” She got up, staggering a little, and he put his arm round her.

“You’re a Trojan—really. Better now?”

“Yes, I’m quite all right.”

“I—I think I love you,” said Lock clumsily, and reached for the door.

CHAPTER X

AFRICA

FIVE days later, and some five hundred miles to the north-east of Ascension, *Cygnets* was making six knots before a moderate following sea. Her position was, roughly, half-way between that most lonely island and the vast shore curve of the Gulf of Guinea. It had, as Lock and Maclay agreed, been a case of humouring the South Atlantic, and hoping that the humour was not one-sided.

The affair was simple enough. When the gale abated to a twenty-mile breeze Lock hoisted canvas and put the yacht about. Half steam, half canvas, he dared not trust her under this reduced speed in a beam sea, and ran before the weather. Thus powered, and moving something like a wounded but undaunted gull, she made a hundred and fifty miles every twenty-four hours. This was less than half her normal, but he was content. The single propeller blade still held and Hillyard cut down his steam to just sufficient to keep it churning.

At noon on the day after the big blow the unshaven face of Jackson appeared at the top of the bridge companion. Till then Lock had been too busy to do more than send occasional comforting messages aft by Webster. As for his passengers, he trusted to Hope. He could not be at all sure what she felt about himself, if anything. She moved back and forth between bridge and cabins, meeting his look without a trace of selfconsciousness, very bright and alert, and thinking of everyone except herself. She developed a friendship with Maclay, who now regarded her with open admiration, and her manner gave Lock no opportunity to press his case had he desired to.

She was equally at home with them both, minded the weather not at all, and showed no trace of what she had been through. And it was she who on the night following the gale brought from Jackson the cryptic order that there was no change in instructions already given.

Later came Jackson himself. The man looked leaner, his cheeks more hollow, his skin rather grey. His hand shook as he reached for the rail, but it said something for his spirit that he should come at all. He gained a corner of the bridge, stared at the sea, which was still very high, though no longer formidable, then gestured at the chartroom.

“Well,” said the dry voice, “that was a bit of a shake-up, wasn’t it? One time I

thought we were done for—I guess that’s when we went about.”

“Sorry, but we couldn’t help it.”

“I don’t question it. Webster was scared stiff too—never saw a steward with the wind up like that before. Most of the crockery’s gone to blazes. I suppose you reckon it’s my fault. Ought to have been lying up in Dakar, eh?”

“No, it’s mine.”

“What’s that?”

“I should have disobeyed your orders. Maclay would have backed me up.”

Jackson gave a smile, saturnine and a little weary.

“I’d have fired you if you had. Now, darn it, I can’t.”

“That’s good news,” laughed Lock. “What next?”

“I want to know a lot—exactly where we are—when we’re liable to reach Ascension—what about repairs—how long they’ll take—how much time we’re going to lose, everything included. Also what in your opinion is the safe thing now. You give me that, and I’ll give you the rest.”

Lock told him as nearly as it was possible to tell, explaining that now he did not propose to make Ascension at all, that with reduced power he dared not trust the yacht in a heavy beam sea, and advised holding south-east, favoured by the wind, in the direction of Lobito, in Angola.

“Why Lobito?”

“There’s a good harbour where Hillyard can do his own repairs. Also fuel oil—and crockery.”

The dry eyes brightened a little. “Show me on the map.”

He pored over the chart, measuring the distance south from Lobito to the Orange River, shooting innumerable questions, till, seemingly satisfied that there was no alternative, he finally agreed.

“It’s curious about those diamonds,” he said with a sort of languid satisfaction, “but I guess they’re fated to make trouble. ’Twas that way before, only that time I nearly died of thirst, and now it’s a case of too much water. However, this little affair isn’t a patch on what some fellows have had to put up with.”

“You’re still after them?” Lock was enormously interested.

“Sure! Why not? We’re a bit late, but that can’t be helped. How much behind schedule, d’you suppose, when we get there?”

“It’s hard to say; in fact, I’d sooner not promise anything.”

“A fortnight—at the outside?”

“Perhaps about that, but don’t quote me.”

“Which makes it something under the month from Southampton—well——”

His voice trailed out, and it was obvious that already his mind had pitched ahead to the waterless land of his treasure. Discomfort to himself or others was of no importance; danger had not diverted him in the slightest, and from this moment Lock had a clearer understanding of the man's indomitable resolution. It was illuminating. He was not, most certainly, the one to waste time on a pleasure cruise with a "bunch" of women. He might ultimately marry one of them—he definitely would if he thus determined—but nothing that affected her would in the meantime sway his prior purpose. And *Cygnets*, crawling across the open seas like a crippled gull, was still the creature of his will.

"Y'know," he went on, ruminating with a sort of simple pleasure in the disclosure of his own thoughts, "I said that time was the essence of my contract, but I'm hoping that may be wrong. Perhaps—darned if I know—we've got time to burn. But in this diamond business you don't take chances you can avoid. Little white stones like that are never forgotten. A man—especially a woman—will shed their memories of most everything else, even human things, but the little white stones sort of stick. And, friend, they get talked about. Ever had anything in the back of your head you wanted like hell to talk about, and couldn't—or mustn't?"

He added these last words with a glance so provocative as to rouse every conflicting, confusing question of the previous day. Now they crowded back and brought another. If Jackson suspected that he knew about Tarrant, why didn't the man make a direct challenge? For an instant this seemed baffling. Then suddenly, the answer grew clear. Mrs. Tarrant!

"I'm not bothered that way," replied Lock cheerfully. "Well, it's settled?"

"Lobito—or bust. I'm going to put up a little prayer for that last propeller blade."

Cygnets, a winged insect in the immensity of ocean, seemed to develop new characteristics as she held on her new course, and these in turn made their impress on her passengers. Under fore, main and staysail she proved remarkably steady, and the impatience at first manifested in her saloon gradually gave way to a placid acceptance of altered conditions. One and all they now felt more a part of the sea itself. Lacking the constant tremor of speed and high pressure, *Cygnets* was more birdlike, and Lock, with a natural hankering for real yachting, delighted in his new duties.

One thing only he regretted. In the two or three days after the gale he had seen much of Hope, but when Mrs. Tarrant and her daughter reappeared the opportunity

dwindled. Mrs. Tarrant gained his respect by the spirit she showed, or was it, perhaps, her unquestioning surrender to Jackson? She did not appear in any way disheartened or unwilling to pursue the journey to its end. Her resilient nature had not lost its hunger for adventure, and she treated the affair of the gale almost casually. It was hard for Lock to guess what Eva really felt, but there was a difference he could not miss. She seemed quieter, more thoughtful, more gentle, and to him more attractive. And he was aware that she watched closely.

Their first real talk was on a day when Lobito lay five hundred miles ahead, and *Cygnets*, drawing in every stitch under a light westerly wind, was making something better than the promised six knots. Hope was reading in the lounge, and Mrs. Tarrant and Jackson were in the middle of a long conversation.

“There’s one thing I’ll be sorry for all my life,” said the girl. “I missed that storm.”

“You didn’t altogether miss it, did you?”

She smiled a little. “I hated being shut up, and felt horribly jealous of Hope. She was on the bridge when the screw broke, wasn’t she?”

Lock nodded.

“It sounded like the end of the world in my cabin. I thought everything would shake to pieces, and tried to get out and couldn’t. Mother was calling. Then a fearful crash from the pantry. Now, honestly, was there any real danger?”

“That one surviving blade saved the situation. Why worry about it?”

“Tell me what would have happened had the other blade gone.”

He shook his head. “I’m not a prophet, and you’re too hypothetical. It isn’t good for you, either. Why not put the whole thing out of your mind? It’s done with.”

“Can you shut out of your mind all the things that aren’t good for you?”

“I don’t suppose anyone can—entirely.”

“Are you ever jealous?”

“I’ve been spared that so far. There are excellent reasons.”

“Then you’re much to be envied,” she went on lightly. “Why didn’t you come to see me for three whole days?”

“There was a good deal else to be seen to—and I thought Hope——”

“So it’s Hope now!” She darted him a swift glance. “Is that the effect of the storm?”

“I don’t seem extra popular to-day,” he parried, exceedingly vexed with himself.

She laughed at him. “At any rate, you’re a lot more human, Norman. And my name is Eva.”

“Yes, Eva.”

“That’s better. Now tell me about Hope braving the storm on the bridge. It

makes quite a heroic picture—can't you see it?—not the captain's little daughter exactly who bore him company.”

The tone of this was more ironical than its intent, and Lock, with his blunt, matter-of-fact mind, had no conception of the real truth. Shut in her cabin, physically suffering and helpless, the girl had been consumed with suspicion and jealousy, and jealousy, being for her a new sensation, was doubly bitter. For once in her life she had conceived a blind, passionate love. Up till now it had been but play for her, with only a casual interest in the effect on others, and certainly no regret at all. This time it was genuine, and she felt shaken by the force of it. Lock's seeming immunity, no less than the build and poise of the man, had moved her deeply. She now admitted that she might be mistaken in underestimating Hope's attraction, for soon it became apparent that these two had much in common. Then the gale! That Hope should have come through as she did was a hard thing for Eva to accept. It hurt her. The picture of Hope spending hours with the man she wanted for herself had made a purgatory. She had fabricated their talk, their looks, even their thoughts, and as an aftermath came an emotional reaction that left her weak.

“She was a perfect brick, and as plucky as they make 'em!” she heard him saying. “When the big wave reached the bridge and hit her I thought she'd fainted. But she hadn't—not a bit of it.”

“Norman!”

“Yes?” The tone was puzzled.

“Promise me something.”

“What?”

“That you'll tell me the truth to what I'm going to ask you. I'm terribly in earnest. Please don't think I'll ever misunderstand your answer, because—well—you can trust me for that much.”

“Does it involve anyone else?” he ventured.

“It's not about Hope, if that's in your mind,” she said shakily. “Just you.”

“Oh—me! Good Lord!” He felt as though he had dropped a load. “The truth about me! Well, here goes for my shameful past. I'll be good and tell you, even though it does forfeit your respect. Open fire!”

“Can I do anything for you?”

“Me—personally—me!”

“Yes, you.”

“Is that the question?”

“Yes.”

“Why on earth should you ask that?”

“Because I want to, Norman. Anything!”

He dared not look at her, and there was a long silence through which sounded a faint whine as the main boom swung with the filling canvas. From the engine-room came only a low murmur. *Cygnets* slim bows were dipping daintily as though in play with the gentle sea, and far overhead an albatross skimmed great flat circles in the sunlit air without a quiver in its long tapering wings. The only other thing Lock could distinguish was the girl's breathing, light, rapid, intermittent. And still he dared not look into her face.

“Won't you tell me?” she repeated in a small voice. “I don't often feel as I do now.”

“There isn't anything,” he creaked, wondering if imagination had run away with him.

“Then shall we make a four at bridge?”

This with a sudden, almost metallic gaiety that left him still more bewildered. Thoughts, half-fledged and inchoate, rushed through his brain. He glanced at her. The colour in her cheeks had centred in two scarlet spots that vanished as he looked, leaving her with an unnatural pallor. Her eyes had lost their dark and velvety light, and seemed dead. But her lips were smiling. She got up and moved aft toward her mother and Jackson, Lock close behind. Half-way there *Cygnets* tilted her glistening deck, and the girl staggered a little. Lock's arm went out and caught her. At that moment Mrs. Tarrant turned, smiled at them, touched Jackson on the shoulder and waved a hand. The smile was eloquent, and Eva gave a strange little laugh.

“Norman and I have talked ourselves out, and we'd like some bridge.”

“Will you play, Bob?” asked her mother.

Jackson nodded, and the four went into the lounge. Hope looked up from her corner, but did not move. She had seen it all.

“Is that really Africa again?” said Mrs. Tarrant, shading her eyes in a corner of the bridge. “I feel as if we'd discovered a new continent.”

This was understandable. Three weeks ago to a day *Cygnets* had left Southampton, and the last sight of land her owner had seen was the swinging beam from Cape Verde the night before the gale. Since then the yacht had traversed two thousand miles of empty sea, mostly under sail and with a crippled propeller.

Under the searching and unmitigated sun the characteristics of her passengers developed with a sort of florid fecundity; while at night, with *Cygnets* slowly parting

the black marble of the sea, the hour seemed an invitation for mutual confidences. Life was less sharp. Its speed had dwindled with that of the ship. The objective was still there, but its urgency less pressing. Mrs. Tarrant had done a good deal of thinking. Her mind being made up about Jackson, she devoted more time to Eva, because it appeared that that affair was not progressing. The girl was uncommunicative and distraught. Nor did it seem that Lock had turned in another direction. He was very quiet, very polite, and apologetic about the accident, which, Jackson assured everyone, was his own fault. He saw much less of Eva, but certainly devoted no more time to Hope. Something had happened, and Mrs. Tarrant was much more curious about this than the African coast at which she now stared.

“It isn’t very impressive, is it?”

“No; Maclay says there are mountains further back, but you can’t see them.”

She pushed Africa aside with a gesture.

“If I may be very personal, what’s the matter between you and Eva? Had a quarrel?”

“Quarrel?” he stammered.

“Call it anything you like—and put me down as an interfering woman if you will—but what’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“H’m—that’s what she said.”

“Well, doesn’t that settle it? We seem quite agreed on the matter.”

She shook her head. “I know Eva too well. She’s going on exactly as I would after a difference with the man I cared for.”

The directness of this was rather staggering, and it left but one thing to be said.

“There’s nothing between us,” he replied bluntly.

From a man it sounded rude, but Mrs. Tarrant did not appear to resent that angle of it, and he watched her with peculiar interest. Her profile was flawless, but hard; her face perfectly moulded, yet lacking something. It was like the face on a coin, and perhaps too independent to be completely feminine. She was a woman to arouse admiration more readily than sympathy, and her expression suggested that it would be easier for her to admire than to sympathize.

“Well,” she said presently, “I’m going to be honest, and tell you that I’d hoped there was something. I never pay compliments, and I’m not doing it now, but your kind of man would be good for Eva.”

“What should I do?” asked Lock, infinitely puzzled.

“Nothing, so far as I know. I’m only talking about something that I thought was

likely. Probably I've been foolish, but most mothers are in such a case. I've never attempted to take any part in Eva's affairs, and certainly she's never encouraged it. But I'd like to see her settled down. She won't want to live with me after I've married again. You know about that, I suppose?"

"Yes; Eva told me, also Mr. Jackson." He hesitated an instant, the picture in his mind being utterly confusing. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks," she said casually. "That day at Uplands when he came across the lawn—you were there—I had a ridiculous feeling that he'd come for me. I didn't know the man from Adam, and told myself that I was too old for such nonsense. But," here she nodded complacently, "I wasn't. And now what do you think?"

"That he's very fortunate."

"That wasn't what I meant. It was that Mr. Jackson isn't over happy because he thinks my late husband may be still alive. I don't know why I'm bringing out my private affairs like this——"

Lock felt deeply troubled, and pictured himself announcing that Tarrant was very much alive, and to be found in Soho. It was clear that not the slightest suspicion of the truth moved in the woman's mind.

"Why should Mr. Jackson think that?" he ventured.

"I don't know and can't guess. He has no real reasons that I can discover, but you can imagine the effect on the prospective bride. I gave him dates, places, what was found, everything, and there's not been a sign since. Hope has heard nothing—no one has."

"It was a strange thing," admitted Lock.

"And a strange man. You'd agree to that if you'd ever seen him. We hadn't been married long, but it was quite a success till he changed. And what changed him I could never find out."

"Miss Tarrant told me much the same thing."

"It's quite true, and that's why she went off and gave us all such a fright. I feel that her father was greatly affected by what she did, though I haven't breathed a word of that to Hope."

"You mean that if she had stayed at home, he wouldn't have——"

Mrs. Tarrant nodded. "I can't help feeling so. He was very fond of her, but didn't understand her a bit. He was big and tremendously strong and rather clumsy. Mr. Jackson has told me a lot about the journeys they made in South Africa, especially that last one in Namaqualand, but my husband never mentioned Mr. Jackson, and that has puzzled me."

"There was some kind of a row?"

“Yes, but they made it up afterwards.”

“I know that, so it’s all the more queer.” She tossed her head as though ridding herself of unanswerable questions, then gave a sudden laugh. “I’m just wondering what my late husband would think if he knew about this yacht. Perhaps he does!”

“What on earth do you mean?” Lock was greatly startled.

“I just meant that people after they’re dead probably know a good deal about what’s going on here. Things would be rather uninteresting if they didn’t. And”—she added with a touch of gravity—“I wonder what he thinks of my next marriage. I don’t believe he’d approve.”

Lock, who could have told her exactly what Tarrant thought—and said—felt a little giddy. He didn’t mind baffling Jackson, whose thoughts were primarily of himself; nor did he feel it out of place to keep the truth from Hope, who actually feared that her father might be alive; but the ingenuousness of this woman, who, being wrong, was convinced she was right, and was about to commit unconscious bigamy, put the affair in another light. For sake of an oath he could not see that happen. However, he reflected thankfully, it could not happen before they reached Capetown.

“I don’t think that those on the other side can be made unhappy by anything that goes on here,” he said. “It wouldn’t be fair.”

She nodded, with a sort of gratitude. “I hadn’t looked at it that way. It wouldn’t. And,” she hesitated a moment, her spirits rising, “that makes everything a lot simpler for the rest of us. You mean that they know—but can’t worry. Just right, isn’t it?”

“It’s the only reasonable thing—to me.”

Mrs. Tarrant took a long and very cheerful breath, then a deliberate look at the coast of Africa, at her yacht, at Jackson who was reading in a deck chair on the poop, and found in each picture something distinctly satisfying.

Thanks to the expressed views of the ordinarily silent young man beside her, she felt more free than since the day when word came from Ireland that Thomas Tarrant was missing and believed to be drowned. In life she had often differed from him sharply, but nevertheless hesitated about doing anything that would antagonize his disembodied self. She had no real reasons for this, but couldn’t help it. But now she needn’t feel it any more.

“I think your philosophy is absolutely sound,” she said with conviction, “and wish we’d met before we did. It will make a difference when I’m married.”

“Is one allowed to ask when that will be?”

“We’re going on to Capetown when we’ve finished with Namaqualand, so it may be there. That’s what Mr. Jackson wants.”

“And the groom’s present will be diamonds?” grinned Lock.

“That’s what he’s promised. Of course he’ll have his share, and I get Mr. Tarrant’s, not forgetting you and a few for Hope. I wonder if there’ll be enough to go round. Sounds rather exciting, doesn’t it? But when that storm hit us two weeks ago I thought my diamond days were over.”

“It was very plucky of you to carry on: most women wouldn’t.”

“I’m not most women,” she said coolly. “And it would have been too utterly flat to turn back.”

“And if we don’t find those diamonds?”

Her fine eyes narrowed disapprovingly.

“Now you’ve undone all the good you did.”

“I don’t want to be a wet blanket, but it’s occurred before.”

“And I don’t agree. Mr. Jackson wouldn’t drag us all these thousands of miles on mere chance.”

Lock, doubting the wisdom of arguing this point, shrugged his shoulders. Jackson was an unknown quantity, a prospector—and a gambler. What could more appeal to such a one than a few thousand miles on a steam yacht at another’s expense? It was exactly in his line, especially when one added the likelihood of marrying a rich and good-looking woman as a finish. This much was obvious. But because the whole affair was now drawing to its inevitable end, whatever that might be, it seemed necessary to wait a little longer. The climax must come in the desert of Namaqualand!

“No doubt he’s decided that it’s more than a chance,” conceded Lock. “He told me about his loss of memory.”

“Did he! People seem to tell you all sorts of things, don’t they?”

“I don’t ask for them. Yes, he did, and how memory came back a year later. But supposing it hasn’t all come back?”

“You’re making me more uncomfortable every minute,” she protested. “He’s as clear-minded to-day as we are.”

“I’ll admit that he knows what he’s after,” said Lock, smiling a little at the truth of this, “and I’m quite ready to help, but I do feel it’s the wise thing to admit the possibility of nothing happening at all, and our coming back defeated.”

“I do wish you hadn’t put that into my head,” she frowned. “You’re just as likely to see my late husband climbing on board this yacht as to see Mr. Jackson coming back empty-handed.”

“That’s a wild idea!”

“No wilder than yours,” she laughed. “Now do have a talk with Eva, and see if

you can't cheer her up."

Eighteen hours after she entered Lobito harbour, *Cygnet* cleared from it, a yacht in being once more. Lock had been remarkably fortunate. He found a very modern port, with a dry dock opportunely empty, in which *Cygnet* was placed without loss of time. While Hillyard and his engineers sweated under her stern, the others were able to inspect a grove of oil palms, the fringe of a mangrove swamp, see a copper-laden train arrive from Katanga, up country, get the latest European news from the cable office, and then drive through dense jungle to a neighbouring Hottentot village of straw-thatched huts. They dined at an excellent hotel, listened to excellent music, and rejoined the yacht with mingled sensations about African life. In the small hours Hillyard expressed himself satisfied, *Cygnet's* turbine gave a preliminary sigh, and she put to sea under a full moon.

Next morning, with the low coast but a few miles off, there was a different spirit on board. The expedition had, as it were, crystallized overnight. Its pulse, human and mechanical, had quickened. There had come to them all an unaccustomed feeling of tension. Lock admitted to a surge of recklessness. He had, apparently, misplaced his affections. He knew what he felt about Hope, but Hope did not seem to care. She was bright, friendly, and untouchable. He had captured her glance more than once, and signalled there was more he wanted to tell her, but she was too elusive. The opportunity had never come. For all practical purposes he might have been miles away. She was very charming—and no more. But he continued to care, and it was part of his unassuming nature to conclude that whatever might be the matter, the fault lay with himself. He could not think of himself as being really desirable—the mere idea was a trifle absurd—and had enough sense to discriminate between Eva's passion for him and what he felt for Hope. Yet he wanted Hope tremendously.

The talk with Mrs. Tarrant had left but little impression. He had said what he felt bound to say, and her response was much what he expected. He saw her quite clearly as an adventuress, bent on her own way—which was Jackson's—and combating whatever threatened it. He could not feel that it mattered much what became of her, provided she did not marry the chosen man. He had no particular instinct of protection in her case, because she did not arouse it, but she must not be allowed to do this thing in ignorance. A strange duty, he reflected, to be laid on an ex-commander at forty pounds a month.

Cygnet was doing fifteen knots under easy steam, and the sun climbing up over Africa, when the diamond hunter, in bare feet and dressing-gown, appeared on the

bridge. Of the mainland, little was visible save the faint blur of a mangrove swamp and the pigmy pillar of the lighthouse where surf was breaking white over the outlying reefs of Point Salinas. He took a look round, sniffed the cool air, and fetched a stool from the charthouse.

“Well,” he said complacently, “we’re on the last lap now. That Lobito job was a deal quicker than I expected. Got everything you wanted, didn’t you?”

“Yes, the tanks are full again, and Webster’s made good his damages. We were lucky to find the dry dock empty, also that the propeller blades made a clean break without fouling anything. I was afraid of the shoe.”

“I suppose so, but that storm cost us ten days.”

It was in Lock’s mind to suggest that the cost might have been infinitely heavier, but he let that pass. What he wanted now was further orders and details. Jackson had bared his lean shins to the warming sun, and, wrinkling his narrow brows, sat plunged in thought.

“Mrs. Tarrant tells me you have your doubts whether we’re going to find anything at all,” said Jackson suddenly. “Is that right?”

“I have.”

The man, in no way offended, smiled a little. “Good! I like straight talk. But what’s the matter?”

“Only that on general principles it sounds too easy.”

“Ye-es—from your angle and lack of experience I suppose it might. Just the same, men have been pulling it off in that country for the last three years, and I reckon before that, only they managed to keep it quiet. Tom and I came near being too late. Merensky, the geological expert, who knows more about Namaqualand and diamonds than most other people have forgotten, says it’s the richest spot on the face of the earth to-day. So why does it sound too easy?”

“I don’t know. I’ve no arguments, but if we come back with a pocketful of diamonds I’d be the most surprised man on earth.”

“Well, you can prepare to be surprised. How long to reach the Orange now?”

“Something under three days.”

“In sight of land all the way?”

“Practically, yes.”

“Any chance of that squareface at the wheel hearing what we’re saying?”

“Not unless he’s a lip reader,” grinned Lock. “No, you’re safe.”

Jackson stroked his sharp shinbone with a long, sinewy hand. “First thing to get clear in your mind is how we’re going about it. There’s a place on the map called Witputz—it’s nothing but a tumble-down shack near a dry water-hole, seventy miles

from salt water, and the same north of the Orange. We're for Witputz. Right opposite, and a few miles off the coast, are what they call the Roast Beef Islands—just some bare reefs sticking up, with nothing on them, but Maclay's likely to find 'em useful. The diamond area runs about a hundred and fifty miles north and south of the Orange, and the bar across the river-mouth is said to be loaded with them. You get shot if you land there. Back of the desert is what we call the blue country. I guess I told you that."

"You did."

"Well, you get diamonds almost anywhere in the desert—it's about a hundred miles wide—and the Dutch farmers in the blue country run over into the sand dunes in their cars to prospect. They all have Fords. It's risky, but they do it. Get on top of a hill, and you can see their headlights almost any night. When they get the stones, the next thing is to get rid of 'em. I'll tell you about that later. It's simple—when you know how."

"Are we going to tackle this in a car?" asked Lock incredulously.

"Not much! *Cygnets* puts you and me ashore at night as nearly as possible opposite Witputz. That part of it is up to you. Then she backs out of sight of land. She can't go into the mouth of the Orange, and, anyway, that would make too much talk. We'd be followed, and, well, life is pretty cheap thereabouts. We take four days, maybe five, to do our job, and are picked up again, also at night. It's a case of signalling after sundown. That's all there is to it. Now you hit a point seventy-five miles north of the Orange, and I'll do the rest."

"There's no other way of getting into the country?"

"Sure, but it's too slow. You can go from the Cape to Vanrynsdorp by rail, then on by car across the desert to Port Nolloth, and hoof it the rest of the way. But I'm telling you the country isn't safe."

The whole affair sounded mad and impossible, but the manner of the man was curiously convincing. He, obviously, saw nothing strange in it, and Lock was yet to learn that he had been told the truth. Namaqualand, outside the closely guarded areas worked under the South African Government, was a congery of lawlessness. Its nomadic population was made up of untamable spirits drawn from all corners of the earth to this shining, sun-smitten, arid desert, where fortunes in the form of small white crystals had been lying, windblown, for uncounted centuries. One could knock fragments from sandstone ridges and find the precious particles there.

The thing was fabulous, incredible. Merensky, but some two years previously, had turned over a few shovels full of sand south of the mouth of the Orange and uncovered a king's ransom. So amazing was it that the syndicate, that opulent

guardian and dispenser of the diamonds of the world, sat up and whistled. The spot was wired in at once, but further discoveries followed over wide areas, fine diamonds of good water to be had for the taking. The human influx swelled daily. Dutch farmers from unprofitable acres in the blue country. Jew traders scenting sudden riches, prospectors, adventurers, all poured in. The area was extended till, as Jackson said, it was no less than three hundred miles long, with the Orange cutting it in two. The output of stones increased till the whole market was threatened. Women the world over looked at their jewels and began to wonder. Anxious men from the syndicate implored the Government to intervene, and, at the same time, drew on their own accumulated millions to absorb this new stream of sparkling gems.

Jackson knew all this better than most, and had overstated nothing.

"I know what you're wanting," he added dryly, "and don't blame you. Drop it if you like."

"I'm not dropping it," said Lock hastily.

"Right! There's five hundred in it for you, and your choice of a couple of sparklers." He searched the pocket of his dressing-gown. "I thought this might interest you—it came from there."

The thing lay in Lock's palm, cold, like glass with a faintly clouded surface, and perhaps a third of an inch square. It had the shape of two tiny pyramids with their bases joined, making a six-pointed cube. Lock, staring at it, experienced a thrill.

"That's nearly three carats, and worth, say, sixty pounds to a buyer, uncut. It's one of the Witputz find and I didn't know I had it till afterwards. 'Twas inside the lining of my coat when I found it a year later. I guess that's what set my memory at work again. The others are cached in a little ravine between two flat-topped hills about ten miles from Witputz. By gad, Lock! Wait till you see them! You'll forget this one."

He broke off, eyes very intense and bright, regarding the young man with a sort of cynical surprise that he could remain so cool. Then he shrugged his sloping shoulders.

"I said I'd tell you how the I.D.B. does it, didn't I?"

Lock nodded. It was no secret that the illicit diamond buyer was the bane of reputable dealers, but had to be recognized and dealt with to save the market. Was Jackson himself in the trade?

"It's this way. I'm a Dutch farmer and I have a few stones. Most everyone in that country has, one time or another. They talk about it as 'the business.' And we'll say I've found mine within the prohibited area. Well, off I start for a place we'll call Bullington. That's on the railway and a hundred miles distant, but I don't follow the

railway, not much. I go on foot, and I'm darned careful who I talk to and where I sleep. At Bullington I have a drink, and get put on to a go-between. He doesn't buy himself, but scouts for the real I.D.B., who's most likely a Ruthenian Jew. We'll call him Schemidtz, since I don't know anyone of that name."

"Go on," said Lock, vastly intrigued.

"Well, I make a deal with Schemidtz, who buys the lot at standard I.D.B. rates for cash, mind you, and no cheques. He gives, say, 50 per cent. of what the fellows we'll call the legitimates will give to keep the stones off the market."

"Do they actually deal with the I.D.B.?" said Lock, astonished.

Jackson laughed at him. "Not on your life—never see him—don't know him from Adam. He takes care of that. Anyway, Schemidtz has a safe friend in the Lichtenburg district who is working some legalized diggings. So he takes the stones there, makes his own deal, the friend plants the lot on his own ground by the light of the moon, and, a little later, digs them up. Then he sells direct to the legitimates. If you ask why all this circus, it's because while you can tell a Namaqualand stone from the ones they get in Bull Fontein or Jagersfontein, it's pretty well impossible to tell them apart from the Lichtenburg stuff. So there you are. The legitimates know all about it—of course they do—but they've got to buy just the same. I sometimes wonder how many millions they've paid out that way."

This recital, given with a casual fluency that left little room for doubt, was a revelation. But Jackson had gone a bit too far and shown himself too well versed in illegal practices, and Lock's impression must have betrayed his thoughts, for in the next moment there came a laugh.

"Darned if I can't read your mind this very minute. Here—I'll say it for you. 'This man's a crook—he's in the game he talks about—let him have it—I won't touch it.' Am I far out?"

"You're exactly right!"

"Good enough! And don't you ever try to bluff, because it isn't in you. Now listen! If I were in the game, I'd be the last man to talk about it. That for one thing. The next is that I've told you no more than everyone in Namaqualand knows already. You stay at Luderitz or Port Nolloth or Springbokfontein overnight, and you'll get all that and a sight more. You'll be asked if you haven't got any yourself. No, I'm not in it, and not going to be. I can make all I want out of it. What's more, I've no particular object in leading an innocent young man astray. Do you recall that broadcast announcement we got?"

"Very distinctly."

"What date was it?"

“I don’t remember, but can get it from the log.”

“You needn’t trouble—it was April the fourth. The Government had passed the Act the day before, or, mind you, more than a year after my find was made. So I’m not going prospecting now, but for what I left then. And, anyway, we don’t know that Witputz is in the proclaimed area at all. I’d bet the Government doesn’t know, either. You can’t divide up a blistered wilderness like a market garden. But as I said before, you can drop out if you’ve a mind to.”

This was specious enough, and Lock took time to think it over. If the area was guarded, they were bound to discover the fact. If not, the scheme might be considered. Then another doubt struck him.

“You say the I.D.B. was in business long ago?”

“He certainly was.”

“Why was it illicit then?”

“They bought stones stolen by natives, mostly from the big diggings. If a Kaffir found a good one he’d likely swallow it or maybe cut his leg and put it in the cut till the place healed. All sorts of tricks, and there’s nothing new about the I.D.B. Any more questions?”

“No—my head’s going round already.”

Jackson got up stiffly and stretched, while unexpected muscles revealed themselves on shoulder and arm.

“Well, that’s one subject on which you’re better posted than you were. I guess I’ll have a wash and a smoke. See you later.”

CHAPTER XI

THE RETURN OF TARRANT

HOPE was watching an albatross whose vibrant but motionless wings seemed born of the ocean itself. The taut outspread pinions, fifteen feet from tremulous tip to tip, gathered into their shining curves every slightest breath that stirred over the unwrinkled sea. Its breast was like snow. At times it banked in long luxurious curves, and the girl could see the two dark stripes on the strong, bottle-shaped back. Again, by some miracle of flight, it was uplifted, cutting a liquid way in effortless ascent, dwindling to a speck in the unclouded sky, then dropping to resume its silent pursuit, master of all storms, pilot of the blue, wanderer through measureless caves of air.

“Rather wonderful, isn’t it?” said Lock close by.

She started a little. It appeared to her that since leaving Lobito, three days previously, he had found or made so much to do that she had had but little talk with him. What time he had to spare was appropriated by Eva; and, considering what she had seen, Hope was not greatly surprised. As he himself had said, Lock only thought he loved her. But it hurt more than she liked to admit. Those few moments in the chartroom after the climax of the gale had been met and passed, were still very vivid, and in her heart she treasured them. Only once before in her whole life had a man said to her anything like that. But the man was Jackson, and she had been terrified. And now, when another man said it, Jackson was within call.

Of late there seemed to have been something of a conspiracy about life in which Mrs. Tarrant took a leading part. She demanded the society of Hope, talked to her more than ever before about a multitude of unimportant matters, insisted on a great deal of bridge with Eva and Jackson making the four, and altogether built up a routine that the girl, as a guest, found it practically impossible to evade. Jackson spent much time in the charthouse with Lock over maps, and when Eva was not in the lounge she invariably gravitated toward the bridge. Now, at Lock’s voice, Hope wondered how he had escaped.

“Lot’s of stories about the albatross,” he went on, “some sailors believe they’re inhabited by the souls of the old Vikings.”

“I rather like that. Where do they come from?”

“There isn’t very much known about them except that they breed in Concepcion Bay—that’s just nearby—and Tristan da Cunha, three little islands half-way between

here and South America.”

“They’ve a long way to go,” she smiled.

“Yes, and I’ve never seen one at rest. They seem to get where they want without effort. Nice kind of life, isn’t it?”

He went on joking, being secretly rather nervous, then took a biscuit from his pocket and jerked it out. The great pinions tilted, the bottle-shaped body side-slipped, and the biscuit vanished ere it touched the water.

“Rather a contrast, don’t you think?” said Hope.

“To what?”

“Us.”

“I suppose it is some ways. For instance?”

“He settles things for himself—we don’t. He’s free—we’re not.”

“Aren’t you free?” he asked gravely.

“Yes—to do a good many things that don’t interest me. But I wonder whether any woman is ever quite free.”

“Isn’t it the same with us all?”

“Are you speaking of yourself?”

“Yes, this time.”

“What interests you the most?”

“You,” he said quietly.

“I—I couldn’t have assumed that judging by the past fortnight,” she countered, feeling immoderately happy. “Why, am I interesting?” This with a not very successful attempt at lightness, for Lock had moved nearer and his eyes were very steady.

“For some reason, I don’t know what, things have gone all wrong. I’ve hoped to see a lot of you, and seen very little. And in my kind of job I can’t make the opportunity.”

“You—you haven’t looked so awfully busy.”

He shook his head at that. “Won’t you help?”

“I’ve been wondering, too,” she confessed. “I thought we were going to be great friends.”

Lock’s throat was getting dry. “Friendship wasn’t exactly what I meant,” he creaked.

The albatross floated nearer, so that they could see the yellowish rings round his beady black eyes. He looked old, unnameably wise, and quite without feeling. But he seemed interested, staring at them from another element.

“You really care?” Hope whispered. “It wasn’t just a bit of impulse—or tenderness?”

“Tenderness! Yes, that was it—and more—a lot more. And,” he went on bitterly, “I haven’t the right to say a single word. A few medals, forty pounds a month, and no prospects! What’s that? I shouldn’t have spoken at all.”

“Do you think that makes any real difference, if——”

“It does,” he persisted. “It’s not your fault, it’s mine. I want to do a thousand things for you, and can’t do one. Forgive me.”

Looking straight into his eyes, she saw the struggle of the man with himself. She did care, and it moved her profoundly. In a way he was something like the albatross, a sea wanderer, born for the same freedom, strong and wise in his own element, but a little helpless out of it. She liked his sort of clumsiness, his bigness, his inability to be indirect, and she felt that one could trust him to the world’s end. So Eva had been lying. She might have guessed that. Nothing understood or arranged for! Hope’s first thought was to come out with this, explaining why she had been so distant, but a glance at the troubled face decided her otherwise. Trouble enough already, and she could imagine him confronting Eva like an angry schoolboy.

“It’s very difficult,” she said gently, “because I feel what you do.”

“Hope!”

“But, Norman, I couldn’t marry, or even promise to marry anyone—now.”

“Why?”

“My father.”

This brought a sudden revulsion, as though he had been struck, and there flashed back a vision of a room in Soho. Was there ever a man whose pretence at death had proved more untimely? But no oath would be allowed to stand in the way now. Then came Hope’s voice, small and sad.

“If I knew that my father were dead it would help so much. That’s a strange thing to say, and, Norman, I can’t explain it. Or if Mr. Jackson were to move out of my life, and I knew that none of us would see or hear of him again. But there again I can’t explain.”

“You would marry me if it could be proved that your father was actually drowned?” he said aghast.

She nodded, her eyes very soft.

He experienced a shock. Till this moment he had not realized the strength of the thing called love. All he knew was that in some queer fashion the vision of Hope had come between him and all that he thought or did. But now that the truth of which he had secret knowledge cut in between him and his desire, that hunger flashed up into a passion of longing. Were he to break his oath and come out with the truth, it must be at his own grievous cost. If he continued to conceal it, Hope might never be his,

and Mrs. Tarrant would marry Jackson. The damnable unfairness of the thing was incredible.

“There’s something concerning your father and Jackson that you can’t—or won’t—tell me?” he stammered.

“Don’t say ‘won’t,’ Norman.”

“And yet you care!”

“It’s not my secret, and I do care. Won’t you believe that much?”

The truth stirred in his brain, restless and discomfiting. He, in turn, was struggling with another secret. What if he were to call this queerly assorted company together, now, and come out with it? What effect would that have? And could it be any worse than the conditions under which these people, either ignorant of the truth or shutting their eyes to it, were not associated?

“Do you think it fair to the biggest thing in life to take that attitude?” he asked grimly. “I don’t know when I began to care, but soon after we met, the thought of you never left me. When you were on the bridge and we were alone, I think I was happier than ever before in my life. I couldn’t quite realize it then, but I do now. One has only to look back to be convinced. When you weren’t there, I missed you. All kinds of things ran through my head, and presently I seemed to be working for you or something connected with you. I wanted to stand between you and anything that could hurt you. It didn’t seem possible that you should care for me, but that made no difference. In a way I didn’t expect it. But now that you do care, you say that because of something I mustn’t know, the thing has to stop here. Is that correct?”

She turned away her face so that he might not see the trembling of her lips, and it was some time before she answered.

“Do you believe in fate, Norman?”

“Not in my kind—at the moment.”

“Don’t—don’t! You’re hurting us both.” She put her hand on his, and he, thrilling to the touch, longed to take her in his arms. “It can’t be always like this,” she whispered.

“What is there to change it?” he said dully, praying that Tarrant might come to some violent end.

“Something will,” she said with wistful confidence. “Perhaps soon. I’ve a feeling that it may be very soon.”

He motioned to the coast of Africa. “There?”

“I can’t tell. But we’re all close to the edge of something. It’s in stronger hands than ours, Norman. You’ve done lots of hard things in your life. Won’t you do another—just one more?”

“What?”

“Accept that to go on with—and wait. Try and get some comfort out of it. You know now that I love you! Listen—I’ll say it—I love you, dear. Be content with that till we can see a little further. And never think again that you’ve nothing to offer. You’ve all the best things a woman wants. Will you try to do this?”

“Yes,” he said, marvelling at the rareness and sweetness of her.

She gave a little sigh, then sent him a wonderful smile.

“Then that’s all settled. Now about to-night! It is to-night?”

“About two in the morning. You’ll be asleep.”

“You don’t know me yet. You’re to be away four days?”

“Perhaps five.” He squared his shoulders, welcoming the chance of action. “There isn’t any wind on shore, so the surf won’t be heavy. That’s something to start with.”

“And we pick you up at the same spot?”

“Yes, with luck, as nearly as possible. You’ll see our signals.”

“Norman!”

“Yes, blessed one?”

“Promise me one thing, and I’m tremendously in earnest. At first I didn’t want you to go—perhaps that might have told you that I cared—a little—but you are going, and now it seems for the best.”

“All my promises are yours,” he said.

“Then watch Mr. Jackson!”

“That will be particular pleasure.”

“And you’re not to take any risks on my account; I mean about anything you think belongs to me.”

He made a face at her. “I’m looking forward to a perfectly amicable excursion, with a profitable end. And, darling, I’ll need the money for our wedding trip. Five hundred pounds for an interesting stroll across country with an unusual companion. I’m overpaid.”

She shook her head, smiling. “You’re honest, but he’s a trickster, and——”

She broke off. The saloon door had opened and Mrs. Tarrant’s voice became audible calling to Eva in her cabin to come out on deck. Hope sent her lover a look full of trust and sudden appeal.

“Norman dear, go now—quickly. I couldn’t do any pretending if you were here. I’ll manage somehow to see you before midnight. Bless you, dearest.”

He went back to the bridge with an extraordinary feeling of peace.

Between Concepcion Bay and Luderitz great sand dunes march unbroken into

the Atlantic, and here the coastal population is made up of vast colonies of sea birds. Through them *Cygnets* progressed a few miles out from land, passing occasionally small vessels occupied in gathering guano. Save for this there was no sign of life till Luderitz came in view, the pillar of a lighthouse guarding the entrance to its sheltered roadstead. Then, further south, the mainland grew more broken, with an outline of irregular hills visible to the east, but there was maintained the same aspect of solitude, with no patches of green, no gap in the line of surf that stretched apparently to infinity.

Lock and Maclay, checking bearings by Luderitz light, reduced speed, and with the fall of night the yacht took on an aspect of mystery. Over leagues of restless ocean she had come this far, urged by the will of the man in whose hands the future now lay, and the thing was a mystery to all but him. It seemed somehow suitable that the next act of the drama should commence in the dark. Still miles from land, a sort of breathlessness enveloped all, while something of the same tension filtered through engine-room and fore-castle. The lounge curtains were drawn, only navigation lights shown, the sharp hiss of split water at the bows was reduced to a gentle ripple, and the figures on deck moved without sound.

The air was clear, with a half-moon, and visibility good—for which Lock was thankful. At midnight, when he reckoned on being abreast of his objective, Jackson, who was on the bridge beside him, nodded with decision, and they made out a small low island not far from shore.

“That’s the one I spoke of. Can we get inside it?”

“I think so.”

It was tricky work, but with two men sounding in the leads, and speed reduced to a crawl, *Cygnets* nosed in. There was plenty of water. They anchored in fifteen fathoms, the chain running out with a harsh noise, and the yacht swung delicately, resting like a weary bird. The three women had gathered in the stern while Jackson gave his final instructions in the charthouse. Maclay took these without a sign of surprise, merely asking for further orders in case the two did not return on the fourth night or the fifth—or perhaps the sixth. He spoke like a man who demanded to know exactly where he stood in this matter.

Jackson, fondling a lean chin, seemed amused.

“The owner will be on board, won’t she?”

“Ay, but not the skipper.”

“Well, if Lock and I go off with the stuff, you’re skipper. We’ll Morse you from the shore with a red lantern—you needn’t look for us by day. What shooting irons have you got on board?”

Lock's brows went up a little as Jackson selected a magazine rifle. For himself he took an automatic. Then water bottles—big flasks that Webster had covered with felt. When it came to clothing, Jackson was insistent.

"It's as hot as Hades by day, and cold as charity at night. Wear flannel, with a solar topee. Bring matches; no, we don't need any shovel, and I've got a compass. Can you go twelve hours without a drink?"

"If I have to."

"You'll have to right enough. No afternoon tea this trip."

His humour and deliberation woke a sort of admiration in the younger man, for never before had Jackson seemed so completely in his own element. No longer did he appear elusive and tricky, but a skilled adventurer, balancing his chances, perfectly aware of what he faced, and more than ready to face it. And, thought Lock, they would be man to man this time.

"Trouble with old Tom," came the dry voice, "was that he got thirsty right away. You pay for that. Then he used to talk about water, which was another mistake. Well, I guess we'd better say *au revoir*."

They went aft to join the others, and there followed a period during which conversation was forced and unnatural. With the exception of Jackson they shared a kind of mental confusion, and the affair of the hour took on a semblance of unreality. Lock had an unexplainable and vivid conviction that never again would they be gathered under the same relationship, that such a group could not assemble twice, and this was intensified by the setting of the scene, and the half-light of moon and stars that revealed the land as a strip of opaqueness bounded by the velvety murmur of surf.

"It's like the first act of a mystery play," said Mrs. Tarrant, alive to the whole effect. "I'm going to write a novel, and call it 'The Diamond Hunters.' Mr. Lock, would you like to be the hero?"

He laughed, feeling that Hope's eyes were on him. She had not managed to see him alone, and now it was too late, but something passed between them and he tried to be content.

"There won't be any hero unless they bring back something that takes our breath away," put in Eva. "Are you two really aware of what's expected of you?"

"The biggest of them," drawled Jackson, "must be three-quarters of an inch square, say twenty carats, and worth two thousand, uncut, if it's worth a cent. It's the size of an acorn. That's yours, Ju. It will make another eight good big stones or a couple of regular blazers, whichever you like."

"Then if you don't bring it back I'll never forgive you."

“Supposing we don’t bring anything back?” jerked out Lock, hardly knowing that he spoke.

She shook her head at him. “You said that once before—and I didn’t like it.”

“Sorry again!” He reddened, feeling awkward and uncomfortable. His object being to keep guard on Jackson, it was strange that she did not realize it. “I’ll do my best,” he added, “or in other words, what I’m told to do.”

Maclay’s voice was heard amidships, davits swung out, and there came a faint whine of falls running through the blocks. Then a gentle crunch, a subdued bump of wood on wood, and the dinghy slid aft along *Cygnets* sleek side. An electric torch lighted the faces of two men at the oars, and a lantern with a red globe was in the stern. This bit of chiaroscuro was very suggestive—and practical. Talk ceased abruptly. Maclay came up, touching his cap.

“All quite ready, sir.”

“Do we all shake hands with everybody?” asked Mrs. Tarrant, a little hysterically. “Do we?”

“I guess we’ll wait till we get back.”

This from Jackson. He betrayed not a vestige of excitement, and started for the gangway steps. A rifle was slung over his shoulder. Half-way down he stopped, looked up and smiled, showing his large yellowish teeth.

“I’m going to turn a pessimist into an optimist. Come on, Lock. Next time you board this boat you’ll be feeling like a different man. So lon’, everybody!”

Oars dipped in water like molten glass. The dinghy moved forward. *Cygnets* graceful lines stood clear against the background of large and friendly stars. For a moment Lock could see the heads and shoulders of the three at the rail, while *Cygnets* turned into a dusky gull, floating with folded wings.

Then the night swallowed her.

There was only a slight ground swell, but the sound of surf increased, mellow and hollow, as they drew inshore. A hundred yards off the man rowing stroke rested on his oars and looked over his shoulder.

“It’s not so bad, sir; I think we can take you right in.”

He was a good waterman. Riding high and steady, the dinghy carried on in a smother of foam. The two jumped out, seizing either gunwale and, aided by the lift of the sea, brought her into shallow water. With a heave she touched land.

“Be here again about the same time in four days, maybe five, and give me that lantern,” said Jackson. “Well, friend, we’re for it now.”

The sand felt strange under their feet, and they could see the great dunes receding like broken waves toward the interior. Half a mile on, and in a hollow between two yellow crests, Jackson unslung his rifle, collected some flat stones and built a tiny penthouse, into which he put the lantern. He covered it and stretched out.

“We’ll stay here till sun up; too rough travelling at night unless you have to. And if smoking makes you thirsty, I wouldn’t.”

The air grew colder. Lock went on to a point from which the sea was visible, and made out the stern light of *Cygnets*, a tiny eye that blinked intermittently and soon vanished. Hope, he thought, had a harder part to play than himself. Rejoining Jackson, he lay listening to the surf.

There was no other sound. Jackson did not speak, nor did he move, his slack figure looking completely comfortable, and proclaiming that this was nothing to him.

Dawn came with a rush, heralded by a faint pink in the east that deepened swiftly to a sort of aerial conflagration into which the sun thrust his blazing shoulders, rising out of unmeasured wilderness. Jackson made coffee, while Lock fried bacon over a few windblown roots. The older man stared into the sky.

“We’d better be moving. It’s going to be a scorcher.”

They moved, carrying their loads in sacks slung on their backs—food, saucepan, water bottles. Jackson was wiry, walking with a loose, easy gait as though he were never out of training. He kept his lips closed. He looked but seldom at the compass and Lock observed that, varying his angle from the sun, he held a remarkably straight course. The country maintained the same character, an endless panorama of sand ridges, areas of disintegrated rock, and bone-dry water courses that began and ended nowhere. The desert had drunk them all. It was a plain of cosmic rubbish in which one might wander for ever. The air grew hotter. At ten o’clock Lock felt on fire. He did not sweat, the air being too devoid of moisture, but his skin was scorched and began to blister. When they halted, Jackson cut a bacon rind and rubbed it on the young man’s face.

“Takes the oil out of your joints, this sun, doesn’t it?” he said, and walked on.

The rest of that day was a purgatory. No wind stirred, and the country became a furnace. The sky was empty save for the blazing sun. Lock walked behind the other man with no attempt to speak, eyes fixed hypnotically on the sloping shoulders and tireless legs.

Jackson, like the albatross, was in his own element. Overnight he had acquired distinction, and become the kind that inspired confidence. Now he pushed on as though he knew exactly what he wanted and where to find it, and such was his assurance that Lock could no longer regard this affair as a mad chase after the

improbable. He pictured the two partners as they made their last trip through this sun-smitten waste, wondering which walked ahead then—this man, or the one with watery blue eyes, big face and barrel-like body. Tarrant, with his stumpy, pile-driving legs, must have made heavy going in the loose sand. One could imagine him puffing, moving through the sand almost as much as over it, getting hotter, angrier and more dangerous as the days passed, while Jackson probably kept cool, and would be apt to be sardonic. Every few miles Jackson would stop, and they moistened their lips at a tepid bottle. Then with a half-humorous but searching glance, he would tramp on. At six, when they had been walking for eleven hours, he halted in the shade of a sandstone ledge.

“We’ll call it a day. You’re doing well for a new chum.”

“What have we done—thirty miles?”

“About that—not so bad. I’m going to revise my figures. You notice we’ve been rising a bit of late?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we’re getting on towards what’s called the Huib Plateau—which means you can knock a bit off that total of seventy-five miles I spoke of. We’re a good half-way now. And I’ve been on this ground before. Tom and I camped somewhere round where we stand now.”

He stared about in the suddenly falling dusk with a slow searching circuit. “It’s coming back clearer all the time, Lock! Yes, ’twas within a mile or two of here, and we were darned thirsty. Have a drink! Wash it round in your mouth before you swallow.”

The lukewarm water was nectar, and Lock began to feel better. A little later, after they had eaten, Jackson took out a chamois pouch and produced the small shining stone he had exhibited before.

“I don’t know but what you might call me diamond mad,” he said, focusing on the magnetic thing with profound abstraction. “With some of us it’s gold, others pearls, others emeralds. I’m for these. It started away back, all of twenty years, but I never found ’em till I got here. I’ve walked over what I knew were gold mines, and never turned a hair. I’ve seen places in Panama where the Spaniards and Aztecs and goodness knows how many forgotten tribes worked gold for a thousand years, and I wasn’t interested.

“There’s a gully back from the Nile where I saw what I guess was one of King Solomon’s mines. It was an adit of sorts, and blocked by a fall of roof. Inside that were skeletons—they went to powder when you fingered ’em—and the skulls were all stove in. There’s an extinct crater in Central America with a lake in it, and a

temple alongside. The priests used to throw in gold images as votive offerings to the local god—whatever he was, I’ve fished ’em up myself. But gold against diamonds never counted with me. And this country—well, there are places I know where, if I could run the sand of a couple of miles square through a sieve, we’d be using diamonds for trouser buttons—and that’s a fact. You’re thinking I’m crazy!”

“Not altogether,” said Lock, involuntarily.

Jackson chuckled. “Quite an admission from you, and I guess you mean it. I told you some time ago I’d no idea of wasting time on a pleasure cruise with a bunch of women. You’ll understand better now, maybe.”

Lock nodded. What moved in his mind was the rapidity with which the man must have made up his plans and his mind the very moment he found Julia Tarrant at Uplands. She and what was hers had forthwith become his objective, and within a short time were the creatures of his purpose. Seeing him here, the purpose revealed, and his whole persistent nature centred on its achievement, Lock was persuaded that, later, Julia Tarrant would find herself of secondary importance. Such a man seemed to have no part of himself to give to a woman, no faculty of response. What he might do for her, such as adorning her with diamonds, would be but self-gratification, the sparkling evidence of his own success.

“Suppose you get what you’re after, what next? Will you retire?”

“Retire!” There was a world of meaning in it. “I’ll do that when I’m finished, used up—and not before.”

“You don’t want to live in England?”

Jackson smoothed a little patch of sand, traced hieroglyphics with rock splinter, and shook his head with a slowly decreasing motion like a pendulum coming to rest.

“Take old Tom! He retired. Maybe there were other reasons, but, anyway, he quit. Next thing is he drowns himself—perhaps. Anyway, the retirement didn’t work. Instead of that he might have been here—right now—this minute.”

“I am!” squeaked Tarrant, looming up suddenly in the dusk. “What about it?”

CHAPTER XII

DIAMOND MAD

IN after years, looking back at this moment, Lock always felt that it was extraordinarily natural, that nothing more reasonable could have happened, and that Tarrant, emerging thus from the gloom, was exactly the man he had wanted without knowing it.

And the silence of the whole affair! At one instant Tarrant was not there except as a character in Jackson's memory: in the next, with no further words, he had solidified out of the night, settled himself, bearlike, on the sand between the two, and sat glancing from one to the other with a glint of amusement in his pale watery eyes. Then he took off his boots.

"Hullo, Bob!" he rumbled. "I rather thought I'd find you here; you too, Mr. Lock."

Jackson, his face a mask, made no answer. Tarrant took out his pipe, rubbed the bowl into his leathery palm and filled it with deliberation.

"You used to tell me not to smoke, but I'm taking a chance to-night. Anyone got a match—I'm out?"

Lock extended his lighter, and against its pin-point of flame the big round face looked on fire.

"Thanks. How are you, Bob? It seems to me 'twas somewhere hereabouts we saw each other last, wasn't it?"

"After which you've been mighty ready to lose sight of everybody." Jackson broke into speech with a sort of biting sarcasm. "How the blazes did you get here? The last time I saw you was in Soho—about a month ago."

Lock's head had begun to swim, but he was painfully anxious not to miss a word of this, and seemed to have been forgotten by the two. They had constituted some kind of tribunal on each other, displaying no real animosity, and talked as doubtless they must have talked on many another such night as this.

"There's a lot I want to ask you, too," said Tarrant heavily, "and darned if I think you can answer it."

Jackson made no immediate reply to that, and Lock wondered was ever a man in so tight a corner before.

"Maybe yes, and maybe no," he said after a long pause. "There's no pressing

hurry about it, is there?"

"I guess not, Bob, so long as we do talk."

"Then before we go any further, why not put our friend here back on the rails?"

Tarrant gave one of his throaty chuckles. "You're right. I'd forgotten him."

"Well, Lock"—Jackson's voice was slow, as though picking his words—"you've held up your end darned well, and this lets you out."

"So you knew this man was alive!"

"Sure—and so did you. We break even there. I saw him in Dean Street—we'd been there together many a time—I saw you go up to his room—saw you come out. That started me thinking hard, and I sort of guessed how he'd fixed things up with you. There were reasons for that—they'll probably come later. All the same, I took you to be a straight man, and proved it several times on the voyage out." He paused, and sent Tarrant a satirical smile. "Never got a cable from Las Palmas, did you, Tom?"

"No; what cable?"

"Our friend sent one saying that Hope was all right." This with a glance at Lock, sly, satisfied, and showing a devilish sense of enjoyment.

The big man heaved himself up, rigid. "How could he know that?"

"Every reason to—she's on the yacht now."

Tarrant choked, then took a long breath, drawing it in through his teeth with a low hiss, while his chest expanded, it seemed in a wave. The big fists clenched, the thick finger-tips dragging with a dry sound across the wide tough palms.

"Hope!" he said in a gusty whisper. "Hope here!"

"Sure, and she's all right. That's another thing to talk about, but let's get back to our friend. I feel responsible, having brought him. I knew that he knew about you, but he didn't know that I did too, so I kept him guessing. But he didn't split, Tom; not a word or sign, though sometimes the ice was pretty thin. Whatever you promised him—I guess you did promise something—he's earned it. I offered him five hundred to talk, and he wasn't having any. He's all right!"

Lock, hearing this as in a dream, saw Tarrant give a nod.

"There's another thing I'd like to say right away—now. That letter I wrote——"

"Damn you to eternity for that letter."

"Ye-es, I suppose you would feel that way, but forget it. I've nothing against you—now."

This volcanic exchange, taking place without the least threat on either side, produced in Lock a sort of daze, and he sat perfectly still, trying to piece the fragments together, and aware that in spite of their violent differences there was

being recreated between these two something of their former companionship. They hated each other, yet they could talk thus without blows.

“Any water to spare, Bob?”

“Sure—here!”

Tarrant just moistened his lips and put the flask down.

“It’s happening all over again, eh, and just about the same place? Like it was yesterday. Now there’s a lot to settle, but it has nothing to do with our friend, so why not let it stand over a while? And if you want to know how I come to be here, well, I did some quick guessing, and left Southampton in a fast liner about an hour after you did. Nice boat that *Cygnets*. I saw her steam out. How about a little snooze?”

Without the least hesitation Jackson agreed. They glanced simultaneously at Lock, sending him a nod as though to signify that he was in some fashion a guest of theirs, and lay down back to back to keep out the cold. This was so instinctive, so entirely primitive in its effect, that it suggested countless other nights when they had done exactly the same thing at the same time and in the same setting. The touch of the desert was on them, the kinship of the prospector, and in a moment they were asleep.

Lock could not rest for hours. His skin burned, but that was nothing to the ferment in his brain, and when, finally, his eyes closed, it seemed but a moment before Jackson’s hand was on his shoulder.

“Wake up, pilgrim. We’ve got to make a push to-day.”

It was a strange journey, with very little said. The sun ever hotter, had, apparently, burned out the last vestige of open antagonism, and the two displayed a sort of jocular relief, Jackson poking fun and telling Tarrant to lift his feet higher and not kick up so much sand. When they stopped to rest they did a little casual prospecting, and at one place Tarrant, chipping at a sandstone slab, disclosed a small diamond in the fracture. He laughed, exchanging a significant look with his re-established partner.

“All over the place!” he grunted, and gave it to Lock. “You keep it.”

Lock took the gem, wondering, pinching its rounded corners. This offhand discovery and disposal of something worth perhaps a month’s pay made him feel out of the picture, superfluous; but, secretly, he was convinced that what was taking place formed merely a prelude to what would be vastly different. Yet Tarrant, standing there with his big red face, a smile in his pale eyes, and the diamond in his hand, would always be unforgettable.

They tramped on. By noon the country had changed a little, with less sand and more rock from which the heat came up in waves as from a hot-air pipe. When they

halted again, Lock's throat felt on fire. Jackson examining the water bottles, looked grave.

"Three of us now. We'll have to cut down on it."

They took a sip each, eating hardly at all, with no moisture in their mouths. Tarrant took out his pipe, fondled and put it away. Then, his head a little on one side, he sent Jackson a straight stare.

"Bob," he began, "there's one thing that beats me."

"Only one?"

"'Twill do to start with. Why didn't you make for Witputz more than a year ago? Why did you leave that stuff?"

"I'll ask you the same question later. My end of it is that, first, I was picked up by some bushmen. Maybe you've guessed that much?"

"Someone picked you up all right. Go on!"

"And when I came round I wrote that letter."

"Yes—a hell of a letter. Well?"

"Then when I was starting back for Witputz someone hit me on the head in a scrap and I lost my memory. I went looney, Tom, looney!"

"You—went—looney!" repeated Tarrant in an extraordinary tone.

"Sure! I couldn't get anything straight for a year. It seems I worked for a Dutch farmer near Weetmanshoop—name of Hensdorp. I guess he's there now if you want to check me up. I had mixed memories of things, but nothing clear. One day I found a diamond inside the lining of my coat—this one."

He held out the stone. Tarrant's pale eyes stared at it, then at his partner. He seemed fascinated, in no way incredulous, and one could see him unravelling knots in the tangled skein of the past months.

"I don't remember that particular one. Go on!"

"It started me over again. I got you and diamonds somehow connected. Then I remembered that you'd been married—saw it in an Exeter paper in Weetmanshoop—and reckoned that if I could find you the rest would follow. So I lit out for England. By the time that I got there my wind was clear."

"And you found my wife?"

Jackson nodded, and there ensued a moment when neither of them was ready to go further. The woman had come into it. Anything was possible.

"Supposing we don't discuss Ju yet?"

"I'm agreeable, Tom."

Mrs. Tarrant was set aside—for the time. She would keep. The chasm had been met, bridged and passed all in an instant, and Lock marvelled at the facility of it. He

had a glimpse of the complete accuracy with which each understood the mentality of the other. He knew that before long they might be at each other's throats, but this made no difference to the present entente.

"Y'know," went on Tarrant, "it's just plumb luck I found you. My water had run out."

"Again!"

"Same thing as before—I never had any luck over water. I hustled right up from the Cape by car as soon as I landed, thinking I had you beat by a week, maybe more. I dropped the car at the Orange, then reckon I got twisted. 'Twas just before dusk I looked over a ridge and saw you two coming along. Someone else for Witputz, I said to myself, then made out who it was, large as life. Queer, wasn't it? I slid behind a rock, afraid I'd laugh or something, and heard you say I'd drowned myself—perhaps. That reached me all right." He made a large, vague gesture. "I was glad to see our friend here. Case of three making better company than two, eh, Bob?"

"Maybe—yes—I guess you're right."

"And what's got to be fixed after this—I suppose we'll let that stand?" said Tarrant in a queer voice.

Jackson's lids fluttered a little, the first sign of tension he had shown.

"Sure, Tom. We'll straighten that out later."

Lock had had only a glimpse, but it was enough, nor was he in any way misled by this superficial calm. They were on edge. They knew to a hair's-breadth the limit of their present truce, and talked with the strained civility of duellists, their temper and malignity held in leash. And they were glad of his presence!

"How's Hope, Mr. Lock!" asked Tarrant deliberately.

"She's well; she came on board at St. Malo."

"St. Malo! Who'd have thought it—just across the Channel in France, isn't it? And not so far off either! Then my wife knew?"

"I assume so."

"Well—well! And how is she—my wife?" he added, possessively.

"They're all quite fit. We had a gale this side of Cape Verde that delayed us, and we ran into Lobito for repairs. We're about ten days late."

"Huh! Lucky for me, eh, Bob?"

"Darned lucky," said Jackson with entire frankness.

Tarrant thought this over, seemed almost to enjoy it, and took a deliberate look at his partner, measuring him with a formidable calm that was immensely suggestive—a very different Tarrant from the one in Soho, with none of the uneasy furtiveness

and massive fear he then displayed. What had changed him? Then he rose, took a long stare into the north, and pointed.

“Hanged if I don’t see Witputz, Bob!”

On the horizon two flat-topped hills with a gap between, towards which the three plodded over a baking plain. At times the hills were obliterated by swimming waves of hot air. They receded. They seemed to approach, drifting southward as though floating over an invisible sea.

Again they changed shape. In turn they became solid, amorphous, transparent.

The partners were silent, regarding these ridges with mesmerized gaze, hating each other, at secret implacable war with each other, yet brought side by side and drawn irresistibly by the same shining magnet, unified in their common hunger. Thirst and weariness were forgotten. The hills, ceasing to swim, became sharper. One made out their wrinkles, individual masses of angular rock, patches of sand, and, finally, the faint suggestion of what had once been an attempt at a farm, with a ruined shack, tumbling walls and the remains of a roof. Beyond this, a little gully, a mere crack in the sun-baked earth.

“By God!” said Tarrant thickly, and halted. “Came straight as a die, didn’t we?”

The three squatted for a rest, staring at this emptiness. The spot was deserted, forgotten, a discarded scene of useless effort, a graveyard of hope, but not that of these two.

“It’s a long way to come,” went on the big man, reflectively, “and now we’re this far, we’d better agree on how we’ll do the thing. Here’s Lock knowing nothing about diamonds, so why not let him split ’em up, while you and I keep our hands off, eh, Bob?”

This was reasonable, but ominous, and Lock did not speak. He felt glad of the weight in the leather holster at his hip. Jackson had scooped up a handful of sand and let it trickle, hour-glass fashion, through his long fingers.

“That’s all right,” he smiled, drawling through the corner of his mouth. “I guess we’d better not touch ’em till he’s divided up. You agreeable, Lock?”

The young man nodded. In a setting where everything was apart from the normalities of life, it was not strange that he should stand between these two. And he had wondered about that division.

“And after that again?” said Tarrant, significantly.

Jackson gave a dry chuckle. “Damned if I know, Tom, how you held it so long. Been waiting for that since you turned up. Now I’ve travelled a bit at your wife’s

expense, and been so darned well treated that if you hadn't undrowned yourself there's no saying what mightn't have happened. But as things stand, I've changed my plans—slightly. I'm for Bullington. I don't see that there's anything else for it unless you—but no—you wouldn't go that far.”

“Wouldn't what?”

“Just an odd fancy. Forget it. You'll take my regards back to the yacht, and maybe a sparkler for the owner: that is,” he added negligently, “if you don't object.”

“Sure, Bob; I don't object. And then?”

“That's all, isn't it?” said Jackson, with an extraordinary glance.

“Not quite, Bob, not quite. That letter! I'm not going to explain how that letter struck me, or how it mixed things up, but I want it unwritten. It sort of sticks in my crop. It's all done with anyway—you said so yesterday.”

“Bit sensitive in spots, aren't you, Tom?”

“Perhaps, but I mean what I say now.”

“Well, in that case”—here Jackson's cold eyes rested thoughtfully on Lock—“suppose I were to say here and now, in the presence of a witness, that when the thing happened we were both crazy with thirst and drunk with diamonds, and neither of us was responsible? Supposing I said that?”

“You do—now?”

“Sure I do.”

“You heard that, Mr. Lock?”

“I heard it.” Lock was completely at a loss.

“We shake on it, Bob?”

“That's right.”

Lock, watching, saw the lean hand engulfed in Tarrant's great paw, and remembered that gladiators saluted before combat. Then came Tarrant's voice, changed, younger, infinitely more cheerful and confident:

“Come on, you fellows.”

He ploughed forward, going straight, shoulders hunched, like a bloodhound on full scent. Then Jackson. Behind them Lock, who with some premonition took his automatic from the holster and carried it loose in his pocket. This with a glimmering of what he now felt sure must have happened hereabouts some eighteen months ago. There was no talk; only the crunch of sand alternating with a lean whisper of loose stone. His breath came faster, but not with fatigue.

There was a cleft in the gully wall at which Tarrant halted, searching the ravine, his eyes screwed up. The opposite side, ten feet high, showed a similar fissure and in rough line across the sandy bottom lay three great fragments of yellowish sandstone.

He drew a long breath, gazed at his partner with an expression of incredulous triumph, and pointed.

“There, isn’t it, Bob?”

“Nowhere else in the world; and nothing here since us but the lizards. We didn’t dream it all, did we?”

“Sure, we didn’t! Now, Lock, you dig just half-way between those two nearest boulders. It’s only six inches down, and we—we——” his voice cracked to a sort of squeak under the tension, “we keep on either side of you. When you find ’em, make two heaps, same number of stones in each. Take ’em as they come, or choose ’em—whichever you like—and we’ll be satisfied. That’s it, Bob?”

“That’s it: fix it any way you like.” He unslung his rifle, holding it out to Tarrant. “You take it, Tom, if you want to.”

“Forget it.”

The rifle was laid away, and Lock, kneeling, began to scoop in hot sand that ran like water. The two had moved apart and stood one on either side, Jackson to the right, their eyes following every movement of cupped hands. Almost at once there was uncovered a flat stone.

“Leave and dig round it,” grunted Tarrant.

Lock obeyed, disclosing gradually a small cube of slabs, their edges roughly chipped and forming a sort of box, the kind Jackson had built to house the lantern. The children of Israel might have left such things in the wilderness of Sinai. He stared at it, looked up, and met the boring gaze of the partners.

“Now?”

They nodded simultaneously. Lifting the lid, he saw a six-inch square of sand from which protruded a few small glassy-looking pebbles. They were like gravel. There came a sharp indrawing of breath from Tarrant, who seemed to have assumed command in this affair.

“One at a time as you come to them—one for each pile.”

He thrust his fingers below the surface, feeling solid layers, packed like nuts, of all shapes and sizes, from split peas to one as large as an acorn. That fell to Jackson, and Lock took it to be the stone he had promised Julia Tarrant. The big man made an unintelligible sound, and the two glanced at each other, but neither spoke. Lock continued to delve, picking fortunes from a pocket of sand, while the piles grew till they were small pyramids, four inches square at the base. When he had finished and smoothed out the sand, he reckoned he had handled five hundred stones.

Neither of the men had moved hand or foot and stood hypnotized at their own success, squinting at these small but potent heaps through which the sunlight struck

with a vitreous penetration, catching here and there a fractured facet in which it lit a tiny fiery eye, prophetic of the blaze that would leap to life under the diamond cutter's spinning disc. On what warm white breasts would they kindle their cold white flame? Lock yielded to the spell, kneeling on front of this treasure house. The thing was incredible—but true! The dream continued. He saw the two sorting their gems, laying them in dry palms, comparing them. There was no friction, no apparent jealousy. He heard an amiable dialogue concerning his own part of this, ended by each man handing him four stones, with the assurance that they were worth a hundred pounds each uncut—anywhere. He heard himself accepting with thanks. The two piles disappeared into two small buckskin sacks, and the partners faced each other like those who, coming to the ending of the ways, are loth to say farewell.

“We might have a snack, Tom. I'm starting right away.”

Tarrant agreed. They ate a little, moistened their lips, divided food and water with scrupulous exactness, and Jackson took one-third. Dusk was already falling when he got up, stretched himself, and slung on his rifle.

“Well, Bob?” squeaked Tarrant.

“Well, Tom?”

“It's been a queer business.”

“Darned queer, but——” Jackson made a gesture, “it's panned out all right. I'm just as glad I lost my memory that time—I'd have got 'em all if I hadn't.”

“You mean that, Bob? Ain't sorry you haven't got 'em all?”

“Sure, I mean it!”

“Where'll you go now?”

“There's a new field up-country in British Guiana. I was thinking of that.”

“Already?”

“Why not?”

“Just like you, Bob. Got to be doing something, eh?” There was a touch of admiration in the voice. “Well, my regards to Bullington.”

“I'll drink your health, and a few more. My regards to your folks. Sort of a surprise someone's going to get, eh?”

“Yes—sort of; but I was darned tired of being drowned. So long, Bob!”

“So lon', Tom! Mr. Lock, I guess you'll—well—never mind.”

He paused, with an expression that in some extraordinary way presented him again as he was a dozen times on the yacht, confusing, contradictory, elusive, a man not to be pinned down, quick of mind, agile in strategy. He would never be forgotten, and his smile meant that he knew it. Then he waved a hand, and moved off, eastward, through the failing light, walking with a springy stride that showed no

trace of fatigue.

Tarrant, staring after him, gave a grunt in which relief and regret were oddly mingled.

“Well, that’s that, and who’d have thought it!” He shook his big head and began to laugh. “You must have had a queer time of it! Tell me on the way back. Lot of things I suppose you want to know, too. They’ll keep. Gad, I’m tired! We’ll stop here to-night where there’s a bit of firewood, and make an early start.”

Lock agreed. There was much he meant to know, but the big man looked done up, and this was no time for asking, so he fingered the diamonds in his pocket, wondered what they were really worth, and set about gathering fuel before the darkness overtook them. The fire was on a patch of sand in the lee of a nest of boulders.

Under a lowering sky the blaze created a pool of warmth in the swift chill of night, and Tarrant stretched prone beside it, a slack mountain of a man with a scarlet face. He carried a fortune, but appeared to think nothing of that, and when he talked, which was only intermittently, it was in random, disjointed sentences that indicated how widely his thoughts wandered. He could not, it seemed, dissociate himself from Jackson, rumbling on about the kind of man Jackson was, with no hazarding as to what lay ahead, no reference to wife or daughter or England, no reasons for this or that, all exactly as though he were prospecting the field of his own memory, and discarding the specimens that did not appeal to the fancy of the hour.

Presently he dropped off, breathing noisily, puffing out his lips, and Lock reverted to his own reflections. His brain was overcrowded. The stones in his pocket were unreal, Tarrant a phantom, Jackson a myth, *Cygnets* a ghost ship. He had the fleeting premonition which comes at times in a dream, that soon he would wake up and laugh! Such—things—do—not—happen! He repeated this over and again, but each time Tarrant moved a little, so Lock knew that they did. They were happening now. Then he yielded to the onrush of fatigue. His lids drooped. His head nodded.

He woke—it must have been soon afterwards—with a tingling start, his inward senses rather than his ears perceiving something. No actual noise, but a disturbance of the atmosphere close by, an emanation from a living thing, not themselves, a faint vibration of other life. No explanation or proof of this. He just felt it. Tarrant had not heard it, and lay like a great human log.

“Anyone there?” whispered Lock.

He would have been amazed had anyone replied, and threw another stick on the fire. Tarrant, without opening his eyes, lifted a slack arm, pushed his hand under his

round cheek and snored a little, then the hair on the back of Lock's head began to crawl as the communicated wave reached him again with no indication of direction or distance. Just something! He swallowed dryly and could hear his heart pumping.

"Who's there?" he barked harshly, automatic levelled.

Tarrant, instantly awake, leaped to his feet with extraordinary quickness.

"What's the matter—who's calling?"

"I thought I heard someone," snapped Lock, feeling very much of a fool.

"Huh! There's no one here, but we might as well kick that fire out. It's an invitation."

He advanced, lifted a heavy foot, and in that second came a level stab of flame from close by. He clapped his hand to his breast, opened his mouth wide and pitched over. Lock, wheeling, felt a stunning blow on his head. No pain; just a violent concussion.

The fire—everything—blinked at him and went out. His knees sagged. He crumpled—and fell.

It seemed to be a long, long time afterwards that a voice reached Lock, thin, squeaky, and oddly like Tarrant's. It came through a loud booming of surf that pounded in his brain with a reiterant though slowly decreasing roar. He opened his eyes. It was Tarrant. He felt a flask at his lips, sucked, tasted brandy, and sat up. Consciousness swept back. A little spearhead of flame cast a faint glow on the big face. It looked green, yellow, flabby, old. The man squatted within touch, the flask in his left hand, while he stared at his right. That one was red, and Lock's reeling senses reconstructed the vision of another man at a table in a back room in Soho, picking splinters of glass out of a punctured palm. No! The same man! And with that the whole thing rushed back at him. He took a long, shaky breath.

"I—I thought you'd been killed," he croaked. "Who was it?"

"Bob! Who else? I might have known. Look at this, will you!"

He tore open his sticky shirt, baring a hairy breast. A shade to one side of the heart was a puncture, small, bluish at the edges. It did not bleed now.

"And my back!"

Lock, marvelling, looked again. Another puncture, larger, more ragged, still oozing!

"Clean through you!"

"I thought so. Bit of luck, eh? But it's drilled my shoulder-blade. Better plug it up. I'm all right—except—well—I'm cleaned out."

"They're gone!"

"Sure! they're gone. Bob's little way of doing it."

Lock stared at him aghast.

“Naturally, and as I say, I might have known better. We ought to have separated, and had no fire. That would have bothered him.”

“It’s my fault. I went to sleep.”

“Nobody’s fault; why shouldn’t you? Did he go through you, too?”

Lock fumbled in his pocket. “No—they’re here.”

“I thought so. He hadn’t anything against you, but didn’t mind leaving me for dead. Well, if it comes to that, I don’t altogether blame him.” He stared at his stained palm with an undecipherable expression. “It’s queer you know; same thing over again and just about the same place. Only it was him last time. Now do you begin to see?”

“You mean it!” Lock was gasping.

“Of course I mean it. As he said himself, we were both drunk, diamond drunk. Gad! but this hole in me hurts.”

“You’d better lie down.”

“I guess ’twould bleed more. I’m sound enough, mind you. I can make the trip.”

The chance seemed remote, but anything was credible now. Presently the man dropped into a sort of physical stupor, out of which his eyes continued to peer, very sharp and knowing. What stirred in that brain it was impossible to read, but more than once he gave a faint smile, not at Lock, but at something that had come into his great round head. And he did not look in any way vindictive.

“Point is,” he began suddenly, after a long silence, “that if we get out of this I’ll be sort of satisfied.”

“Satisfied!” Lock thought he had gone mad.

“Bit difficult, that, isn’t it? Not with the hole in my shoulder-blade, but—well, something you’ll find hard to believe. I drowned myself—perhaps! Now why do you suppose I did that?”

“You were afraid of Jackson—which seems reasonable now; also you had a letter.” Here Lock paused while the thing grew in his brain till it seemed outlined in light. “And that letter told you he was coming back to—to——”

“Get even! You’ve hit it. Now, hold on a minute! I want you to have this thing dead straight just in case I don’t get out. Sort of message to the sorrowing relatives. I’ve told you some things, that sounded queer, but I never lied. That’s a fact, isn’t it?”

“I believe it is a fact.”

“Right! So you let me talk while the talking’s good. When I heard that Bob was coming back to get even—which is right—I got the wind up, and drowned myself—

perhaps—for two reasons. One you've guessed. The other you can't."

"What?"

"Shame!" said Tarrant in a strangled tone. "Just shame! Sounds maybe out of place from me, but it's God's truth. I tried to do in my partner—thought I had—learned I hadn't—saw the thing as anyone else—you, for instance—would see it; couldn't look anyone in the face—wife, daughter, no one—and knew what shame meant. Fear and shame mixed. It's a rotten blend. It's no use trying to tell you how my brain worked: you've got to be the man himself to know that. Well, Bob was coming back to England—that's before he lost his money—to show me up, or else demand Hope for not doing it. Now you've heard it all."

"And Hope saw that letter!"

"She must have—and cleared out. She was right, too. Now can you understand it—supposing, of course, we get out of this—that I'm not so sorry about what's happened? Curse the diamonds! The thing that counts with me is that Bob is down to my level, and I'm not ashamed anymore. We break even in Namaqualand. Both done our partner in."

Lock, forgetting the blinding ache in his head, did not stir. These processes of thought he could not follow, and this grim reasoning seemed grotesque; but he could not question their sincerity, and here, beside the crumbling fire, he was convinced that this wounded giant was in some hitherto unimagined way rebuilding his own self-respect on the ruins of his one-time faith in his partner. Jackson had come down with a crash, and Tarrant, oblivious to the hole in his breast, felt infinitely better. He looked it. With the ebbing of bodily strength he had acquired, it appeared, some other quality not to be found in him before: not virtue, but a vague promise of decency in the future—if there was to be a future. He was shaken, he must have been suffering, but behind the shock and pain there moved in large uncouthness another man. And this one had possibilities.

Lock, being neither a fool nor a moralist, did not speak. Loving this man's daughter, he himself was involved, and he too felt infinitely better. The old Tarrant would have been hard to swallow, though he was ready for it. This new one differed. It was strange to look at the man now and consider him as a father-in-law. But Tarrant knew nothing about that, and to-night was not the time to talk. It was then, eyes wandering, that he saw on the other side of the fire two flat stones, one on top of the other, with something between. They had not been there before. He moved stiffly over.

"What is it?" said Tarrant sharply.

"Nothing, I think."

Under the stone was a scrap of paper, screwed tight. Something inside. He opened it, and stood for a moment transfixed.

“What’s that?” repeated Tarrant.

It was the acorn-sized diamond. On the paper a pencilled scrawl.

“With my regards to Ju.—R. J.”

Tarrant stared at the thing, wide mouth broadening, his expression that of one who has been let into a joke. Taking the diamond, he pinched it, toyed with it, eyes narrowed, breathing a little faster. Presently he burst into a roar of laughter, broken by a choking cough. He put his hand to his breast, pressing hard.

“By Gad, that’s a good one! Just like Bob. I thought it was a message for me.”

Lock shrugged his shoulders helplessly. He did not understand either man’s type of humour, but recognized in this contemptuous but regal gift something characteristic of Jackson. It was absurd, satirical, Olympian. He had lost the woman, but, keeping his partner’s riches, kept also his promise to the partner’s wife. One could picture him smiling over this, wherever he might be, and still diamond drunk. And the whole affair was in keeping with all that had preceded it. In Jackson’s opinion, Lock could be trusted for delivery if Tarrant should never reach salt water.

Tarrant read the scrawl again, still grinning, then dropped it into the fire, where it spurted, curled and vanished. Once more fingering the gem, he slid it, nodding, into his breast pocket.

“She’ll have it all right, all right. You leave that to me, and forget the rest. Now there’s five hours before we start out, and I’ll need them. You too, I guess. Don’t worry about Bob; you couldn’t find him any more than a flea in a haystack. I feel as though I’d a red-hot poker through me.”

He lay down on his side, breathing stertorously.

Parallel with the coast of Namaqualand there moves northward a deep-sea current, hugging the African coast till, opposite Angola, it swerves westward to lose itself in the Gulf of Guinea. It passes inside Roast Beef Island, and here, on the fourth night, *Cygnets* waited, showing no avoidable lights, and with only an occasional turn of the screw to hold her position. Dark figures were grouped for hours on her deck, from which the edge of the desert was clearly visible. All that night she waited in vain. No glimmer of red came from the great sand dunes, and at break of dawn she turned seaward.

By now Mrs. Tarrant was of two minds. This long, empty interlude, during which

she seemed to find no companionship in either of the two girls, had given her a breathing space uninfluenced by the mesmeric presence of Jackson, and without any special object she reviewed the past few weeks. They began to look unbalanced. Even hectic! She had not come to the point of regret—because the experience they afforded was of a totally novel kind—but she admitted that she would not care to relive them.

This waiting with *Cygnets* on an empty sea, bows boxing the compass, Maclay in solitary speechlessness on the bridge, Eva openly critical and dubious, Hope silent, anxious and much withdrawn within herself—it was all cumulative. It provoked inward questions, and to a woman of Julia Tarrant's nature they were unwelcome. That nature was a strange one, and the only thing it feared was being thought weak. Anything but that! Now she began to ask herself had she been merely weak instead of daring. She was fully convinced that Jackson would return—and successful, but, lacking his stimulating presence, the venture had flattened perceptibly, and she yielded to a malaise. By this time she was bored with the yacht, found it constricting, and, thrown on her own mental resources, was discomfited to realize how slight they were.

She was sitting idly on deck during the afternoon of the fifth day, when Eva dropped into a chair beside her.

"I've been trying to pump Mr. Maclay."

"What does he think?"

"I wish I knew. He explained very carefully that twenty-four hours' delay might mean anything—or nothing. He won't commit himself."

"Not very satisfactory, is it?"

"And he says the decision is up to you."

That was the part Mrs. Tarrant disliked, and it struck her that to have left it thus was decidedly unfair. She murmured something to that effect.

Eva shook her head. "Yes, I know, but you can't dodge it. How long, approximately, do you mean to wait? Suppose they don't come to-night—or next night?"

"That's just it; they might be within a few miles—water may have run short—anything! How can I decide? Can you see us three going off alone? I can't."

"I don't think you'd take long to get over it," said Eva, pointedly.

"And why not?"

"What's the use of repeating. I never could see it, and you're much happier as a widow. But Hope really is in love, so it would go hard with her."

"Eva, that's rubbish!"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "All right, and have it your own way, but if anyone should know it's myself."

"Then it's all on one side!"

"It's queer about you, mother, but you do come to a lot of wrong conclusions about people. You act first, and think afterwards. And if that seems cheeky, I can't help it. Take this yacht!"

"I'm beginning to loathe it."

Eva smiled a little. "One can see that. Now, again, if they're not back in three days, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said her mother desperately.

"In other words, we've both been rather mad."

"Very generous of you, I'm sure."

"It's honest, anyway."

"Go on—you always interest me when you talk like this. Suppose I do admit it?"

"All right—and I'll begin at home. Norman and I wouldn't do for each other at all. We couldn't mix—really. I might understand him, but he couldn't do as much for me. He's too cramped with principles and fixed ideas, and he'll never learn how to enjoy himself, at least not in my way. He appeals to a certain type—Hope, for instance. I thought I wanted him: now I don't. Perhaps it was the phosphorus! Anyway, I prefer a good deal less bone and more flexibility."

"You seem to have given the matter a good deal of thought."

"I've had nothing else to do."

"And you're sure that Hope——"

"Absolutely! It's difficult to explain, but he and she started from the same point, while he and I didn't. I'd expect him to give up the sea, while Hope wouldn't. I'd expect him to knock about with me, while Hope would be content to live in a trunk and knock about with him. That's the main difference. And Mr. Jackson!"

"And Mr. Jackson!" repeated her mother.

"Is not in love with you—and never was. Just with his own ideas and ambitions—which are not the sort you could share. I suppose he'll turn up, probably to-night, with a pocketful of diamonds—but what then? The man himself won't have changed. I wish I could call back my late stepfather and get some inside information."

Mrs. Tarrant almost wished so too. She had by no means forgotten a previous and rather uncomfortable argument with her daughter on the matter, and in this difficult hour would have been much more relieved than frightened had the ghost of Tarrant appeared over the gunwale and told her several things she greatly desired to know.

“There’s one thing I could do,” she said uncertainly.

“What?”

“Go back on a liner and meet some of his people first, instead of getting married at Cape Town. I’d thought of that already.”

“It’s something—for a start. Would you insist on that if I were marrying Commander Glacier?”

“I’d prefer it, but not insist.”

“Then isn’t my point pretty well made?”

Mrs. Tarrant acknowledged that it was, and felt better. Eva had proved an unexpected ally. She found herself comparing her third husband with the contemplated fourth, but did not want to discuss that.

“Where is Hope?”

“In the engine-room with Mr. Hillyard.”

“Won’t you get her?”

Hope came up, wiping her fingers on a scrap of cotton waste, dropped the waste overboard and sat between them.

“Do you want me?”

“If you want to be wanted. Eva has been asking me questions I can’t answer about how long we’re to wait here in—in case, and it’s very hard to say. What do you think?”

“You couldn’t leave them!” said the girl quickly. “You couldn’t do that!”

“What would you do?” This in a tone of genuine feeling.

“You’ll have to send some kind of expedition.”

“But how—and where?”

“Couldn’t you go to Cape Town and put it in the hands of the police?”

Mrs. Tarrant, aware of Eva’s sharp glance, hesitated visibly. The police! She felt checked—confused—and assured that this was the very last resort Jackson would approve. What an innocent the girl was!

“I don’t think that’s much use,” she said slowly, “and the police have their—their duties. But there’s a settlement at the mouth of the Orange River a little further on, and we might engage someone there.”

Hope brightened a little. “Why not put that to Mr. Maclay?”

Mrs. Tarrant agreeing, Maclay came aft, touched his cap and listened, his face impassive.

“Ay, it’s possible, but you have to reckon on chances. There’s a spot on the map marked Witputz right enough. Between that and the coast call it sixty miles of desert, in a straight line, mind you. They might be five miles on either side of that line. Also it

might be hard to find Witputz. Maybe it's only a trading post, maybe abandoned. You can't tell much from a map. I wouldn't worry—yet. What's a day or so, anyway?"

"That's rather comforting."

"And, begging your pardon, it's sense," added the little man. "No, I'm not afraid for Mr. Lock. Of Mr. Jackson I don't know anything, but he's seemed able to take care of himself."

"I fancy he is; but why did you say that about Mr. Lock?"

"Well, as an older man I've been watching him. He's the sort that comes through. Got no nerves, strong as an ox, and been in a lot of tight places considering his age. He'll turn up, or get word to you. And, ma'am, it's no secret what they're after."

"Who told you?" asked Mrs. Tarrant, startled.

"Just no one—exactly. I suppose it leaked. As to this search party, I'd go myself if there were anyone to take my place. Every man jack of us would."

"No—no!" she said hastily. "We'll need you here."

"Then give them another three days, that's my advice. If they don't turn up, we'll make a landing party and go in, say, twenty miles. If that's no good, we'll try the Orange. One might get a car there. Mr. Jackson says they're good for the desert. Anyway don't fash yourself yet. There's naught gained by worry."

He saluted again, and moved forward.

"Thank heaven for a sensible man!" said Mrs. Tarrant, with a long breath of relief. She paused, with a meaning glance at her daughter, whereat Eva murmured something and followed Maclay. Then a little silence. Looking obliquely at Hope, it came to the older woman that she alone of the three of them could feel this affair as one would like to feel. She loved her man, and was afraid for him. The man had come to her, which Mrs. Tarrant shrewdly suspected was the obverse of Eva's case. She was not rich, but, excepting this present anxiety, her future was happy. One used to think of Hope as not having much. Now she seemed to have a great deal.

Yielding to something like envy, she put out an impulsive hand, and the girl felt her grip, strong like a man's.

"Tell me, child! Tell me all about it."

Hope started. Never before had she seen her stepmother's face with exactly this expression. It looked softer, in an odd way defenceless, and without the old high-spirited daring. The eyes had a different light, suggesting that she wanted gentle companionship—which was indeed the case—and was ready to repay in kind. She seemed less defiant, more womanly.

“Do you care—really?”

“Yes, I care,” said Mrs. Tarrant with complete honesty. “Perhaps it’s this—or that.” She motioned toward the open sea, then Africa.

“About Mr. Lock, is that it?”

“Part of it: I want you to say all you feel like saying—to me.”

“I’ll go back,” she said, “to the time when I left Uplands, but I can’t tell you everything without hurting you.”

“I’ve been hurt before; go on, my dear.”

“I went away because of a letter I found from Mr. Jackson to father. It threatened him with exposure if——”

“Exposure!” put in Mrs. Tarrant swiftly.

“Yes: Mr. Jackson said he was coming back to be revenged because my father had tried to kill him, and left him for dead in the desert. He said that if he could have me, he would take no action, and——”

“You!” breathed the older woman.

“That was it. If he couldn’t, he would make my father’s name a shameful one. It seems they’d had a fight over some diamonds. Six months before that he had wanted to marry me. I wouldn’t have it, nor would father. I found this letter, and read it before I knew what I was doing. Then I was afraid that if I stayed father would make me agree. I couldn’t explain to you or anyone else without exposing him.

“The letter seemed to change him, made him suspicious and fearful, and, I think, horribly ashamed. He never referred to it, or knew that I’d seen it. And I hated Mr. Jackson. Father had never mentioned the diamonds or any kind of trouble. When I disappeared, he probably blamed himself for that. You know what happened. I wrote to you then. A year went by and I got your letter to Dinant. Why didn’t you say that Mr. Jackson would be on board?”

“He—he asked me not to.” The tone was very peculiar.

“I thought so, but wasn’t in a position to protest. I had to pretend all the time. I had to put up with—with everything. He tried to kiss me, often.”

Mrs. Tarrant nodded jerkily. “Go on!”

“After a whole year’s silence I thought he was dead. That’s all. As to Mr. Lock, there isn’t anything to tell you except that we love each other. I don’t know how it happened; we just seemed to find out. It was so strange, after beginning the voyage so unhappily. And I’m afraid I’ve been a very ungrateful guest.”

Mrs. Tarrant made a little gesture that asked for silence. Her brain was in a tumult, and in the middle of the uproar stood Jackson. During the last few moments,

listening to this dispassionate and utterly truthful story, she had discovered that she hated Jackson. She had not known she could hate so wholeheartedly. The influence of the man was whisked away, and she was left marvelling at her own blindness. One could not doubt Hope. She felt cold with anger and horribly humiliated. She tried to put Jackson aside, failed, and her animosity deepened. She loathed being deceived and, still more, being made a fool of. To Hope, as to Eva, she must look a fool, and her resentfulness was such that all the diamonds of Africa would not now have moved her.

“But why on earth didn’t you tell me all this before?” she managed to say.

“It was my father’s secret. He had left his partner in the desert after attempting murder.”

“I wish he’d succeeded. So it was just a fight over diamonds! I can quite imagine that. Oh, my dear, all this explains so much. I couldn’t tell what was the matter with him either, and all the more after you went off. He was good to me, as I see it now. I hadn’t anything then, and he made a home for us both, and——”

She broke off helplessly, and Hope, sitting very still, thought of her own doubts concerning her father’s death. But she seemed to have said quite enough for one evening, so why add to it? And nothing could be proved.

“Of course, what you’ve told me is absolutely startling,” went on Mrs. Tarrant in a voice that sounded half-strangled, “and you must have had a lot of queer ideas about me in your head lately, but—well—I’ve got to work out the rest for myself. Eva was never in favour of my marrying the man, I might as well tell you that, and for once in her life she’s right. Now he and your man are off together and——”

“I’m not afraid about mine in the way you mean. It’s just the desert.”

“The desert!” Mrs. Tarrant tried to think about the desert, and gave it up. She could not get away from Jackson. If and when he returned with a pocketful of diamonds, what sort of reception should he get? The fact that she should ask herself that was sufficient to provide the answer. She would take him to Cape Town, drop him, and, if she could, forget. But she knew that she would never forget.

“Now I wish that Mr. Lock hadn’t gone,” she said.

“So do I,” whispered Hope. “I didn’t want him to.”

“Well, as Maclay says, it isn’t time to worry yet. Keep up your courage, my dear; and if that nice man only comes back alone I’d be infinitely thankful. And you’ve given me a great deal to think of, so when your affair does come off—well—just leave it to me. I’ve a wonderful idea.”

Hope smiled at her wistfully, and the subject was avoided for the rest of the day.

At nightfall, *Cygnets*, as before, nosed her way shoreward, and loitered, bows

toward Cape Town, breasting the deep-sea current. But Hope could not sleep, and, staying alone on deck hour after hour, suffered a thousand pictures of what might have happened behind the great dunes whose slow ridges lay clearly defined under the stars. She was proud of her man, and afraid for him. As to the other, it had been a prodigious relief to talk out, no less than to discover in her stepmother something of which she had always doubted the existence. Eva would never quite forgive her, but that was hardly to be expected. She leaned over the rail, full of love, longing and a vague intangible fear, and it was from the middle of this gulf that she thought she saw a tiny point of red light beyond the pale line of breaking surf.

She stared, heart fluttering, then raced to the bridge.

“Mr. Maclay! Mr. Maclay! Did you see it?”

“Aye,” said the little man, calmly, “they’re there—that’s Morse he’s signalling. D’ye no ken Morse? Dash, three dots—three dashes, dot, dash-dash—spells boat. Losh, but I’m glad!”

“Then why don’t you send one!” She was dancing with excitement.

“Just a minute—there’s more—he wants brandy—aye—I’ll believe that. Now, miss, if you want to see how quickly a boat can take the water, stand here.”

She could not wait, but raced down and hammered at Mrs. Tarrant’s door.

“They’re coming! They’re coming!”

Mrs. Tarrant sat up with a start, collected her senses, and yawned.

“All right, I’ll be there presently.”

This was sobering, but natural enough under the circumstances, nor could Hope quite see what kind of reception awaited Jackson, diamonds or no diamonds, so after wakening Eva she went back on deck. Maclay must have signalled in return, for no light now blinked from the shore. The boat was just visible half-way across, and word had run through the yacht, for a group of motionless figures were already clustered forward. Presently she thought she heard voices, but that must have been imagination, and it seemed an age before the boat reappeared with racing oars snatching at the quiet water. Two dark figures in the stern instead of three! She thought her heart would stop.

There was no call, no shout, and her lips grew stiff. Then Maclay’s voice out of the gloom.

“Easy there! Back her!”

Hope, trembling, leaned over the rail. The boat lay in a pool of faint light at the foot of the ladder stairs, and she saw a form huddled in the bottom, big and thick. Lock, from the stern, looked up and waved a hand.

“It’s all right—everything is all right! Don’t be frightened!”

Her heart leaped, but something took her by the throat. The big prostrate form reared itself up, and as in a dream she saw the man's face. Her brain swam. She tried not to scream. She saw him grasp the ladder rope and mount, slowly, indomitably, forcing himself from step to step. This appearance, born of the desert and the sea, robbed her of the power to move. She was aware of Lock close behind, arm out, ready to help. The man gained the deck and stood, balancing himself. His face was like death!

At that moment Mrs. Tarrant came out of the lounge, wrapped in a dressing-gown. She halted, transfixed. The man, still grasping the gunwale, opened his pale blue eyes wider. His cheeks were drawn, sagged, hollow, his clothing stained and clotted with blood. He put his hand to his breast, pressing it hard. The pale eyes roved from wife to daughter, and he gave a wide-mouthed grin.

"Well—well!" he croaked. "And how's the family?"

Mrs. Tarrant moved toward him, stopped, gazed round the speechless little circle dominated by this apparition, then went into yelps of hysterical laughter.

At noon next day, when the low iron-roofed buildings of the mining company at Port Nolloth were just visible abeam, and there remained but a twenty-four hours' run to Cape Town, Tarrant, his blistered face stinging after a clean shave, lay in Jackson's bunk, wearing Jackson's only clean nightshirt.

Beside him sat his wife, now quite calm, but still wondering if he were really there, listening with dumb fascination while her reconstituted and reconditioned husband in a weak and squeaky voice told her a great deal more than she had ever expected to hear. He had paused every now and then, making openings for questions.

She had none. It seemed impossible to put any without some reference to a state of affairs of which she devoutly hoped he would always be ignorant. She could picture Jackson trudging eastward toward Bullington with his pocket full of diamonds, probably smiling to himself, and the picture filled her with a sort of secret savagery. At every point and hour he had been too much for her. She did not think of him particularly as an outlaw, or thief, or liar, but as a superlative artist in deception with whom she had been in close and perilous contact for five amazing weeks, and she blamed herself as much as him.

With that admission, she set about re-establishing her husband as fast as she could. It had not been difficult. When he told her that shame had driven him as much

as fear, there was that in his face and eyes which proclaimed the truth. His protracted loneliness, his danger, his wound and the killing struggle to reach salt water had snatched away the bluntness of the man and revealed another self that now, weak but very, very sane, looked up at her and could not be mistaken. He had paid for his past, and she apprehended that his future would be vastly different. So would her own.

“Tom,” she asked, “would you ever have got here without Mr. Lock?”

“Not on your life! I don’t know how he did it. I guess he carried me half-way, and I went to sleep on his back. I don’t believe he more than wet his lips for three days. If he hadn’t been there—well—I would yet.”

“I’m glad, for Hope’s sake.”

“Hope’s in luck. You did a good act, Ju, when you fetched her along.”

Mrs. Tarrant glowed with gratitude. How kind everyone was! And this was just one of the things that, all put together, meant that Tarrant would never know the whole truth about Jackson. Why should he know?

“I say, Ju?”

“Yes, Tom?”

“Look in the breast pocket of my coat, will you? Ought to be something there.”

She glanced at it, hanging where he insisted it should hang when he staggered into bed. Shuddering a little, she pushed in her hand, and encountered stiffened cloth, a sort of dried mat, sealing the pocket. She shook her head.

“Tom—I—I can’t! Here you! Let me throw it overboard.”

“You can, in two minutes.”

He thrust in his own big hand, sending her a glance that expressed a thousand things, then pulled out a little packet. That also was stiff and stained.

“Sorry, Ju, but we didn’t have any water to wash it in.”

He broke the thing open and gave her what looked like a glass pebble the size of an acorn. It, too, was smeared.

“It don’t look very pretty now, but when it’s cut ’twill make a couple of regular blazers. It’s all I could get away with.”

She fingered the stone—the stone with the story that she would never hear—then put her head on his big shoulder and burst into tears. Tarrant stroked her dark hair, thinking how wonderful the touch of it was, and smiled knowingly at Jackson’s shaving kit in a rack against the wall. Why should she ever know? Presently his wife drew a long, tremulous breath.

“It’s too—too marvellous; but, Tom, I can’t talk much about it now.”

“That’s all right, Ju, that’s all right. It came from near a spot called Witputz, that’s

just outside the closed area. I looked it up in Cape Town as I came through. So you're safe enough. So's Lock—he's got a few—little fellows."

"I'm so glad! And about Mr. Lock, you agree—I mean as to Hope?"

"Sure, I do."

"And, Tom, do you want to go back to Southampton in this yacht? I'd rather not."

Just how clearly he entered into her thoughts at that moment she could not tell, but was determined that not under any circumstances would she make the return voyage on *Cygnets* with her own husband as a substitute for Jackson. It was unthinkable. And she had had enough yachting for the rest of her life.

He sent an inscrutable glance at Jackson's stringy shaving-brush, a glance that betrayed nothing of how much or how little was in his mind, and arrived at the comfortable conclusion that what he did not know could not hurt him. The brush suggested the lean, satirical face it had so often lathered, also that Jackson at this moment would be in need of a shave. One could see quite clearly. Then, oddly, the face became blurred. Partners! They had been partners! In what? No, he didn't want to take Jackson's place on this yacht.

"I guess I'd prefer a liner, Ju."

"So would I—much. Now you go to sleep, and I'll be here when you wake up."

Tarrant smiled at her, and shut his eyes.

This in the cabin where for so many weeks Jackson had schemed and plotted toward an end very craftily hidden from all but himself. He had pulled it off, but not quite as he expected. He had the diamonds, but not the woman. And now the woman who so narrowly escaped him sat looking at the blistered face of her own husband, feeling strangely thankful. She had been a fool—mad—intoxicated by false romance and utterly blind. Tom—her Tom—was a giver, not a taker. She examined the great gem, little dreaming the truth concerning it, the truth she would never know, then bent over and kissed Tarrant's swollen cheek.

"Good old Ju!" he murmured drowsily. "It's nice to be alive again."

In another cabin another woman was sitting, holding the big hand of a man who gazed at her very earnestly. They had talked for an hour, and their hearts were open to each other.

"That letter from Jackson," Hope was saying, "you know what was in it?"

"About you?"

She nodded. "He was coming back to England to demand me. If I refused, he would accuse father of attempted murder. He didn't love me, Norman. He couldn't love anyone, really, but just wanted me as he wanted diamonds—or money. It was

the same about Julia Tarrant—she would be a sort of possession. I found that letter, and read it, and knew what it meant to father. But I couldn't speak of it, least of all to him. So I ran away. Soon covered with shame, and not knowing that I knew, he disappeared. He thought the past was dead, but found it wasn't, and fear of exposure was too much for him."

He looked at her, loving her with all his soul. Then he took out the eight diamonds, his share of the treasure of the desert, his tribute from those queer partners whose alliance had ended in blood and for all time. He put the stones in his girl's hand.

"They gave me those," he said. "I fancy they're worth a good deal. And I've got my discharge money. We could start on that, couldn't we?"

"I think we could, with what I have," she smiled. "But when?"

"I've got to take *Cygnnet* back to Southampton first. Queer sort of journey, eh?"

"My behaviour will be perfect. Don't worry about that, Norman."

A knock sounded at the cabin door and Mrs. Tarrant came in. Hope was sitting very straight.

"I know I'm not wanted, but I'll only be a minute. Mr. Lock, when do you think you'll go on duty again?"

"In about fifteen minutes." Then, with a grin, "Any orders from the owner?"

"It's about getting *Cygnnet* back to Southampton."

He flushed under his sunburn, and she saw a big hand tighten over a small one.

"There's no difficulty about that."

"I didn't really suppose there was, but it seems a pity to go over the same ground—or water—twice. Do you know the East Coast of Africa?"

"Enough for navigation purposes, but I'd like to know it better."

"Is there any real difference in going that way?"

"It's a bit longer, but perhaps safer for a vessel of this size. Do you feel nervous? Whichever way you like; it's all the same to *Cygnnet*."

"I don't like either—on *Cygnnet*," she said, her lip quivering a little. "My husband and I have been talking things over. He doesn't fancy going back on the yacht. Neither does Eva. So we three are taking the first liner from Cape Town. I'd suggest the East Coast for you, and stop at Zanzibar and Madagascar."

"And Hope!" blurted the young man. "How's she getting back?"

"Oh, you great, big, honest, blind-eyed, young fool!" laughed Mrs. Tarrant—and fled.

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Queer Partners* by Alan Sullivan (as Sinclair Murray)]