

forced itself into her nostrils and crept into her lungs.

She struggled feebly for a few seconds and then collapsed in a heap on the ground.

When Joan Endermine came to her senses she found herself in a small cabin, some ten feet square. She was lying in a bunk on a heap of nets and old sails. There was an overwhelming smell of tar and lamp oil, flavoured with a very unpleasant odour of fish. A lamp swung from the ceiling at an angle which showed that the boat was heeling over under a stiff breeze. The water gurgled past the planks, but otherwise there was silence.

Joan Endermine raised herself from her unsavoury couch, and pressed her hands to her forehead. She was still dizzy, and the motion of the boat made her feel sick. She stared round her for a few seconds, and then lay down again.

Two minutes later the hatch was pushed back, and a breath of fresh air came into the cabin. Then a man lowered himself down the ladder, and sat down on the opposite bench. He was a tall, thin man with a brown, handsome face. His hair and eyes were as black as jet, and he was unmistakably a foreigner.

"You are better, madam?" he queried, speaking with a very slight accent.

"What is the meaning of this?" she cried, fiercely. "Who are you?" Why have you brought me here?"

"Why not?" he answered, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "Madam shall receive every attention. You soon be on a fine ship, where you can have every comfort. Champagne if you like it, eh? For this"—and he pointed round the cabin—"we must apologise."

"What do you want with me?" she groaned. She felt so sick that she could not even think of her possible fate. She lay back on the nets and sails and closed her eyes.

"It is Mr. Lowick who wants you," the man replied, with a smile. "We are taking you to him."

Her only answer was a groan. "I will get you a brandy and soda, madam," said the man, politely. "All this will be over in a few minutes. You shall have every comfort, every luxury, if you will do as we wish."

He went to a locker, and taking out some bottles and a glass mixed a brandy and soda. When he offered it to Joan Endermine she did not refuse. She drained the glass to the dregs, and felt so much better that she sat up and faced him with glittering eyes.

"What do you want with me?" she asked. "What is the meaning of this outrage?"

"We only want you, madam, to use your influence with Mr. Ralph Lowick."

"I don't understand. Please speak out plainly."

"Well, it is like this, madam. Mr. Ralph Lowick has only to speak a few words to save himself from death—from a rather unpleasant death. He refuses to speak them. We thought that perhaps you would be able to persuade him."

Joan Endermine looked at the man with horror in her eyes. Then she placed her arms on the table and buried her face between them. So this was what they wanted her to do—to persuade Ralph Lowick to be traitor to his country and his own conscience, to use her love as a weapon. Oh, it was monstrous, horrible!

Two minutes elapsed before she spoke again. Then she raised her head and looked contemptuously at the man. "I shall not try and persuade him," she said, quietly.

"We shall see," the man answered, grimly, and rising from his seat he made his way up the ladder and disappeared.

And when he had gone Joan Endermine lay down on the heap of nets and sails, and sobbed as though her heart would break.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE sun blazed pitilessly in a cloudless sky, and the white sand beneath it was so hot that it seemed to scorch the bare feet of the man who moved

slowly across it to the edge of the sea. He moved very slowly indeed, shuffling his feet along inch by inch, and stopping as if exhausted after he had traversed every yard. This was not to be wondered at, seeing that his ankles were fettered with a heavy chain, and that he dragged behind him a ball of solid iron weighing a hundred pounds.

Three months had passed since Ralph Lowick had been taken out of the darkness of his cabin and rowed ashore to this lonely island in the South Pacific—three months of insult and degradation and pain. His skin had been burnt a dark brown, and his black hair was flecked with grey, but his sunken eyes burnt as fiercely as ever. His spirit was yet unbroken.

He knew now with whom he had to deal. A band of adventurers, bound together by a common purpose, had outwitted and forestalled the Governments of Europe in the contest for supremacy. Their object was the glory of no particular nation, for they numbered all nations in their ranks, but simply and solely the plunder of humanity. Their leader was a wealthy Spaniard, who was English on his mother's side, and who united the dogged courage of the Anglo-Saxon race with the fierce hot-blooded cruelty of the people who had conquered South America with fire and sword. He chose to be known as Senor Smith, and Ralph Lowick had never heard his real name. It was doubtful, indeed, if anyone knew it, for he was one of those men who, when they emerge from obscurity, find it advisable to forget their past. All that Lowick knew of him he had heard from the man's own lips. There were none of his followers who would have dared to discuss their master's affairs with the prisoner, lest the gossip should come back to their master's ears. He was feared by everyone who served under him, and loved by some, for he was a modern type of the old buccaneer—fearless, ferocious, and a leader of men.

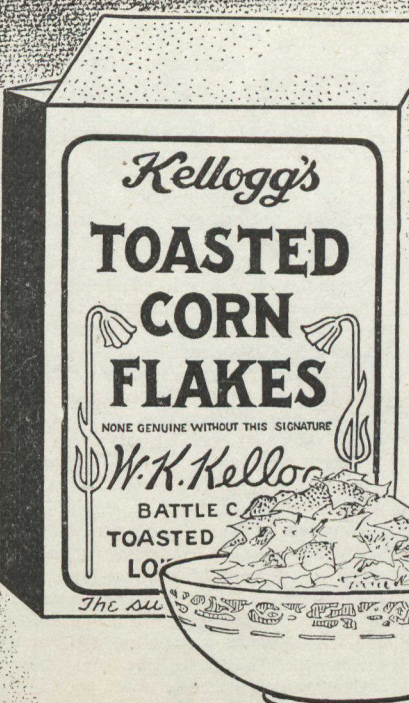
But so far Ralph Lowick had held his own. They kept him short of food and often of water. Occasionally, but not often, he was lashed with a whip, but the chains were never taken off his ankles. Yet his spirit was still unbroken, and he defied the ruffians to do their worst. He knew they would not kill him so long as there was a chance of forcing him to speak. He was only waiting his opportunity to kill them. He felt sure that would come one of these days.

And as he slowly dragged his aching feet across the sand this thought was uppermost in his mind—that one day he would turn the tables on his torturers, that one day he would be able to gain access to the machine, which was guarded so carefully in the centre of the island, and that he would be able to rain death upon Senor Smith and all his accursed crew.

At last he reached the water's edge, and sat down where the fringe of the surf swept over the sand in a surge of cool, white foam. He moved a little further forward, and allowed it to run past him till he sat waist deep in it. A lagoon of still water ran round most of the island, and the sea beat on the coral reef outside. But here, for quarter of a mile, the coral insects had not yet built high enough to stop the onslaught of the waves, and twenty yards away they broke like thunder on the shore.

"My bath," he muttered, grimly. Then he lay back with extended arms and allowed the foam to sweep over him, covering him entirely from sight. A coarse canvas shirt and an old pair of blue serge trousers were all the clothes he possessed, and they were not likely to be spoilt by the seawater.

"Bath and laundry as well," he said, aloud, as he sat up again and wiped the salt water from his eyes. He had got into the habit of talking to himself lately—not to any great extent, but occasional sentences now and then. At first there had been plenty of conversation between him and Senor Smith, but during the last month the latter had pursued a policy of silence, and the other men had been forbidden to speak to the pris-



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