CIHM
Microfiche
Series
(Monographs)

ICMH
Collection de
microfiches
(monographies)

Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions / Institut canadien de microreproductions historiques

Technical and Bibliographic Notes / Notes technique et bibliographiques

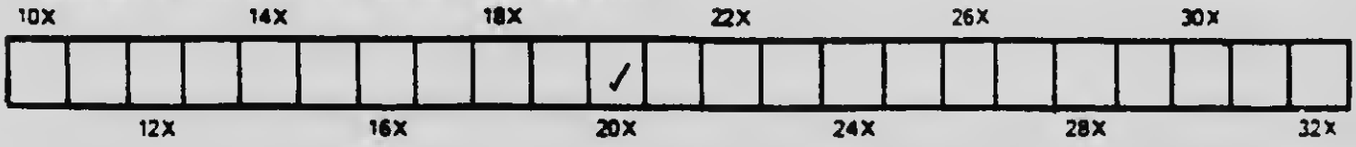
The Institute has attempted to obtain the best original copy available for filming. Features of this copy which may be bibliographically unique, which may alter any of the images in the reproduction, or which may significantly change the usual method of filming are checked below.

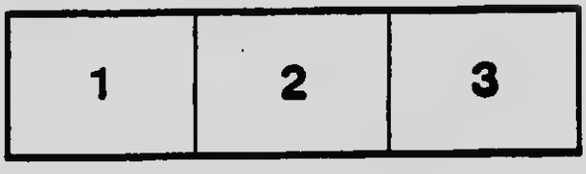
- [x] Coloured covers / Couverture de couleur
- [ ] Covers damaged / Couverture endommagée
- [ ] Covers restored and/or laminated / Couverture restaurée et/ou pelliculée
- [ ] Cover title missing / Le titre de couverture menque
- [ ] Coloured maps / Cartes géographiques en couleur
- [x] Coloured ink (i.e. other than blue or black) / Encre de couleur (i.e. autre que bleua ou noire)
- [x] Coloured plates and/or illustrations / Planches et/ou illustrations en couleur
- [ ] Bound with other meterial / Relié evec d'eutres documents
- [ ] Qnly edition available / Seule édition disponible
- [ ] Tight binding may causa shadows or distortion along interior margin / La reliure serréa peut causer de l'ombre ou de la distorsion le long de la marge intérieure.
- [ ] Blank leaves added during restorations may appear within tha text. Whenever possible, these heve been omitted from filming / Il se peut que certaines pages blenchas ejoutées lors d'una restauration apparaissent dans le texta, mais, lorsque cela étc:t possible, ces pages n'ont pas été filmées.
- [ ] Additional comments / Commentaires supplémentaires:

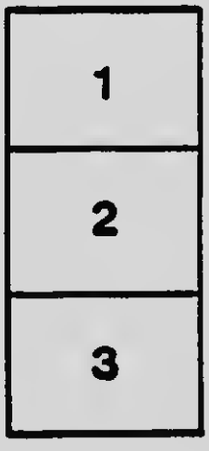
L'Institut a microfilmé le meilleur examplaire qu'il lui a été possible de se procurer. Les détails de cet exemplaire qui sont peut-être uniques du point de vue bibliographique, qui peuvent modifier une image reproduite, ou qui peuvent exiger une modifications dans la méthode normale de filmage sont indiqués ci-dessous.

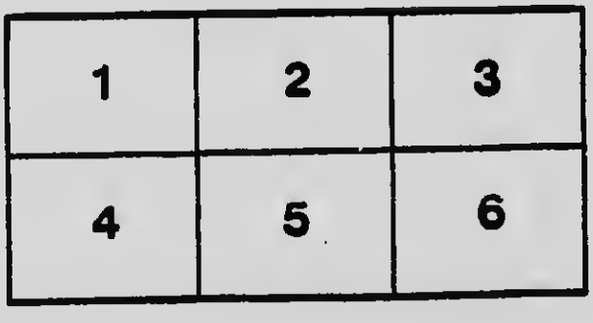
- [ ] Coloured pages / Pages de couleur
- [ ] Pages damaged / Pages endommagées
- [ ] Pages restored and/or laminated / Peges restaurées et/ou pelliculées
- [x] Pages discoloured, stained or foxed / Pages décolorées, tachetées ou piquées
- [ ] Pages detached / Pages détachées
- [x] Showthrough / Transparence
- [ ] Quality of print varies / Qualité inégale de l'impression
- [ ] Includes supplementary material / Comprend du matériel supplémentaire
- [ ] Pages wholly or partlelly obscured by erreta slips, tissues, etc., have been refilmed to ensure the bast possibla image / Les peges totalement ou partiellement obscurcies par un feuillet d'errata, une pelure, etc., ont été filmées à nouvaau de feçon à obtenir la mellleure image possible.
- [ ] Qpposing peges with verying colouretion or discolouretions ere filmed twice to ensure the best possible image / Les pages s'opposent ayent des colorations variables ou des décolorations sont filmées deux fois efin d'obtenir le meilleur image possible.

This item is filmed at the reduction ratio checked below/
Ce document est filmé au taux de réduction indiqué ci-dessous.










EMBLEM
EWARDS

THE TREASURE HUNTERS

BELL & COCKBURN'S EMPIRE REWARDS

FOR BOYS AND GIRLS.

Cr. 8vo, average length 270 pp., with Frontispiece in Colours, and charming illustrations in duo tone by leading artists.

Price **75 cents** per vol.

THE TREASURE HUNTERS. By JOHN MACKIE.
A bracing story of quest and adventure.

JUNK AHOY. By W. C. METCALFE.
One of Mr. Metcalfe's best sea stories.

THE FORTUNES OF JOYCE. By L. E. TIDDEMAN.
A delightful girls' story.

THE PERILS OF PETERKIN. By ROBERT LEIGHTON.
A delightful story of adventure in the Canadian Rockies.

THE KING'S PARDON. By ROBERT OVERTON.
One of Mr. Overton's best stories.

THE GIRLS OF ST. BEDE'S. By GERALDINE MÖCKLER.
A charming school story for girls.

COMMON CHORDS. By RAYMOND JACBERNS.
A story for girls, of great force and charm.

Extra crown 8vo, average length over 300 pp., with Frontispiece in colours, emblematic end papers, and several charming illustrations in duo tone by leading artists.

Price **$1.00** per vol.

FAIRY GROUND. By LADY MACALISTER.
A splendid story for boys and girls.

THE FOURTH FORM AT WESTBOURNE. By CHAS. J. MANSFORD. A fine healthy school story for boys.

FAGS AND THE KING. By CHAS. J. MANSFORD.
A delightful story for placing in the hands of any boy.

THE BRIG 'JANE MARY.' By FRANCIS MARLOWE.
No boy could wish for a better book.

THE WILD RUTHVENS. By CURTIS YORKE.
Probably Curtis Yorke's best book.

THE REBELLION OF MARGARET. By GERALDINE MÖCKLER. Undoubtedly one of Miss Möckler's best efforts.

TORONTO: BELL & COCKBURN

WITH A WILD OATH, ESAU FELL FORWARD INTO OUR MIDST.—*Page* 167.

[*Frontispiece.*

THE TREASURE HUNTERS

A STORY OF TROPICAL SEAS

BY

JOHN MACKIE

AUTHOR OF

"THE MAN WHO FORGOT," "THE LIFE ADVENTUROUS,"
"THE RISING OF THE RED MAN," "HIDDEN IN
CANADIAN WILDS," "IN SEARCH OF SMITH,"
"BLACKMAN'S ROCK," "THE HEART OF
THE PRAIRIE," ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANCIS E. HILEY

TORONTO
BELL & COCKBURN

CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

THE TREASURE HUNTERS

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF THE MALAY

As a mere child I must have knocked around quite a bit, for I was born near Suva, in the Fiji Islands, and when things went all wrong there with the planting, and my dear old dad thought it necessary to shift camp, we came to Australia. There for several years we followed the usual nomadic life that most families live whose head has got to pick up a living somehow. It is unlikely that my father would have minded these vicissitudes of fortune much, had it not been for my mother, myself—the eldest of the family—and my two sisters.

Then we drifted into Queensland, where my father went opal-hunting, and a lucky day for him that he did so, for one evening he came into the tent carrying a huge lump

of something rolled up in the kerchief he was in the habit of wearing round his neck. He uncovered it and placed it in my mother's hands. It was a huge mass of opal, almost without a flaw, and from it flashed all the colours of the rainbow. It was, indeed, as if all the glories of the heavens had been concentrated and pent up in the heart of that stone through all the ages, only to be revealed when it saw the light, for there was something almost uncanny in the bewildering blaze of its loveliness—in the prismatic colouring of its ever changing lights.

"That licks my new butterfly!" was the comment of Amy, my youngest sister, for the rest of us were speechless for the moment.

"What does it mean, dear?" asked my mother, looking somewhat anxiously, I fancied, at my father, with something suspiciously like moisture in her eyes.

"A thousand pounds, anyhow," he replied, "and perhaps more. That means a snug home, dear wife, for you and the little ones, and a fresh start in life for me. I know of a snug little selection on the Fitzroy Downs, in the Maranoa district, that we

can have cheap. With care and good luck we can get together a nice little herd of cattle within a few years, and then the rest will be easy sailing. Thank Heaven, it will be a rest from the sort of life we've been leading of late! It has been breaking me all up to see you living like this, but there's been little else for a man to do."

Then I remember my mother having a little cry and kissing my father, and we three youngsters stealing outside with a somewhat lowered sense of the importance of butterflies.

We went to the Fitzroy Downs, and there took possession of one of the loveliest little homesteads it was possible to meet with in a long day's journey. We got together a small herd of cattle and horses, and things prospered with us as they had never done before. Our stock increased, we bought up more land, and in a few years my father was one of the most prosperous squatters in the district. Talk about happy homes, it would have been difficult in all the length and breadth of Australia to find a happier one than ours! We employed stockmen and servants, and I no longer had the mortifica-

tion of seeing my mother bending over the wash-tub and wearing herself to a shadow, so that we children should always be spick and span, and different from the teamsters' and bush-bred children generally, whom we used to see running about as wild and dirty as the piccaninnies of the semi-civilised black people. We got a piano from Brisbane, and my mother, who was a good musician, taught my sisters how to play as well as to be good housewives.

Being a boy, I did not consider their ideas regarding a change of life applied to me, so when sending me away from home was mooted, I offered so many objections that, for a while at least, they did not press the matter. Besides, my father, who was a good all-round scholar, had himself taken my education in hand, and I knew, from what I had seen of other boys who had been at public schools in Sydney, and even further afield, that my acquirements—and I say it, I trust, in a proper spirit—could very well bear comparison with theirs. Besides, there were other reasons that influenced me which it is not necessary to speak of now.

Then came the curse of the Australian

squatter—drought. No one who has not seen and experienced this ghastly presence can form any idea of its pitiless, malign influence.

As ill-luck would have it, the great dam, to build which my father had borrowed money from the banks, had not been completed in time to catch the last rains, and the result was that the little valley with the huge embankment at one end, which ought now to have been a beautiful lake, resembled the sweltering crater of a volcano. Away out on the great plain beyond the blood-wood and ti-tree limit, the heated air-waves danced the livelong day, creating phantom seas and crystal lakes, as if to mock one with a sense of futility. It was pitiful to watch my father's attempts to wear a cheerful face before those at home, though, of course, riding about with him as I did, and working like any station-hand, he must have known that I realised the gravity of the situation.

One year passed, and no rain. Two years passed, and ruin was staring us in the face, for there was nothing fit to sell on the station, and there was a large sum to be met that we had borrowed from the bank to construct the

dam. To make matters worse, the banks were closing on the station properties, and there was a senseless strike among the shearers and station-hands, who, in many cases, vented their ill-feeling against the squatters by acts at once dastardly and cruel.

I knew that the bank had begun to press my father, that we had not too much ready money, and that it was because we could no longer afford it that my sister Mary had been brought home from the boarding-school at Sydney; and the chances were in a year's time we would be utterly ruined and have to resort to our old hand-to-mouth existence.

Things were now getting desperate, and I taxed my brains day and night to try and devise a way out of our difficulties, but it was of no avail. I would be seventeen in another fortnight, tall and strong for my age, and it was difficult to make some people believe I was not four or five years older; the out-of-door life and the Australian sun rush up young people so quickly. Perhaps I should have said at the beginning of this story that I had been christened John Chilcot, after my father's father, and, I understand, his father before him. Anyhow, it was only my parents

who called me John; by my sisters and every one else I was usually called Jack.

I can never forget as long as I live the tragic incident that occurred at the close of a dusty and windy day in July at our station, which my father had christened Maranara, after its original native name. Upon it hinges a remarkable sequence of events.

A few days previously a middle-aged and footsore Malay—a native of Java, as it afterwards transpired—had come up to the station store, and, in tolerable English, asked my father to sell him some quinine, as he was suffering from fever. There could be but little doubt that the man was seriously ill; he was one of the most pitiful specimens of manhood I had looked on for many a day. He was a little under average height, but his face and frame were wasted by disease until he looked more like a walking skeleton than anything else. A cabbage-tree hat, a worn pair of boots, a cheap coloured shirt and blue dungaree trousers completed his attire. He staggered under the slender swag and billy-can he carried. As for food he did not seem to possess any, and asked for none, as was the custom of sun-downers and many

whites who could well afford to pay for it. The expression on his face was by no means unpleasant, but it bore unmistakable traces of late hardship and suffering.

After my father had mixed him a bottle of fever medicine—a remedy that he rather prided himself on, and for which he would never take any payment—the Malay expressed his gratitude in a few words with obvious sincerity. He then begged to be allowed to camp for a day or two on the far side of our water-hole, as he had been very ill, and felt utterly unfit to walk any further.

Now, to shelter an alien at that particular time, when the working-men in the colony were crying out and denouncing coloured labour, was to court serious trouble at the hands of the malcontents. These latter were generally men who never did any work, but drew pay from their union in return for going about and inciting simpler minds to dissension and crime. Still, my father did not hesitate; he saw that this stranger in a strange land was sick, and, literally, he took him in and gave him bread. There was an empty hut, with a bunk in it, somewhat apart from the other buildings, he must go into it,

and there remain until such time as he was well—my father himself would look after him.

The Malay appeared surprised, and looked strangely upon my father, while he muttered something in a tongue I could not understand. Then he spoke somewhat in this wise, in the dignified language of his people: As surely as God was great and Mahomet was His prophet, my father would be rewarded for his goodness. He had been driven out of Brisbane by the strike riots, and been for days trudging from one station to another in terror of his life from the bands of lawless men who were patrolling the country looking for an excuse to work evil upon him and those who helped him. My father had been as a friend to him; he would not risk bringing trouble upon him by sheltering under his roof-tree.

But my father insisted on having his own way, and he led the Malay to the empty hut. There he lay for three days very ill indeed with the fever and ague, and lucky it was for him he was with us, for he could do nothing to help himself. On the fourth day he rose, and sat by the door of the hut. I saw him,

and asked why he seemed so anxious to be up?

He said, in reply, that it behoved him to bestir himself, get well, and be off, as he would never forgive himself if he brought trouble on those who had befriended him.

As he spoke, I saw a cloud of dust in the distance. In a few minutes more a mob of horsemen galloped up. It was the picket of strikers, and bent on mischief. The odd feature of the situation was that some of them wore crape over the upper part of their faces. One of them carried a long green hide rope over his arms with a noose to it. They were a blackguardly-looking lot, and evidently meant business. Was it the poor, dying Malay these noble sons of labour—save the mark!—were after?

CHAPTER II

THE STRIKERS

THERE were at least twenty-five of the strikers, and all well mounted. Typical bushmen they looked, with shirt-sleeves rolled up to elbow, moleskin trousers and broad-brimmed felt hats on; they nearly all had revolvers in their belts. They came up at a good swinging pace, and as soon as they caught sight of the Malay, sitting in the doorway, they drew up in a semicircle before the hut and dismounted. Whatever the sick man thought of the sudden appearance of the enemy, he at least betrayed n fear. He turned his face in a certain direction, and muttered something that might have been a prayer, for I caught the name of Allah. He remained seated.

My first impulse was to get help, but our two remaining stockmen were out on the run, and I was not quite sure as to where my

father was. Then it occurred to me that if my father were in the neighbourhood it would be a mistake to call him, as he would be sure to resent any violence to the Malay, and trouble would come of it. I stood by the sick man's side, with my hand upon his shoulder.

"What do you want, mates?" I asked, for in the bush this is the common form of address.

"We want your Chinkie," answered a tall, dirty-looking fellow coolly, as he took the long rope with the noose from the man who had been carrying it. I noticed he had a large, loose, cruel mouth, with fleshy lips, but I could not see his eyes properly through the slits in the crape.

"He's no Chinaman," I retorted, nettled by the fellow's insolent way of talking; "and, if he was, what is your business with him?"

"Well, then, he's a half nigger all the same, my young Cock-o'-the-North," was the still unruffled reply, "and we're goin' to wipe out the vermin. It's high time we took the law into our own hands. I warn you, young man, if you don't hold your jaw, or if you

attempt to follow us, we'll tie you up in the hut, and shove something into your mouth that will save you the trouble of speaking."

I noticed, as the cold-blooded brute coiled the rope up, that he lacked the two upper joints on the third and fourth fingers of his left hand. I looked around for a stick or something to keep him off should he approach, but there was nothing within reach. Suddenly I heard voices in the direction of the dwelling-house, some hundred yards or so distant, and saw my father in the act of turning my mother and my sister Mary back into the house. But my sister had caught sight of me, and, scenting trouble, broke away from my father and ran towards me. She was tall for her age, and her long, dark hair streamed in the wind behind her. She was in her sixteenth year.

My father called after her, but she did not seem to hear, and reached the semicircle of men.

"Get back to the house, Mary, this very instant!" I cried to her with all the dignity of an elder that I could muster. But I might as well have cried to the wind.

Two bushmen stor[illegible] her [illegible]ay.

"Get back, miss," said one warningly, "or ye'll be sorry you comed here."

"Let me pass!" she demanded, looking at him indignantly and with a little stamp of her foot, "or you'll be sorry *you* came here!"

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" exclaimed the bushman in mock horror, and putting out his hands to bar her progress. "You mustn't really, you know. If a pretty girl could only see her face when she's angry she'd be ashamed of it and hide it, it looks so ugly."

"How jolly well ashamed you must be of yours to have to use that crape veil!" she retorted.

There was a general contortion of lower jaws, and one or two hoarse chuckles. The would-be wit bit savagely at the ends of his moustache.

At this moment the Malay at my side, before I divined his intentions, struggled to his feet.

"My good friend," he said to me; "if it is the will of Allah, it is His will. I will go quietly with these men, for I feel that my days are but few in the land, and so it matters not. It is not meet that I should be

the cause of trouble within the gates of those who have been to me as brothers and sisters."

And, apparently unconcerned, he staggered towards the man who held the rope.

"Don't do anything so silly," I cried, holding him back by the faded silk sash he wore round his waist. "They forget they're British subjects and on British soil, and if they touch you they do it at their peril!"

At this moment there was a distraction. My sister Mary, in endeavouring to push past the facetious and somewhat discomfited bushman who barred her progress, found herself caught in his arms. Laughingly he drew her towards him, but in another moment she had dashed her little clenched hand full in his face and torn away the crape veil.

I turned in a frenzy. The sill of the log-built hut was only a sapling with one side planed away and about a couple of feet in length. I wrenched it from the uprights, and before any one could prevent me had brought it down crash on the fellow's head with such a force that he dropped all of a heap as if he had been shot. He lay on his back with glassy, soulless eyes fixed on the blue

heavens, and with that ugly supercilious grin still on his lips as if testifying against him. Yet I was fearful lest the man was dead.

I thought my action would have brought the others down upon me at once, but it did not. The gallant one was evidently no favourite.

"Serves him jolly well right!" "Never knows where to draw the line!" "Spiles everything by his confounded nonsense!" "He'll come to shortly; his silly skull's too thick to hurt!" were some of the comments passed upon their mate.

Mary now stood beside the Malay and myself. The latter seemed as if suffering, and sat down on the door-step with a deathly pallor on his face. The angry mob in front did not seem to concern him in the very least. My sister ran inside the hut, and fetching out a pannikin of water put it to his lips.

"Oh, you cowards!" she cried, sweeping the circle with her dark eyes; "all you're fit for is to go in bands and fight sick men!"

"You'd better keep that pretty little mouth of yours shut, Long-legs, or you'll find we

can do more than that," remarked the cool one, approaching with the rope in his hand. There was something so significantly cold-blooded in the man's voice that I instinctively shuddered.

"Mary, go home! Go home right now, I tell you!" I shoutcd. "This is no place for you!"

But she would not go, and with her hands on the Malay's shoulders, looked straight at the yellow-haired, lop-fingered one with the rope as if she would have liked to put it round his neck. Having seen her cry over a dead bird and a mangy kitten, I was rather surprised to see her exhibit so much pluck.

The yellow-haired one came up to within a few feet of me.

"Stand clear, young 'un," he said roughly, "I want to see how your Chinese-cheap-labour looks with a rope round its neck."

"Why not have a little private rehearsal on your own account, Long-legs," Mary chipped in coolly, "and anticipate the hangman?"

There was a series of explosive snorts at this that reminded one of a lot of ravens rejoicing over a dead bullock.

"If you come another inch nearer I'll break your head!" I cried.

What would have happened it would be difficult to determine, had not just then my father come running towards us. No one tried to bar his progress—he was pretty well known in that district—and in another minute he was with us fronting the impatient crowd.

"Mary, go up to the house and look after your mother," he said, in that quiet voice of his that none of us ever disregarded; "I'll see to this."

My sister passed right through the strikers, carrying her head in the air as if they were beneath contempt. The whole thing would have been very funny had it not been for the point at issue. It was a caution to see how the men separated to let her pass. They would not have let me pass so readily.

"Now, what do you want?" my father asked of the yellow-haired one.

"We want to make an example of your coloured labourer," was the determined reply. "We've got no particular grievance up to the present against you, Mr. Chilcot; but if you get in our way and interfere with

us, it will be worse for yourself and family. We want to do this 'ere business without any fuss, so stand aside."

He was pushing past my father, when all of a sudden the latter drew a revolver from his shirt front and clapped it to the braggart's head. The dad was one of the coolest and most determined men I ever knew.

"Get back, you cowardly blackguard," he said, "or I'll shoot you, as sure as Heaven is my judge! Back, I say! Come now—before I say three. One, two——"

But the yellow-haired one was not prepared to die, and drew back a couple of paces. The others looked on somewhat surprised, but I noticed that one or two fingered their revolver-pouches undecidedly.

"It's no use trying that game of bluff on with me," continued my father. "And, Joe Williams—you may as well take that piece of crape off your face, for that mark on your left cheek gives you away; and you, Dan Smythe, and you, Walsh—do you think a man's blind? And as for you, Charles Egan, I know how you came to lose those two joints from your left hand, so you'd

better crow low. Do you think that I, a magistrate, am going to allow you to break the law before my very eyes? Do you think I'm going to give up the stranger within my gates to you?"

The detected men shuffled uneasily, but the long one plucked up courage again. Perhaps he did not know my father's cool, resolute will as some of the others did.

"Look here, boss," he said insolently; "you're talking mighty big—just as if ye were a little tin god on wheels. If we, in protecting our rights, choose to keep this country for the whites, I don't see why you should back up them yellow-skinned beggars in taking the bread out of the mouths of hard-working men!"

My father gave a little laugh of contempt.

"Hard-working men!" he echoed. "Egan, I've never known you do a hard day's work yet. You live on the hard-working men through their unions, by going about the country and advising them against their own interests, and now you want to show your zeal in their cause by egging them on to commit a crime upon a sick Malay who never did you

any harm, and who has never been in anybody's employ so far as I am aware."

"He's not in yours?"

"No."

"Then why should you interfere with us?"

"In the first place, because I'm a man, in the second place, because I'm a magistrate, and in the third place, because if I gave him up to you I'd be as low-down as yourself."

"All very fine, boss, but we've come for the Chinkie, and we're going to have him. I'll admit you've stuck up for the working man before, and advocate white labour; but you're not going to interfere with us."

"Not so long as you behave yourselves, but I swear, and I've done so before, that if you or any one of you lay a finger on that man, I'll shoot you where you stand!"

And the dad was so cool that I knew he meant business. From the way the jaws of some of the other men dropped, I knew they were also of the same opinion.

"Much good that would do you!" sneered the brute; "there are enough of us and to spare to silence your lot."

"You're graduating for the gallows with

a vengeance!" sneered my father. He swept his eyes over the group. "Now, look here, you men," he continued; "you are going the wrong way about getting what you want, and I'm sorry to see some of you, whom I've known hitherto as respectable working men, running your necks into a noose all through the gassing of one who lives upon your discontent. A lot he'd help you if you came to stand upon the scaffold. For, mark you, this is British soil, and the life of that Malay would have to be avenged, if it took all the soldiers in the Empire to do it—make no mistake about that! Now, you've no right to be wearing those crape veils on my premises, and I'm not going to have it. Take my advice and take them off right now. Your horses are pretty well played out, and you can't get any water within twelve miles of this. Go over and camp in the shearing-shed alongside the lagoon. I think, as a member of the Employers' Union, and as one or two of you are members of the Employees', it would be to our mutual advantage to have a talk over things. I give you my word of honour nothing further shall be said about this day's work."

It was the old story of the right and moral courage pitted against the wrong and brute force. Slowly, one after the other, they removed the crape veils from their faces —all save their yellow-haired leader. It might have been that some of them were only too glad to get an excuse for backing out of what they now foresaw would have much more serious consequences than they had at first imagined. To my intense relief I saw that the man whom I had knocked down was showing signs of returning consciousness. Some of his mates carried him to the shearing-shed where my father, later on, cut the hair from the scalp-wound and dressed it.

"Now," said my father, "that's something like business, and I think I can trust you to do what's right. If two of you come over to the store with me, I'll give you enough meat and flour to last you till to-morrow morning. It's close on sun-down, and, I dare say, most of you would rather camp for the night than go on."

Some of the men expressed their thanks in a rather shamefaced way, and assured my father that he need not have any further

apprehension on their behalf. Leading their horses, they went off towards the shearing-sheds which were about a quarter of a mile from the other station buildings.

"That fellow, Charles Egan, who for some reason best known to himself has kept on his crape veil, has some devil's scheme in his head," observed my father. "He said something about continuing his journey, as he could not think of trespassing on my hospitality, but it strikes me he won't go very far to-night. He's got the name of being a real bad egg, so I think we'd better keep a good look-out to-night. It won't do to leave our friend here alone in the hut. Hello! He has fainted."

We carried him out of the sun and placed him in his bunk, and in a few minutes he came round again. But that he suffered from some dangerous internal trouble in addition to fever was obvious. He had taken hardly any nourishment since he had been with us, and that had only been a teaspoonful or two of beef-tea. Save to mutter his thanks he had lain in a curious apathetic condition with his eyes wide open and a far-away look upon his face. At times he would mutter in a

strange tongue, and throw out his arms wearily, as if something uncompleted, undone, weighed heavily on his mind.

Seeing that all danger from the strikers was over, my father, according to his promise, went over later to their camp unarmed, and had a long talk with them. They received him courteously. He discovered that their yellow-haired leader had taken his departure.

I remained with the Malay who seemed in a sinking condition. He seemed suffering from a relapse. About ten o'clock in the evening, when my father came back from his talk with the strikers and entered the hut to relieve me, the Malay turned his eyes upon him, and said—

"My good friend, the blessing of Allah be with you and yours. It is His will that the quest which thy servant began he may not follow, but must leave to another. It matters not that you are not followers of the Prophet—you have been as brothers and sisters to me, and that may cover many things. Before the sun rises my spirit shall have passed, but the secret of my quest will remain with you. I have neither

father, mother, sister nor brother save yourselves to whom I can commit my secret, so to you I leave it in return for what it is needless of me to speak. It is a quest that may not be without peril, but it is one that will bring you riches in abundance. It is a strange tale I have to tell, but it is one that has been carefully guarded for many years, and is none the less real."

He drew from under his pillow a packet wrapped in oil-skin, and, opening it, produced a sheet of what looked like very old parchment or sheepskin. It was, I could see plainly, some sort of a plan or chart.

"It is not according to the usual stories of buried treasure," the Malay said, smiling feebly. "Listen, and I will tell you a strange thing."

CHAPTER III

THE HADJI'S SECRET

THE Malay had wasted so little time over his preamble that he had hardly given my father or myself time to express our willingness or otherwise to listen to his confidences. He seemed to take it for granted that we would only be too glad to listen. It was quite evident that he believed himself to be dying, but this did not seem to trouble him much.

Thinking that perhaps the shock he had been subjected to by the appearance of the strikers might have unduly influenced him, and made him fanciful, my father suggested that he should take a sedative and postpone what he intended telling us till the morrow, when perhaps he might wish to alter his mind regarding it.

But the sick man only shook his head, and said that there was no time like the present. He had purposed that if he felt he was going

to die, his secret should perish with him, but our kindness to him, an alien and a stranger, had been so great that he determined to make it known to us.

The little oil-lamp on the shelf close to his head threw a steady light upon the parchment that lay upon his breast, and on his pinched, yellow features. His eyes gleamed out with a light in them that I had never seen before; it was as if they already saw something that lay beyond the range of mortal vision. Only the quaint, far-off chant of the morpoke—that weird nocturnal bird—and the shrill piping of the unseen cricket broke the stillness.

The Malay, or more properly speaking the Javanese, paused a moment as if to gain strength, then continued his strange narration.

His name was Seyid Rahimoon, and he was born at Situbondo, on the north-east coast of Java—the land of ancient temples to strange gods and burning mountains, and under the shadow of Besuki. Still, he was a citizen of the world, for had he not made the great pilgrimage to Mecca, and was he not a Hadji in consequence? He came of a race of seafaring people, who for many generations had scoured the Eastern seas,

trading and taking from their enemies that which they had taken from others. They had known the Banda Sea, the Moluccas, the Celebes, better than they had known their own native villages; they had even traded with the warlike Achinese, who look out upon the far western Indian Ocean, and sunk countless proas belonging to the treacherous wild folk of Borneo, nearer home. For hundreds of years they had even gone down periodically to that great gulf in the northern portion of Austral Land, now known as the Gulf of Carpentaria, and traded with its strange, savage, black people, giving them of their produce and goods in return for bêche-de-mer, tortoiseshell, pearl-shell, and other things.

But that for which they not unfrequently went down into the gulf was to escape for a while from the importunities and vengeance of those piratical pig-tailed unbelievers, the Chinese. For in the China seas their junks lay low in the water with treasure, gold, money, and plate, which they had looted from merchantmen and the palaces of princes over seas. It was but meet that the Malays should punish the pagan dogs by taking these

things from them, and letting them know what it was like to be robbed. On these occasions it was necessary, as has been said, to pass out of sight for a time, lest the avengers should band together and pursue; or even, as was not unfrequent, the greed and cupidity of some of the other Malays should be aroused, and cause them to turn on their fellows.

By the beard of the Prophet, those must have been stirring times, when the proas from afar sighted the junks low down on the ocean's rim and gave chase! And when the swallow-winged proas bore down and overhauled the clumsy, square-sailed boats of the Chinese cut-throats, how the hearts of the pursuers must have rejoiced! For the Chinese, with their gongs and their sulphurous stink-pots, had but poor show against the musket and kriss, and it was seldom long before their bodies were food for the sharks.

Here the dying Hadji pulled himself up short; he was becoming reminiscent, exhausting his powers before he had communicated his secret, and that was a foolish thing to d He paused for a minute or two; my father gave him a drink, and he went on again.

His father and mother had died when he was a mere child, and his grandfather had been kept in prison by the Dutch for many long years for alleged piracy on the high seas. He had worked with the convict gang at the public works in Samarang, and later on at the great harbour and breakwater of Tandjongpriok, off Batavia. Some British people who had become acquainted with his (the Hadji's) destitute condition had pity on him, and took him to Batavia, where he passed the early days of his life. Later on he took service in an hotel, and, saving a little money, made the great pilgrimage to Mecca. He had turned his hand to many things in his time; made money and lost it again. But that was the will of Allah, and he made no complaint.

It was only about two years ago, when on one occasion going from the wharf at Tandjongpriok to Batavia by rail, he got by mistake into a railway-carriage reserved for the convicts returning from their labour. Before he could get out again, the prisoners filed in, guarded by warders with loaded rifles, the doors were locked, and the train started. The warders did not heed his

presence—such things were always happening. And now came the strange part of the story. In the bent and toil-worn old convict sitting opposite to him the Hadji recognised his father's father. He had been pointed out to him some time before in Samarang. To make his identity known to the old man, and to prove it by certain things beyond all shadow of doubt, was the work of a few minutes.

When, however, his grandfather looked upon him, he hardly needed confirmation by word of mouth, for it was written on his face. Nature had imprinted the same lines on the features of his grandson as it had done on that of the son. The memories of the old filibuster harked back to the days when he varied the exercise of boarding Chinese junks —which, however, were not always Chinese junks—and spilling the blood of the owners, with the more restful arts of love and peace, so that his heart softened within him. The thoughts that had possessed him when the wife whom he had loved presented him with his first-born brought back to him the long-forgotten claims of kinship. The warders did not seem to heed the pair, and the noise of the train prevented them being overheard.

He was in for life, the old man explained, and his last appeal to the Dutch powers for the remission of his sentence had proved ineffectual. He must end his days as a convict, they said, and now he knew he would remain a prisoner until he became unfit for further work, when the Dutchmen would quietly get rid of him. He felt that time was now very near at hand. But there was treasure he knew of, hid in one of the Sir Edward Pellew Islands, in the Carpentarian Gulf, which lay somewhat heavily upon his mind. The Hadji seemed poor; what was to prevent him obtaining possession of the same?

It had been hidden in a cave in an inner harbour of one of the islands on the last trip he had made, because his party had feared some other and more powerful proas were in pursuit of them. As it was, when on the way back to Java, with the intention of returning for the treasure at some more convenient season, they were overtaken by a Dutch gunboat, and in the fight that followed his comrades were nearly all killed. Only three survived, to be lodged in a Javanese prison. He was condemned to penal servitude for the

remainder of his days; his two comrades, who were old offenders, departed this life suddenly. Their captors had not been able to wrest their secret from them. It was an old story now, a mere myth in the ears of the present generation. He had all along hoped that he might one day be released, or that he would escape and go back for the treasure; but the years had passed, and his hopes had passed with them. There was one day in seven that the prisoners were allowed to see their friends. If he, his grandson, came on that day and brought concealed some parchment and materials with which to write, he would draw up a rough chart signifying the spot where the treasure lay hid. The warders of the prison were not scrupulous in matters of oversight as in other prisons; a little money when no one was looking on might work wonders.

He, the Hadji, went to the prison; his grandfather prepared and explained the chart, and it was smuggled out safely. It was now simply a question of securing that treasure. He had taken no one into his confidence, but set out on his quest. Having but little money at the time, he had managed

boat that sailed to Brisbane. When he arrived at that port, he found that all the to get a position as cook's assistant on a wharfingers and stevedores were out on strike, and the merchants, their clerks, and the ship's officers themselves, were obliged to discharge the cargo. Grateful for the kindness he had received on board, he had helped them, without thought of recompense, with the result that when he went ashore he received rough usage from the strikers, and went in fear of his life.

As it was hard to say when there would be a boat going round to the Gulf, and as he dared not stay longer in Brisbane, he left that city by rail, and went up to Toowoomba. Owing to his insufficient geographical knowledge and lack of experience of the Australian bush, he had conceived the idea of pushing on overland to the Gulf of Carpentaria. By getting odd jobs as he went, saving his money, and walking from place to place, he would be able, by the time he reached Normanton or Burketown, to hire a boat, engage a couple of men whom he could trust, and set sail for the islands.

But he found that those who would have

hired him dared not on account of the outcry against coloured labour. Footsore and weary, he tramped from station to station, but the awesome loneliness and dangers of the Australian bush were things he had not bargained for; he had fallen ill, and had been warned by the strikers that if he chanced to get well again, and accepted work from a squatter, they would most assuredly "do for him!" But still he had struggled on. It was, therefore, in this condition that he had at length reached the gates of his friends, whom Allah would reward for having taken compassion on the stranger. He grieved to think he had been the cause of disturbing the peace of the household, but he knew that the seven years of plenty in the land had passed, and that the seven years of famine, like the seven lean kine of Pharaoh's dream, had arrived; therefore, perhaps, his treasure would prove to his friends what Joseph's interpretation of the dream, and his precautions, were to the Egyptian king. He feared that before another sunset he would put his friends to the further trouble of burying him; but their reward would come.

He paused, and then took up the chart in his wasted hands to make his meaning clear to us. There were few sounds to break in upon us save those that nature makes—the irregular chirruping of certain nocturnal members of the grasshopper family, the eerie shuddering croon of the 'possum in some neighbouring tree, the quaint, melancholy call of the morpoke, and now and again the fitful chorus of shrill trebles and deep basses that the frogs tried to raise, with indifferent results, among the reeds down by the banks of the lagoon. The square space some four feet from the ground that did duty as a window was unshuttered. It was in the shadow, and through it one could see the dark-blue fields of heaven strewn with God's diamonds. I thought that once or twice, as I glanced towards this window, a dark object furtively showed itself for a moment, then vanished. Some iguana or venturesome bush rat, I fancied, on mischief bent.

The chart was a rough one, but still the Hadji's grandfather must have known those islands well, and have had a good memory; for these, the Sir Edward Pellew group, which were indicated, were shown in such a

way that could not have been achieved by mere guess-work. Afterwards I noted that, so far as their position was concerned, they coincided fairly well with Flinders' chart of 1805—the only one used to the present day so far as I am aware. These islands had never been inhabited, and had only been occasionally visited by wandering tribes of wild, cannibal blacks. They are surrounded by reefs and shoals, and far from the course of ships. Little or nothing is known about them, and the adjacent country on the mainland is practically unsettled.

The Hadji pointed out the inner island, which his grandfather had christened Cannibal Island, from the natives found thereon. It looked like an unbroken, wooded hill at a distance, and there were some peculiarly-shaped rocks at the north-west end by which we would recognise it. He told us how, by sailing up what seemed a blind passage on the south side, and rounding a sharp spit, we would come to a harbour where hundreds of proas could safely ride at anchor. It was cliff-bound on all sides, and pierced by peculiar caves which ran far into the mountain. He also told us how we could find

"THE HADJI POINTED OUT THE INNER ISLAND."

Page 46,

the particular place in which the treasure was buried, and mentioned some of the peculiarities of this truly remarkable island. It was shaped like a squat volcano, the broad crater of which went right down and formed a natural harbour. These, and other things, I say, were so strange and unique that it may be well to keep them until the proper time comes for their description. The tortuous passage leading to this large central basin would, of course, only admit the smallest craft. To the early explorers, Tasman and Flinders—who could not in any case have come near those shoal-guarded islands with their large vessels—the existence of such a spot was quite unknown.

And then the Hadji begged of us a last favour—to observe some little details regarding his burial. My father and myself, by word and act, tried to rally him, but it was of no avail, and we knew that the sands of life were fast running to a finish in the glass of time. With his failing breath he said good-bye, and blessed us. Then his eyes closed, and peacefully and contentedly, it seemed to me, he crossed the bar and drifted out to sea.

It had all come about so suddenly that I

could hardly believe the poor Hadji was dead. But, thank goodness, I had done for him in life what I could, and no vain regrets would be mine! Even if no treasure existed, or the whole thing were an imagining of his weakened brain, there was reward in the thought that we had done what was right towards a stranger in a strange land—to a helpless fellow-creature.

As my father lifted the rude chart from the dead man's breast, I happened to glance towards the window, and there I saw something that for the moment gave me a bad turn. Two glassy eyes were staring at us from a long white face, with such an intensity of gaze as to be decidedly creepy and discomfiting. The dim light did not permit of me distinguishing the features, but I noticed that one hand rested on the sill of the window, and that the fingers were not all there. There was something so startling and terrible in the appearance of this face that I involuntarily cried out.

CHAPTER IV

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW

THE expression of the face at the window was one I shall never forget as long as I live. It was as if all the worst passions of the man had suddenly been aroused, and covetousness and murder were undecided as to what course they should take. At least, so it seemed to me.

"Hello!" cried my father, turning to me quickly; "what's the matter, John?"

"The face—the man at the window!" I gasped, pointing to it.

But when my father looked, the face had vanished, and there was nothing but the dark-blue, star-studded heavens to be seen through the open casement. There was nothing to be heard save the ceaseless chirping of the cicada, and the absurd chorus of the frogs, who seemed calling out for "more water! more water!" in a somewhat half-

hearted way, as if they knew they had very little chance of getting it.

Together we rushed outside, but there was nothing to be seen. We ran round the hut in opposite directions, and met at the back, but there was no one there. The bush was some forty yards distant, but we saw no dusky form glide into it and disappear like a shadow. Had there been any one about, surely we would have seen them in that wonderful star-light. Away over on the other side of the lagoon lay the shearing-shed; we could see, hard by it, a blood-red eye of fire, and we knew it was the strikers' camp-fire. Not a sound could be heard from it; they were doubtless all in the land of dreams.

"It's very odd," I remarked, hardly knowing what to say; "I am certain there was some one looking in at that window."

"A heated imagination often plays such tricks," observed my father quietly. "After what you've just heard and seen, I'm not surprised. I fancied I saw such things myself."

"I could have sworn it was that chap who led the strikers to-day," I said, some-

what chagrined, and feeling not a little foolish.

"He wore a crape veil; how could you tell it was he?"

"It was by the hand I saw on the sill," I replied; "the finger-joints were missing."

"Ah! It's an ugly, uncanny thing to see mutilation of that sort, and it doubtless made an unpleasant impression upon you. Unconsciously you reproduced it in your mind's eye with that face. Anyhow, that rascal had left the strikers' camp before I got there. I saw him myself some two or three miles away cantering back to Roma over the downs. The others weren't sorry to see him go, I fancy."

But, despite what my father said, I could not get rid of the thought that the murderous, yellow-haired one had only cleared out of the camp in order to throw dust in our eyes, and, doubling on his tracks, had come back to the hut under cover of night, in order to gratify some fell scheme of revenge upon the victim who had slipped through his fingers, and brought him into disrepute with his fellows. What if he really had been at the window all the time, and heard the Hadji's story!

It was a horrible idea, for it went without saying he would make a bold essay to secure the treasure. Such a man would not stick at crimes to achieve his ends; he would think as little of taking human lives as he would think of destroying so many white ants. The look in the eyes I saw was that of cold-blooded villainy—the look of a man who is utterly destitute of any moral sense.

Even if he had been at the back of the house he could have heard every word of the Malay's story, for the rough, undressed slabs of which the hut was built did not always come together. His intention had probably been to kill the Malay, and then indulge in a little incendiarism out of sheer love of revenge. In all likelihood the thought of this was what had enabled him to keep so cool earlier in the day under trying circumstances. But, again, if it was he who only a minute or so before was looking in at the window, where was he now? There was no one there. No one could possibly have been there without our having seen him beat a retreat. Surely it was, as my father had said; my excited brain had played me a trick!

We re-entered the hut, and my father took the chart and put it into his pocket without a word. He covered the face of the dead man, shut and barred the window, then, locking the door, we left the Hadji to his new estate.

I was much awed by what had occurred, but could not resist asking—

"What do you think of what he told us, dad? Wasn't it a queer story?"

"I don't quite know what to make of it just yet," he replied thoughtfully, as we walked towards the house. "I'm rather inclined to be sceptical about yarns concerning hidden treasure, but I happen to know that the Malay pirates did run into the Gulf in the old days, to hide and make believe that they had only gone on a little trading expedition. He told his story lucidly enough, and he had no reason to send us on a wild goose chase."

"And there's the chart; there's no getting over that."

"No, if the treasure's there."

"If you could get it, dad, wouldn't it help you a good deal these bad times?"

"I dare say it would"—he paused for a

moment, then exclaimed excitedly: "Yes, it might mean the saving of us all from ruin, and, Heaven knows, I'm not so fit for the old, hard life as I used to be."

"Then you'll go and have a look for it, won't you?"

"I don't know. How can I possibly leave, the way things are at present?"

"Father," I said deliberately; "what's to prevent me going? I'll be in my eighteenth year in a few days. I'm more than a boy now. I'm about as big and strong as an ordinary man. I've never been away from home, and a trip would do me good. What's to prevent my going and looking for it? It wouldn't take long—a few months at the most. I could go round to Normanton or Burketown in one of the boats; charter a cutter or schooner there, and go to the islands. It might be worth my time, and I'm quite able for the task."

He paused before speaking, and looked at me musingly.

"Yes. I don't know what's to prevent you," he remarked. "We'll see about it."

And that night it was as if a new world and a new life had opened up before me.

Next morning the strikers came over in a body to speak to my father before leaving the station. He went down the verandah steps to meet them. They seemed quiet and respectful enough.

"Good-morning," he said cheerfully, before any of them had time to speak. "Come over to the spare hut with me. I want to show you something."

They followed him without a word, wondering what it was he had to show. I mingled with the crowd, and went with them. My father opened the door of the hut, entered, flung open the wooden shutters, then told them all to come in. They straggled in one after the other until the room was almost filled. Some of them looked rather queer, and considerable curiosity was depicted on their faces. My father stood at the head of the bed, and beneath the old blue blanket the shape of a human form showed with that rigid angularity which is so significant. He lifted the covering from off the head and disclosed the peaceful, set face of the dead man.

"I thought you'd better see him," he said. "This is the man whose death you would

have had to-day upon your souls if we had not stood in the way. He has gone before a higher tribunal than yours, and a more merciful one. I only hope that when your time comes you may look the Hereafter in the face with as little to fear as had this man. This is what I had to show you."

Never in my life have I seen a crowd of men look so taken aback and ashamed of themselves, and I hope never to see such another. They filed out of the hut like men who had received a lesson that would last them for life. And they had. After a whispered colloquy outside, one or two of them came back into the hut and spoke to my father. To what they said he readily assented. Then a couple of them made a rude bush coffin; several of them got tools and took turns at digging the grave, while the others prepared a substantial mortised fence to surround it. When my father read the burial service over the remains later on in the day, I never saw more subdued and attentive mourners than those rough bushmen. When it was all over they went quietly away to their respective locations. For them the strike had ended.

For a few days my father never once referred to what the Malay had divulged to us about the treasure, and knowing that probably he had his own good reasons for his attitude, I did not annoy him by asking questions. It was an anxious time, anyhow, on the station, and no one could possibly have filled my father's place had he elected to go away. There was no one on the run with his practical knowledge, and his absence would simply have meant the speedy dissolution of the whole property. Towards the end of the week something happened that precipitated matters. The Bank wrote a letter intimating that certain payments were due on a certain date, and that circumstances would necessitate their collecting such sums in full. Though my father did not show this letter to the others, he showed it to me. I handed it back to him.

"You must let me go and find what the Malay told us about, dad," I said. "You can do without me perfectly well for a few months. It will mean so much for mother and the girls if I do come across the treasure, and I'm very much inclined to think, judging

by what the Malay said, that we'll find everything just as he explained to us."

To my no little surprise, for I had feared he would have a hundred objections to make, he replied—

"I'm afraid you must go; it is impossible for me to get away myself. There is just a chance that you may find it as the Malay said, but I somehow can't help looking upon the whole thing as a sort of wild scheme. I wish there was some one I could trust who could be sent with you, if, indeed, any third party could be found who would listen to such a yarn without laughing at it. But it will require ready money to go there—fifty pounds at least—and I can ill spare it."

"I can sell the greys I've been breaking into double and single harness, dad. Mr. Scott, up at Alpha, told me he'd give me forty pounds for the pair any time I wanted to sell."

After some debate I had my own way, and with a heart not a little heavy, rode over to Scott's, and sold the greys, in which my hopes had been centred for so long.

Of course, my mother and sisters had to be told about my going, but one drawback

in so doing was that as soon as Mary heard it she would insist on going too. Nature made a great mistake in decreeing that Mary should be a girl, for although as gentle and womanly in most ways as any one could wish, she was so plucky and level-headed in others, and managed things in such a cool, taken-for-granted style, that it was seldom any one dreamed of interfering with her. But, of course, it was not to be thought of.

I said good-bye to them all at Maranara, and went down to Brisbane, and from there I sailed in one of the A.U.S.N. boats to Townsville. It had been a hard thing for me to say good-bye; for it must be remembered I had never been away from home for any length of time before, and the journey —though we concealed the fact from the women-folk—was not without its risks. Still I looked forward to the trip and the quest with a zest hitherto unknown to me. There was an old-world glamour about the whole thing that was very fascinating.

Arrived at Townsville, well up the Queensland coast, I left the ship to find out from certain big merchants, who were old, personal friends of my father's, whether or

not they happened to have a boat going round to the Gulf via Torres Straits just then. The head partner on one occasion when visiting us had promised to give me a passage round whenever I chose. As luck would have it, there was a sixty-ton ketch called the *Alacrity* going round to Normanton and Burketown in a couple of days. I was welcome to a passage in her, and the saving would be about fifteen pounds, a consideration with me at the time.

On the Saturday the ketch was towed down the creek and set sail on her voyage round Cape York Peninsula. She ought to have made the trip in ten days or so, but as it was, she took three weeks.

The skipper's name was Robinson, who was of the bottle-nosed species of sea-fish without any of the bluffness and heartiness generally accredited to the same. He had, I afterwards learned, been an adventurer of the lowest order.

The mate was a Scottish Highlander called Macaulay, who came from Port Charlotte in the Island of Islay, in the Hebrides. He and a red-headed Dane known as Peter were the only two reliable

men on the boat. The other three were of the lowest type of seamen, the sort that are picked up from the gutter in such places as San Francisco and Sydney. The cook's galley was on deck, and the cook himself was a run-away man-of-war's man. That he could cook was his one virtue.

When I caught sight of the ketch before taking my things aboard, the amount of deck cargo she carried, and her lowness in the water, even to a landsman like myself, was, to say the least of it, disconcerting. I was to occupy a bunk in the cabin along with the captain and mate, but why I preferred sleeping on deck instead, along with a crazy German, must be held over to another chapter.

CHAPTER V

I SET OUT ON MY QUEST

WHEN the tug cast off the hawser outside the long break-water, and Magnetic Island and Kissing Point dropped astern, I began to pay more attention to my surroundings. The red-faced, bottle-nosed skipper, who hitherto had been comparatively smooth-tongued, now strutted the deck like an angry turkey-cock, giving unnecessary orders, and swearing at the sailors as if in the full enjoyment of a luxury from which he had long been debarred and of which he now meant to make the most.

It was significant that although the crew obeyed him, they made remarks under their breath of an unflattering nature, and when addressing him, did so by simply using his Christian name, which was Dan. This clearly showed that in Townsville they had pretty much herded together, and probably worked side by side on the wharf while wait-

ing for a berth to turn up. The only exceptions to this state of affairs were Macaulay, the elderly mate, and Peter, the Dane.

When it grew dark I went to the cabin to turn in, but what I saw there was not inviting. The swinging lamp smoked and smelt horribly. The place was hot and stuffy, the skipper was snoring lustily in his bunk, and the empty bottle on the table explained the situation. To take my blankets out of my berth and bring them on to the deck was the work of a minute or two. I did not care to sleep in the same sty with such a pig. I sought out a suitable spot, which happened to be close to the German passenger, and lay down on my blankets. On account of the dangers of the coast, with its reefs and islands, we generally dropped anchor at night, and weighed it again before the first streak of dawn crept up out of the sea away out on the eastern horizon. This we did until we got into the open waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria, when we kept on day and night.

I shall never forget that trip between the bold, wooded Queensland coast on the one hand and the Great Barrier Reef on the

other, the lovely islands we passed, and the wonderful effects of sea and sky in those tropical latitudes. At times we were becalmed for days, and there was nothing for it but to seek out the ever-changing shadow of a lazily-flapping sail on deck, and lie chafing over the delay. But there were diversions in the way of watching and catching the great sharks that followed up the ketch, the great turtles that floated on the surface, for all the world like boats bottom up and often with a bird or two resting on their backs, and the brilliantly coloured sea-snakes that drifted past, particularly in the neighbourhood of Torres Straits.

One day as the skipper was passing the stacked timber something caught his eye. He stooped and picked it up. It was a chart that I had been busy elaborating, when unobserved, of the Sir Edward Pellew Islands, partly copied from Flinders' chart, which the mate had let me look at now and again, and partly from the Malay's rough drawing.

The passage to the curious harbour in the centre of the island I had carefully marked and, foolishly enough, had even put a cross at the third cave on the starboard side on

entering, where the treasure was supposed to be. This chart had been rolled up in my blankets, but unfortunately one end of it peeped out.

At first I scarcely realised what it was the skipper held in his hand, and then as I saw him study it with a look of wonder and curiosity on his face, the truth came home to me. Taken off my guard, and in a foolish frenzy of fear, I rushed up to him and caught hold of one corner of the chart.

"I beg your pardon, Captain, this is mine," I said.

He jerked it from my grasp, and, putting it behind his back, regarded me with his wicked, insolent eyes.

"Hello, my young blood!" he drawled. "What's all your hurry about? Seems to me there's something mighty interesting about this here map. What do you know about the Sir Edward Pellew Islands?"

CHAPTER VI

BIRDS OF PREY ON THE HORIZON

If I had only reflected a minute or two before acting so precipitately with regard to my chart in the skipper's hands, I would merely have let him peruse it without comment, knowing that he could not possibly have any idea as to what it indicated. I could also have had some explanation ready that would have left him none the wiser as to its import. As it was, I had very naturally aroused his curiosity and impressed his suspicious mind with the fact that there was more in it than met the eye. Moreover, it must have been palpable to the meanest observer that there was something to conceal, for my manner was undoubtedly agitated and conscience-stricken.

I assumed too much, and blamed myself for having allowed that on which might rest the future fortunes of my family to fall into the hands of such a mean blackleg. He had

doubtless heard that my father was a well-to-do squatter down south, and he probably wondered what was taking me up to such an uncivilised part of the world. When he asked me with that keen suspicious look in his eyes what I knew about the Sir Edward Pellew Islands, I hardly knew what to say.

"I was giving myself a little lesson in geography," I said.

The bottle-nosed one must have had all the innate love of torture pertaining to the savage in his composition. He rejoined—

"But schoolboys don't put more down on their maps than what's really there. Now, what does this ring mean inside this here island, and this here cross?" He had taken the chart from behind his back, held it at arm's length, and was gazing at it critically. "Now, which is the island—this here ring, or this here cross? And what does it all mean, anyhow?

"As to your first question, you can take your choice; and as to your second, it's one of those matters that I'm only at liberty to tell those directly concerned."

This had the desired effect, and took his mind off my chart, but I thought at the time

I would have to pay a heavy price for my temerity. He started forward with an oath upon his lips, and his hands clenched as if to strike, but the old Highlander once more stepped in to interfere. He seized him by the arm and the shoulder.

"Captain," he cried in his deep bass voice, in part relapsing into his native Doric, which he usually did when excited; "I think ye're just about at the end of your tether now. Don't you see that if you het him how you'll run your head into a hole after what's just happened. Gi'e him back his map—siccan a fuss about naething"—wrenching the map from his hand and throwing it at me. "Here, take your map, and dinna be quite sae spunky wi' folk aulder than yersel'!"

I picked up the chart and took myself off. It really was against my grain to talk to any one so much older than myself as I had done; and I knew full well that there is nothing more disgusting in the attitude of youth towards seniority of years than disrespect. But, as I have said before, the man had courted it, and I had done it to distract attention from the chart.

While I was on board he never spoke to

me again, and by the way he looked at me, I knew that if ever he had me in his power there was nothing he would not stoop to so as to compass his revenge.

At last we entered the Norman river, the town of Normanton lying some sixty miles from its mouth.

The little town was built on an iron-stone ridge some few hundred yards from the river in lightly-timbered country. It consisted of about eight hundred souls. It resembled any other Australian bush town—was built of wood and corrugated iron, and had the usual complement of churches, banks, stores where you could buy anything from a needle to an anchor, and public-houses. The ketch drew alongside the wharf, and I went to an hotel.

Over a month had now elapsed since I had left home, and the crucial part of my trip had not yet begun. Indeed, it would require some generalship to get just the sort of boat I wanted, to obtain the right men, and to do what was to be done expeditiously and quickly. The awkward part about the whole affair was that those who went with me would have to work considerably in the

dark, for it might not be policy to share my secret with them. One thing my father had impressed upon me was, not to employ two men who were mates, unless they were recommended by some one who could vouch as to their respectability.

Another thing to be done was to leave a sealed letter with the agent of the firm in Normanton to whom the *Alacrity* had been consigned, containing a full account of my intended doings, and to be opened if I did not return within a stated period, so that the Government cutter and the telegraph wires could be put into operation. Yet another precaution my father had advised was that, I should confide my secret to no one, and never be without a loaded revolver on my belt; for the Gulf country in those days swarmed with men who were "wanted" elsewhere, who were continually on the look-out for plunder, and were utterly without any moral scruples.

The next morning I went and saw the agent, but he was so worried over his own business troubles that he had little time to spend upon me. The crew of the *Alacrity* had laid a complaint against the captain, and

had refused to make the return voyage in her, even if they had to go to prison over the affair. There had been mutual recriminations, in which only the mate held himself aloof. The result was that, by mutual consent, the skipper's articles were cancelled, and the mate, who actually held a master's certificate, was to take the *Alacrity* back to Townsville. I told him that I meditated a cruise to some of the islands in the great Gulf, and that I should like to charter a pearl-shell boat or a cutter, say from eight to twelve tons, for a few weeks. I would require two or three men.

"Ah! I see," replied the merchant; "you want to do a little of the Robinson Crusoe business among the islands by way of a change from mustering and branding cattle. Well, you'll have to keep your eyes pretty well about you if you do, for I've been told they're mostly rather dangerous in the way of shoals and reefs, and the niggers are precious bad. It's a queer sort of place to go for a holiday."

He then told me that just then there was only one boat in the river that was anything like what I wanted. It was called the

Black Witch, and was owned by a couple of Philippine Islanders called Tommie and Pedro—shady customers both, and of whom sinister things were whispered. He advised me to have nothing whatever to do with them. At Burketown, however, some hundred and eighty miles to the west on the Albert river, there was a boat belonging to a countryman of his own called McNab, which, perhaps, I might be able to charter. It was an old pearl-sheller, carried about ten tons, was ketch-rigged, and was said to be a very swift boat. He had heard only quite recently that within a week or two its owner intended coming round with his boat to Normanton.

Now, as the matter stood, I had no time to spare hanging about in such a place as Normanton waiting for uncertainties. I must get to Burketown, and that at once. I asked the merchant if there was no chance of getting there.

"Luckily there is," he said, "if you don't mind a stiff ride. There's half-a-dozen saddle-horses being sent on to-morrow to a drover at Burketown, who is waiting for them there with a mob of cattle to start up the

Nicholson river. His first in charge—a man called Johnson, and a curious chap whom I believe is a Yankee skipper—is going with them. I bought them for the drover, and if you like to start to-morrow morning with them, I dare say we can find an old saddle for you that will carry you through to Burketown; you can send it back again next trip the *Dugong* makes."

I thanked him, and left to make my preparations. As I drew near the hotel—the International—where I had put up, there were two men whose figures seemed familiar walking before me on the road. One of them I recognised as the ex-skipper of the *Alacrity*, but the other I could not for the life of me make out. He was a bushman, tall, and with an ungainly roll of his body when he walked. I could not see his face. When near the verandah of my hotel they suddenly stopped as if to look round; by an impulse I could not account for, I stepped aside into a convenient doorway. When I looked out again they had disappeared. Most likely they had gone into the International. Seeing the disgraced skipper had been compelled to leave the *Alacrity*, he had doubtless taken up his

quarters in the hotel, which was the recognised rendezvous of such seafaring men as came there. I ascended the verandah steps and went in by a side entrance.

When passing the bar-room that opened off it, I heard voices which suddenly riveted me to the spot with wonder and a vague sense of apprehension. The hard, drawling voice of Dan Robinson, the skipper, I was too familiar with to make any mistake about, and, unless I was the victim of some strange trick of the brain, I had heard the other voice before. Something had struck me as being familiar in the slouching figure of the skipper's companion, and now the voice I was sure of having heard under peculiar circumstances; but where I could not for the life of me think. Then a hardness in the tone associated itself with a certain unpleasant experience, and memory supplied the missing link. It was Egan, the agitator, the man who had tried to incite the strikers to murder the Malay who had bequeathed to my father and myself the secret of the hidden treasure.

This discovery was of such an unexpected and extraordinary nature, and carried with it such a vague but none the less potent sugges-

tion of trouble and danger, that, for the moment, I was incapable of thought or action. But the instinct of self-preservation brought back presence of mind, and I slipped unnoticed up-stairs to my bedroom, which was simply one of many in a long corridor. It was more like one of those small compartments adjoining a bar-room than aught else. I locked the door, and sat down on the edge of the bed in a condition of mind that would be difficult to describe. How had those blackguards come to meet? How had Egan managed to get all the way from Maranoa? And what did the meeting of these two portend?

As to the first of these questions it was not hard to tell how they came together. There were but few new-comers in a place like Normanton; the hotel-bars and verandahs were the invariable meeting-places of all those who came in to town, and the truism about birds of a feather explained the rest. As to what had brought Egan to Normanton there could only be one explanation—he must have been listening with his ear to the logs of the hut that night the Malay told us of the treasure, and died. The

shadowy face at the window, and that ghastly hand with the missing finger-joints upon the sill, were no mere creations of a heated imagination after all. It had been Egan who had managed to make good his escape before my father and I rushed out. He had probably come back to murder or execute some devilry; but, having heard something that suited his book, and would enable him to have his revenge, he had taken himself off.

If he had taken boat to Townsville, from that port taken rail to Hughenden, and then "sweated"—taken the temporary loan of—or, in other words, stolen—fresh horses as he journeyed down the Flinders river, it was not unlikely that he should have got to Normanton before me. What with calms and sticking in the river, we had taken an unconscionable time to come from Townsville. Again, he might have come by the *City of Melbourne*, the regular passenger-boat which had passed us in the Gulf. No, there was nothing wonderful in his being there. And if he came with the intention of watching my movements, and robbing me of the treasure, what was more likely than that he should

hear about my arrival, and immediately interview the skipper?

What would be the outcome of their concerted deliberations? I now realised that it was not merely the successful navigating of the dangerous waters of the islands, with their reefs and shoals, I had to contend against, but probably a formidable and unscrupulous enemy, to whom revenge was an incentive as well as gold. Truly, the birds of prey were looming up on the horizon, but they would not fatten on my carcase if I could help it. My father had entrusted the mission to my hands, and I must prove to him that I was worthy of the trust.

As I rapidly ran over these things in my mind, I heard the sound of feet coming along the passage. They stopped opposite the next room to mine.

"This is the room they've given me—number twenty," said a voice I knew well.

It was that of the ex-skipper, Dan Robinson.

CHAPTER VII

WORKS OF DARKNESS

I ADMIT that on hearing the skipper's voice, and knowing that he and Egan, the Malay's would-be murderer, were in the next room, only separated from me by a half-inch board, a sense of something almost approaching fear took possession of my heart for an instant. I would not have feared either of them had I met them face to face and on equal terms, but there was something so repulsive and inhuman about these two wretches that I felt much as one does when conscious of the near presence of loathsome reptiles. But it would be the height of folly to give way to silly fears; reptiles can generally be crushed if one only keeps cool and awaits the opportunity.

I heard one of them unlock the door and then they both entered. How plainly I could hear every sound! If they could only have known that these walls were little

better than sounding-boards, they would surely have taken themselves elsewhere. As it was, they somewhat lowered their voices. It was the first time in my life I had ever played eavesdropper; but I had not gone aside to overhear them; moreover, with such men, who would not fight fair, and who, it was more than probable, were about to hatch nefarious plots which it would be impossible to combat unless one were prepared for them, it surely was justifiable. I did not listen because one of them had gained his knowledge of my secret by listening, but because I believed it might be a matter of life and death that was under discussion, and there were others concerned. I was not mistaken. I had only to lie down on my bed to hear every word that was being said.

"You're sure he went down to Burns Philp's, the agent's?" asked a voice which I knew to be Egan's.

"Certain; I spoke to a clerk just before I met you, and he said the young whelp was still with him."

A whelp! Well, to hear the opinions of other people about oneself might be wholesome now and again, but it certainly was not

pleasant. A whelp! For the moment I was almost sorry that half-inch board was between us.

"Besides," continued Dan Robinson, "I saw the key of his bedroom hanging on the board in the passage as we went into the bar, and I know he hasn't come in."

It was fortunate I had come in by that side door; and it was equally fortunate that some careless person had hung his bedroom key on my nail, Number 19, for I had carried mine in my pocket.

"Well, that's satisfactory," remarked Egan; "not that we need fear of bein' interrupted, but I don't want to let that young divil see me."

"But he wouldn't recognise you anyhow," rejoined the skipper; "I thought you said as how you'd crape, or somethin' on yer bloomin' face the only time he clapped eyes on you?"

"That's so, but I'm afeared he saw me that night at the window, but mebbe I was mistook. Then, there's this confounded paw of mine as wants some of the joints. His upstart of a father spotted them at oncet, and was nigh givin' me away before the

whole crowd; but I'll be even with him and the whelp yet, mark my words! I say, let's have a drain out of this bottle, it'll help us to discuss matters better."

I could hear the sounds of a cork being drawn, and the necessary drain being discussed.

"How did you lose your fingers?" asked the skipper irrelevantly.

"The whelp's father knows," savagely replied Egan. "It's a long story, but it was some years ago. We were down on the Wairinoo opal mines at the same time, and just like the luck of the beast, he dropped on to a reg'lar Bobby Dazzler. I knew as how he had it in his tent, and had put it under his piller until he could take it away next day. So at night I creeps up to his place and puts my hand under the flap of the tent. You see, I made certain he'd be sound asleep, for I had got wind that Jim Hogan, the dealer, and some of the boys had been hocussing his ginger-beer—the beggar wouldn't drink—in order to get ahead of him in a deal. But he knew too much to sell. I could hear him breathin' hard in the tent, and I thought as how it was all serene. I

gropes with my hand until I reaches his piller, and then"—and here he shot out a volley of oaths—"a blessed tomahawk comes whack down on them fingers and chops them clean off! He hadn't been asleep at all! As I runs from the tent, he yells after me: 'Lucky job to get off with them fingers. Next time you'll get a bullet through yer body!' I didn't clap eyes on him again till I sees him on his station—he's a blessed squatter now—and, as luck would have it, bested me again."

"But his luck can't last for ever."

"No; and it ain't a-goin' to. I went back that night to his station, just dying to plug him through the window as well as the Malay—I'm blow'd if I'd have stuck at his wife or that long-legged imp of a girl either, though she did take down Joe Walsh—him as fancies himself a bit of a masher and goes about with the mule—as well as ever I saw any one took down in my life. There I heard something that I thought might allow the other thing to wait, but I've told you all about that. So, my son, that's how I came to lose them fingers! And that's partly why I've risked sweating about a dozen diff'rent

horses so's to get here in time to euchre that cocky young cub of his. Now, if I can't chop off a couple of his fingers, dead or alive, and send them in silver paper in a beautiful little box to his parpar with my compliments, you can call me several sorts of a fool!"

"It was a lucky job you came to speak to me," observed the skipper; "what made you think of doing it?"

"Well, of course I heard in Townsville as how he'd gone round with the ketch, and so when I cut across the peninsula, by way of the Flinders, I got here before you. When you came in yesterday I just stood your cook a few drinks, and soon found out how the land lay. From what I heard of you, I made certain you'd stand in with me, and when I saw you——"

"I'm hanged you did!" interrupted the bottle-nosed one pettishly. Strangely enough, he harboured one or two delusions regarding his personal appearance.

"Don't get huffy; I means no offence. I sees you were a man who was no jackaroo, who wasn't a-goin' to let no boy like this young jackanapes give you a settin' back for

nothing—and when I hears as how you had got the sack, I says, now here's——"

"Oh, blow it! Who said as how I got the sack?" demanded the choleric skipper.

"Oh, well, keep your hair on!—you understand best what happened, I dessay; but let's put it, as soon as I heard you was a-goin' on your own hook, I said here's the man for me; the man as has a grudge like myself, who can sail a boat, and who can stand in. But it was a piece of luck your seeing that chart."

"But I'm blowed if I'm at all certain about that island. I remember as how there was a ring and a cross, but I took no particular stock; the beggar began jawing me so that I couldn't take my attention off him. Crikey! but he was a cheeky young cub!"

"Oh, well, I dare say we know enough between us to try and find that island and that queer harbour the yellow-skinned heathen who died spoke about. Anyhow, we can have a try. If we don't, then we can watch where they goes to, and if we thinks they've got the boodle, we must just catch them on the hop, and pot the lot of them—

scuttle their old boat, and make for foreign parts—the thing's easy enough."

"You said you knew them two Philippine Islanders who owns that cutter?"

"Yes, and a precious crooked lot they are—they want watching, I can tell you; they'd think nothing of cutting our throats after we'd got the oof, if they got the chance, and clearing out with it themselves. Isn't there one of your old crew you could get to come with us?"

"Yes, there's Grimes, an old beachcomber; he's once stood his trial for knifing a chap in 'Frisco, but got off by shoving it on to a Greaser——"

"A what?"

"Half-breed sort of Mexican cove who was hanged in consequence. Precious smart thing of Grimes."

"He'll do, sonny. Now, what do you think our young hero'll do for a boat?"

"Fancy he'll make round to Burketown. I understand there's some horses being sent on there post haste for a drover to-morrow morning, and he'll go with them."

"Very likely, but we'll find out. If the young beggar only drank we'd give him a

dose to-night as would make him sleep as sound as a top, and then we could nail that chart. As it is, we'll just watch him mouching round, and if we happens to get him by hisself anywhere—if near the river the better—we'll tap him on the head a collar the map as well. Savey?"

"Right you are, me boy. Now, let's go and find this man Grimes, and make an arrangement with them two yellow-skinned beggars as owns the boat. If we can't get them to fall in with our plans, we must just fix them and clear out with the cutter—the Gover'ment ain't a-going to ask after or make any fuss about such riff-raff anyhow."

It was funny to hear how these two princes of the riff-raff talked about their fellows.

As soon as the clatter of their feet died away down the wooden stairs, I sat up and mentally reviewed the situation. It was a stiff one to face. I had sometimes thought that some of the dark deeds I had read about in works of fiction could only have existed in a distorted imagination, but what had come under my own observation these last several weeks, and what menaced me now, brought home the truth that the things

which occurred in real life were far more wonderful than anything one could read about.

That arch-villain, Egan! To think that he could so coolly talk of meditating revenge upon innocent men and girls! When he had spoken as he did about my father and sister Mary, it was as much as I could do to keep myself under control. I had to clench my hands together, while the sweat literally poured off me, so as to prevent me doing something rash! To think that one of his ambitions was to chop my fingers off, and send them to my father, was simply horrible to contemplate! All my scruples in regard to listening had utterly vanished. It seemed little less than providential that I should have had an opportunity of ascertaining the projected programme of the rascals. To have told the whole story to a magistrate and have them arrested would be doubtful policy, for then the particulars of the treasure would get about, and the chances were I would either be looked upon as a lunatic, or some one would start off and become its possessor while I was detained.

No, there was only one thing for it; they

would have to be checkmated in such a way as would for ever effectually prevent them from carrying out their scheme of revenge. They were by no means certain about the island where the treasure was hid, and if once I managed to get there before them, I would take such precautions and means as would prevent them robbing me of that which might be in my possession. There would be some satisfaction in frustrating their knavish tricks. My spirits rose as I thought of it, and the spirit of adventure ran hot in my blood as I contemplated outwitting and trying conclusions with the cut-throats.

Already I was eager for the fray. It would be an exciting race to begin with—as to who would get there first. True, they might arrange matters with the Philippine Islanders, and start at any time, while I had to get to Burketown, and charter my boat after that. It was galling to think that I could not start till to-morrow morning. Till then I must busy myself somehow, or I would make myself ill fretting over the delay.

The first thing I did was to slip round to

the telegraph office and wire the agent in Burketown, asking him to detain McNab, who owned the boat, as I would arrive at the Albert river within the next three days and make him a good offer for its charter. Then I went back to the hotel and wrote to my father, telling him of my plans, but still not letting him know more than was absolutely necessary about the dangers to be faced; he had cares enough on his shoulders without taking on fresh ones.

I then went to Collis's yard, from which the horses were to start on the morrow, so as to arrange about my saddle and pack. There I met Johnson, a smart-looking bushman, who was to be in charge of them on the trip. He seemed glad that I was going with him, as he said the man the agent had told off to him as assistant, though doubtless a decent enough fellow in his way, did not seem to know much about horses. In point of fact, he was a sailor, and so eccentric at that, that he. Johnson, was not quite sure as to whether he was "all there" or not. He certainly had "a bee or two in his bonnet," and talked in a way that was past all understanding; but he was free with his money,

and had made himself agreeable while in the township.

From what Johnson told me of his personal appearance he seemed, indeed, a remarkable person. I arranged to be at the yard on the following morning about four o'clock, as, by making an early start we would be able to give the horses a couple of hours' rest in the middle of the day. Then I left, and informed the merchant of my plans.

After the last meal of the day, when it grew dark, I strolled down to the river, and saw that the little cutter owned by the two islanders had been moored close to the bank - it had previously ridden at anchor in midstream. I did not approach within fifty yards of her, but stood for a few minutes in the shadow of some mangrove trees. There was a light on deck; the hatches were up, and two men, who it seemed to me were her owners, were stowing away ballast. A large pile of stones lay on the bank alongside. The conclusion was obvious; they were on the eve of a trip on which they were taking no cargo, but, instead, a large quantity of ballast. That they meditated an

early start was evident from the fact of their working so late.

I returned to the hotel, and entered the large general parlour that opened off the bar-room—no rooms are very far from bars in Australian bush-towns; they are thrust under one's nose everywhere—and standing close up to the latter, I saw a most remarkable-looking man, who, despite his wrinkled face and grey hair, could not have been more than forty-five or so.

He was dressed like one of the better class of bushmen or squatters, in a light-grey flannel suit, but with a large pith helmet on his head—an article of head-gear rarely affected by bushmen from its liability to topple off when riding—underneath which his angular, thin features looked out with an expression of almost unnatural alertness. His skin was as dark as a half-caste's. He was clean-shaven, with the exception of a slight moustache. He wore a stiff, stand-up collar, and the kind of gaudy pinbedecked tie affected by bushmen when they come into town. Even had I not noticed the ear-rings which he wore, when I saw him walk with his jaunty, free step from the counter to a

side-table to get a light, I would have known in a moment that the man was a sailor trying to figure as a bushman.

As soon as I entered the room he shot one quick glance at me, and I realised that there was very little escaped this man's attention. He looked about him with quick, nervous, birdlike movements. He was evidently free with his money, for I noticed him "shouting" for drinks for some men who seemed to be mere casual acquaintances. As I watched this striking individual with no little curiosity, for odd types always interested me, two men entered by the opposite door—one was the ex-skipper of the *Alacrity*, and the other, who kept his left hand in his pocket, was the glib-tongued Egan. It was quite evident that they had both been drinking, for they talked in a loud, bragging way. Not wishing to meet either of them, I rose and went outside.

Not knowing exactly what to do I strolled off to the yard where the horses were, at the far end of the straggling township. I threw in some more hay to them, and was returning, when, passing the gable-end of a deserted shed, some one darted out of the

"BEFORE THE SKIPPER COULD STRIKE AGAIN I HAD JUMPED IN UPON HIM."

Page 93.

shadow and aimed a swinging blow at my head. I dodged it, but it came down on my shoulder with a force that made me feel queer for a second or two. Then another man jumped out of the shadow and came towards me. They were Egan and Robinson.

Until that moment I had quite forgotten all about their avowed intention of lying in wait for me so as to steal the chart. I had no weapon of any sort in my hand, and it was little use crying out for help. There was nothing but sharp action for it. Before the cowardly skipper could draw back his stick and strike at me again, I had jumped in upon him, and dealt him a couple of severe blows with my fist that sent him staggering backwards. The other man closed in upon me with his upraised stick, when suddenly a third party appeared upon the scene. In a moment I recognised the dapper figure and quick movements of the stranger in the bar-room. He put his hand sharply to his hip-pocket, drew a revolver, and there was a sharp *click-click*.

"Now, really, gentlemen," he cried in a quick, somewhat high-pitched voice, "I reckon this ain't a square deal. Two to one,

and with sticks chucked in, is playing it pretty low down upon William, I guess. Holy smoke! but the age of chivalry's gone clean bust. Put down those sticks, gentlemen, quick, or I'll pump some lead into you in two shakes of a lamb's tail!"

He stood between us, cool and erect, with a nickel-plated Smith and Wesson's revolver levelled fair at Egan's head.

I saw the latter's hand steal down towards his side, but the stranger was too quick for him.

"Hands up!" he cried sharply. "Just as much as think of that pouch again, and you'll join the Choir Invisible."

He turned to me, and with quaint, exaggerated politeness, asked—

"Have you anything to say to these gentlemen, sir? Shall I detain them further?"

"No," I replied, wondering at his manner; "I fancy I'll meet them again."

He addressed himself to the two surprised ones.

"You may retire," he said. "You hear what this gentleman says. It strikes me forcibly you've both been drinking. Right-about-turn. Quick march!"

"Yes, he's right, we'll meet again," said Egan; "and then, Heaven help him!"

To my no little surprise the two worthies turned, and withdrew.

"Now, sir," said the queer stranger, turning to me with a little laugh; "let me introduce myself. I'm Lieutenant Jiggers, late of the United States Navy, at your service. I presume you are Mr. Chilcot, the gentleman who proposes accompanying us to Burketown to-morrow?"

CHAPTER VIII

MR. JIGGERS ENJOYS HIMSELF

THERE was something so impressive about the manner of Lieutenant Jiggers, that, despite his offhand style of introducing himself, I caught myself bowing to him in a way I had never done before. It made me laugh afterwards when I came to think of it, and it served to show me how susceptible I was to impressions.

"My name is Chilcot," I said in turn. "I don't know how I can thank you enough for what you've just done. But didn't I see you in the hotel bar only a few minutes ago?"

There was something almost puzzling, it seemed to me, in his sudden re-appearance.

"That's so," he remarked coolly, easing the springs of his revolver and putting it back into his hip-pocket. "And the fact is, I might have been there yet, but I spotted you, and I saw that those two coves did

likewise, so when they followed you out I guessed they were up to no good, and thought I'd just take a stroll round to see what was going on. I made sure you were the gent whom Mr. Johnson told me about, and so, as we were to be shipmates, so to speak, for the next few days, I reckoned it was my duty to stand by."

"Well, it was awfully good of you, Lieutenant Jiggers," I said. "I'm glad to think we're going to Burketown together. Shall we go back to the hotel?"

"As you please," he remarked carelessly. "It's hardly likely we'll run against those two jokers again."

"They will have made themselves scarce enough by the time we get there," I said.

"Humph!" he snorted. "I've knocked up and down the Pacific coast quite a bit from Valparaiso to Sacramento, but I should say that those two chaps are just as tough a lot as anything I've ever struck. It's none of my business, of course, but what have they got their knives into you for?"

I explained that personal animus against my family and myself was at the bottom of the attack. Though the stranger's manner

and the circumstances would almost have justified me telling more, still, the time had not come for taking any one into my confidence.

"Lieutenant Jiggers," I said as we approached the hotel, "if you don't mind, I'd rather you didn't say anything about this affair to any one. Will you come and have some refreshment before turning in?"

"Thanks," he replied, "I don't mind; but don't call me Lieutenant. I'm only plain Joe Jiggers now, I drop the ornamental business in private life. You see, it's some years since I was in the navy, and I've been doing all sorts of things since—been a revolutionary officer in Chili—done a bit of trading among the Islands—sailed a schooner in the West Indies—got up a little revolution all on my own hook in China, and only escaped the snicker-snee by the skin of my teeth—had a turn at the Kimberley diamond fields in South Africa, and had a high old time generally. You see, this is a dull, prosaic, utilitarian age, and I'm by nature inclined to be lively and romantic—should have lived in the age of chivalry; was born two or three hundred years too late, but

endeavour to make the best of things. At present I'm on the outlook for new experiences; want to see this new Never-Never country they talk about. I hear there's lots of niggers, snakes and alligators there."

We entered the hotel, and sat down to a couple of lemon squashes. I felt attracted by this uncommon type of adventurer. He was obviously straightforward and plucky, and, despite his avowed revolutionary sentiments, it struck me these were more due to the inborn and irresistible love of "liveliness" in the man's nature, than any innate discontent and anarchic tendencies.

As I had anticipated, we saw no more of the two conspirators. As we afterwards learned, they had quietly removed their slender belongings from the hotel to the cutter, and made it their headquarters until they dropped down the river with the tide. Doubtless they had too many things to think about, for they forgot to pay their hotel bills.

My newly-found friend declared that it would not be wise of me to sleep in my room alone that night, so, despite my protestations, he brought his roll of blankets into my room, and, spreading them across

the doorway soon went fast asleep. Before doing so, we each paid our bills so as not to disturb any one when we left.

It was about half-past three o'clock next morning, and broad daylight, when I heard a voice calling me.

"Reveille; four bells; show a leg!" it said.

One thing that always amused me about this cosmopolitan was the varied stock of terms of which he made use. While he talked in the spirit of the Middle Ages, he did it in the most up-to-date Cosmopolitans.

I went down to the Chinaman's kitchen, and putting a quart-pot on the fire for tea, went back to my room to dress. In less than half-an-hour we were carrying our swags —*i. e.*, blankets and belongings—on our backs to the yard. There we found Johnson already waiting for us. He looked at Mr. Jiggers with a hint of disapproval on his face.

"I say," he said, indicating with a nod of his head the cosmopolitan's huge pith helmet; "you're surely not going to ride with that great umbrella-looking thing on your head, are you? It'll frighten the horses; and it looks so like a new chum."

"Sorry you don't like it, my friend," was the reply, in a conciliatory tone of voice; "but I reckon that the man who takes Mister Joseph Jiggers, late U.S. Navy, for a tenderfoot or new chum is going to get left, you bet!"

"All right," said Johnson laughing, "it's you as has to balance the thing on your head and not me."

We packed a horse apiece, and then tying their halter-shanks round their necks, turned them loose on the track, and drove them before us. Johnson cracked his stock-whip, and away we went through the cool, fresh morning air at a lively canter.

As yet the little township was asleep; the straggling, corrugated-iron buildings gleamed white against the coffee-coloured background of the ironside ridge, and from the slight plateau on which we were we could see the vast glaucous-hued expanse of surrounding country—that interminable vista of tree-tops—stretch on and on until it was lost in the dim blue of the farthest horizon. We passed the last house of the township on our left, and then left God's-acre behind us on our right—a well-filled burying-place, truly, considering the age and size of the

township. There were no attempts at trim plots and stereotyped walks here. A somewhat open part of the bush had simply been fenced in, and the green, graceful acacias, the shady bauhanias, and the gleaming golden-wattles had been allowed to grow, just as those pioneers who lay underneath them in their long sleep would have wished them to.

Away we went along the winding track, the green bush on either hand. The packhorses kept well to the track and gave us no trouble. We rode in Indian file—the packs first, then Johnson, then myself, and Mr. Jiggers bringing up the rear. It was quite evident this gentleman had not done much riding of late, for several times on looking back I caught him in the act of putting one hand before him on the pommel of the saddle, and the other hand behind him on the cantle, at the same time standing in his stirrups, with the obvious intention of gaining some brief respite from the pounding process that was going on.

As for his great pith helmet, it was as Johnson had said, it would insist on working over his eyes, and when it did not do that it shifted round to the back of his head. On

several occasions it jolted off altogether, and it would be rash to hazard a guess as to how often it was sent flying into the air by branches of trees. At last its owner clearly saw that, however useful such a species of head-gear might be under certain circumstances, it was at least no good in the bush. He took it off and slung it to the D-straps of his saddle; tying his handkerchief round his head instead, which made him a more grotesque sight than ever.

It was wonderful, too, how his trousers managed to work up to his knees, exposing his thin, wiry legs. But the man himself was so good-natured and entertaining that his obvious strangeness to bush travelling did not excite us to sarcastic remarks or making merry at his expense, as it might otherwise have done.

Once fairly out of town we took it considerably easier, only now and again breaking into a canter. The horses were in good condition and fresh, and Johnson hoped that on the following evening he might camp at the Chinaman's garden on the lagoon, about eight miles from Burketown. I was impatient at the slightest delay, as naturally there was a good deal of uncertainty about

my being able to get the Scotchman's boat, and knowing, as I did, that it was more than likely the rival cutter, the *Black Witch*, was on its way to the islands, I would have to look sharp if I did not want to confess myself beaten after all.

At the Bynoe Inlet we turned out for a couple of hours to rest and boil our billy under the dense shade of stately Leichardt and Moreton Bay fig-trees. I noticed that Mr. Jiggers limped rather painfully, but he was otherwise so active and cheerful that we forebore to chaff him about his obvious condition. After a good rest, during which Mr. Jiggers smoked an uncommonly long and evidently strong cheroot, we saddled up and were off again.

We camped that night on the western side of the river; the country now all the way to Burketown was open and flat as a billiard-table. Next morning early we struck the track, crossed the river some little distance above the tiny township, and camped at the lagoons on its outskirts.

In ten minutes more I had hobbled out my horses, and went over to the store-keeper to make inquiries about the boat.

CHAPTER IX

A GLIMPSE OF THE ENEMY

As my friend Mr. Jiggers remarked, Burketown was a one-horse place. It was the Ultima Thule of civilisation in the north-west corner of Queensland. It consisted of a couple of stores, a drug-shop which did a roaring trade in quinine and fever medicines, a police barracks to look after the bank and five public-houses or hotels, and a butcher's and baker's shop under one roof. From there to Fort Darwin, in the Northern Territory, a distance of nearly a thousand miles, there was no other town.

The town itself was situated on the banks of the Albert river—the Maat Suyker of the early Dutch—and, as Mr. Jiggers said, took the cake for eccentricity. It seemed to flow in every direction save that in which Nature meant it to run—to the sea. It seemed to have a horror of the latter, for, in a distance of some fifteen miles or so, it wandered all

over the country for some thirty or forty before it could quite make up its mind to behave like any other respectable river. To the west, and all around as far as the eye could reach, was one great, sun-dried mud-flat called the Plain of Promise; doubtless because any expectations formed of its capabilities were as yet unfulfilled.

I went first to look up the store-keeper. When that gentleman was found he was seated on his own counter tailor-wise with two or three other customers, shaking dice for tins of pine-apple and other things. The other things were represented by different kinds of corks, and appeared to be the most popular gamble. He seemed to be doing quite a trade. He told me I would find McNab, the owner of the boat, down by the wharf.

I failed to find the wharf for the simple reason that a plank and a couple of big posts driven into the bank constituted the same. Some distance further up, however, I found McNab with his little schooner, the *Petrel*, a trim little boat of over ten tons burden. McNab, who was rather a sour-looking Scotsman of some forty years of age or so,

was hardly prepared to receive visitors, being engaged in mending the only pair of breeches he possessed with a piece of old canvas; but he did not seem to mind in the least being caught in undress. He explained that "one crown" moles and "dungaree" trousers were an "awfu'" price at the stores, and he was obliged to set his face against extortion.

As I thought of my limited funds, I was not displeased to hear all this, naturally considering that one who so deprecated overreaching in others would not himself be avaricious. But when I came to ask him how much he would charge for the hire of his boat per week with his own services thrown in, I to provide the services of two other men, I realised my youth and inexperience. He asked what to me seemed such an utterly absurd and exorbitant figure that I simply considered it a waste of time to try and do business with him, so, without as much as even wishing him good-morning, prepared to walk off. But he seized me by the arm.

"Haud on," he said in Lowland Scotch, and with a decided Lanarkshire accent; "I thocht it was a squatter's son ye were, wi'

plenty o' siller." And then he took one-third off his figure.

I told him that even if I were Baron Rothschild, I would not be such a fool as to give that. I told him my limit, which I thought was a fair thing, and was indeed what the store-keeper had advised me to give. He was inclined to haggle, but I told him my time was limited, and that if he could not come to the terms mentioned, he had better say so at once. We settled the bargain. I left to find two other men, and to get the stores on board, for it was my intention to start that very day if possible.

The first thing I did was to find Mr. Jiggers. If only he would give up his idea of an overland trip for the present, and condescend to be one of the hands on board the *Petrel*, I would consider myself fortunate. I had grown to like this somewhat eccentric individual. He was always in the best of spirits, and entertaining; there was not a lazy inch in his body. That he was above-board in all his dealings was as obvious as the day; his cool courage he had already proved, and he certainly did not want for knowledge of men and things. Of course, I could not

approach him as I would have done an ordinary hand; there was a dignity about him, despite his form of speech, that forbade it.

I found him in the chemist's shop which, he said, he had only dropped into to get some quinine as a protection against fever. When we got outside I told him as much of my secret and arrangements as I thought discreet; merely referring to the Hadji's treasure as something left there by some one on a certain occasion, and which I was now going to take away for another. I asked him if he would care to go with me and help McNab to navigate the boat. I would pay him what he considered a fair thing. Perhaps, however, he had not got enough of the saddle?

I admit this last shaft was a Machiavellian one on my part. He stopped short, and thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets replied—

"Say, mister, I reckon you're just a little bit fresh with that saddle racket; it ain't chivalrous to chiack like that; but I guess you are about right. Until they put a little more padding into those saddles, it strikes

me I'll go for a spell on the briny. I rather like the idea of this trip; it promises to be lively. Who is the other party that you think it quite possible you may run against?"

"Those two men whom you stood off with your revolver the other night near the yards," and I told him something more of the story, and about the chart.

He heard me out in silence; his nervous, tanned face working all the while with suppressed excitement, his eyes fairly dancing in his head. He gripped me by the hand.

"Shake, mister—put it thar!" he cried. "I'm right with you! You can bet your bottom dollar on that! I can see a high old time in store for us—it's sticking out a mile. Let's only hope that those beggars won't disappoint us, but come up to the scratch——"

"What!" I interrupted. "It's a fight you're spoiling after, is it? I don't mind a little racket myself, but it's the safety of the goods I'm thinking about. I'd rather they didn't show up at all; they might prove too many for us."

"Pooh!" exclaimed the Yankee, snapping his fingers. "Two chaps like those!—even

although there were half-a-dozen of 'em! My dear sir, you may never get such a glorious chance of a little bit of excitement again in your life. To me it's a heaven-sent opportunity! Come over to the store with me right now, and we'll fit out. Yes, sirree, we'll sweep 'em from our paths, we'll——"

"But," I said, interrupting his flight of enthusiasm, "what about the business part of the arrangement? Will you name your figure? And I want you to understand distinctly that whatever we may find is my father's property, not ours. He will be the giver of whatever prize-money there is, and if the goods are there, there will be prize-money."

"My dear sir!" said Mr. Jiggers waving his hand deprecatingly, "I'll agree to any mortal thing you like. Let's say you've secured my services for two pounds a week, and have done with it. Between ourselves, I'll not touch a farthing if you are not successful in your quest. I'm in reality very far from being hard up—did something in the diamond line at Kimberley, invested it, and draw my dividends regularly."

"And still you drift around like this!" I remarked in some surprise.

"Of course I do!" he exclaimed, as if he were surprised at my comment. "It's my idea of enjoying myself—it's the next best thing I can do, seeing I wasn't born in the Middle Ages. I'm only forty at the present moment, and seeing God's world, and what is to be seen in it, is my hobby. I'll be a live man until the time comes for me to hand in my checks. No vegetation for me, thank you!"

We went over to the principal store, and in a very short time had a month's provisions aboard the *Petrel*. We were fortunate enough to secure the services of a Cingalese boy, or more properly-speaking a man, who had been an under-steward on one of the big boats, and could speak English like a white man. He turned out to be one of the best coloured boys I ever met.

He was a true disciple of Buddha, and had knocked about quite a lot. For a year or two he had been on a sugar refinery on the Queensland coast, where a strange accident had befallen him. He had tumbled into a revolving vat of hot sugar in a liquid state, and been nearly scalded to death.

His skin had come off in patches, and when it grew on again *it was white*. This gave him an odd piebald appearance.[1]

We had filled the water-casks, got our swags on board, and made all preparations for a start at the turn of the tide, when I saw a dray drive down to the boat with Mr. Jiggers sitting on the near shaft. I wondered what new purchases he had been making, for he had already insisted on buying all sorts of luxuries in the shape of canned goods and articles which, of course, I could not afford. The store-keeper, by some mistake, had received a consignment of fireworks, and Mr. Jiggers had insisted on buying them also. What he intended doing with them was beyond my comprehension, unless it was to give the elements and the fishes a pyrotechnic display. Later on I realised that a man with Mr. Jiggers' wide experience provided for contingencies of which other people could hardly be expected to dream. And now we saw what the dray contained, and I admit the sight made me stare in astonishment.

[1] A fact; the author had a Cingalese servant answering to this description.

Across the body of the vehicle was an enormous punt-gun with a barrel several feet long—one of those unsportsmanlike, wholesale destroyers used by some butchers for wild-fowl shooting. I noticed that there was a brand new gun-carriage with it, on which the gun worked in a species of row-lock or swivel, which would facilitate the handling of the weapon on a flush deck. With it there were canisters of ammunition and several bars of lead. I also noted three or four old cutlasses which had been newly ground, a couple of rifles, and a fowling-piece. There was also an assortment of shark-hooks, harpoons, and tackle to match.

"What on earth are you going to do with that cannon?" I asked, pointing to the punt-gun.

"We're going to sweep the seas, my boy," exclaimed its proud owner with the wild light of enthusiasm in his eyes. For a moment I almost doubted his sanity.

He took me aside, and whispered—

"If you want to secure the goods you spoke about, mister, I guess you may require these things; the very sight of them may save you trouble. That lead is for balls; I

"'AN' WHAT MAY YE BE GOING TO DO WI' THAT MURDEROUS-LOOKING WEEPUN?'"

Page 115.

can make the moulds out of clay when I strike an island."

I saw there was more method in Mr. Jiggers' apparent madness than I had imagined, still I realised his fighting propensities would have to be kept in check.

McNab's face was a study when he saw the huge gun carried on board, not to speak of the rifles and cutlasses which were taken into the little cabin; the bulk of the ammunition was stored away forward in the hold. A doubt as to our lawful intentions must have crossed his mind from that moment. He regarded Mr. Jiggers sternly with that cold, hard eye of his.

"An' what may ye be going to do wi' that murderous-looking weepun?" he inquired uncompromisingly.

"What weapon? Oh, that pea-shooter!" was the airy reply. "Well, it's for the mosquitoes. I hear they're pretty big among the islands—got beaks like parrots and claws like monkeys."

"Young man," said the Scot, without moving a muscle, "I'm thinking you're indulging in leevity. An' I suppose them swords are for the vermin, too?"

"You've just struck it, mister; the two-legged ones, of course. Just lend a hand, will you?"

It was quite evident from the very first that there was going to be some slight friction between the Scot and the Yankee. They were so utterly dissimilar in every respect. The latter, when he saw his open-handed and apparently extravagant ways looked upon with horror and disapproval by the parsimonious one, only went out of his way to make them appear still more so. But still, they never came to an open show of antagonism. The one was too good-natured, and the other, despite his primitive ways, still had a certain rough dignity which prevented such a contingency.

We had made all necessary preparations to start at the turn of the tide. Johnson, who had accompanied us from Normanton, came down to have tea, or supper, with us, and see us off. Mr. Jiggers and I felt quite sorry to have to part with the good fellow. Jamie, the Cingalese, who was to act as cook, prepared the meal. The cooking-stove was one of the most primitive and ingenious contrivances imaginable. It was simply an iron oil-drum minus one end, and perforated

with round holes at the base by way of making it draw, set in a large, square, wooden box filled with sand. The fuel was put in on top, and the kettle, grill, or frying-pan crowned the whole. Jamie did wonders in the culinary line with that simple fire-place. For that first meal we had tender, juicy steaks from the skirt, grilled to a turn, pumpkin and baked sweet potatoes, of which we had laid in a supply at the Chinaman's garden, hot cakes, and fragrant billy tea. As Mr. Jiggers had insisted on supplying chutney and jam, it was a meal fit for an emperor.

The meal over, we said good-bye to Johnson, loosened the canvas, heaved up anchor, and stood out for the centre of the stream. We had wind and tide in our favour, and tacked and beat down the river in splendid fashion. It had been an uncommonly hot day for that season of the year, and we noted that the weather looked very threatening to the north in the direction of the coast. It grew dark, and when the moon rose we noticed that the banks were becoming thickly fringed with mangroves. The wind fell, and the air became close and sultry.

For some hours we slipped down between

the low banks from which the dark, dense walls of foliage loomed up in a ghostly fashion. Seaward we could see the sheet-lightning play in one continuous blaze. If there was any likelihood of a squall in the open, or any apprehension of crossing the awkward bar and finding the right channel, seeing the tide was now low, it might be as well to lie close into the lee-shore in the mouth of the river, cast anchor, and wait for daylight to negotiate the passage. That a storm was imminent there could now no longer be any doubt, for the dull rumble of thunder began to make itself heard in the distance. Then unexpectedly the last reach of the river opened out before us, and we saw that it struck the coast at an angle.

"I'm thinking," said McNab, "that we might do waur than lie in close under the right bank until the morning. Ye've done well for a start, but I'll tack out if ye like."

We took his advice, ran in to the lee-shore, and made fast in deep water under the wooded bank. From where we were, we could overlook a wide expanse of gleaming, scurrying sea. We had barely time to stow the sails and make things fast on deck, when

the tropical squall broke, and for half-an-hour or so we enjoyed a truly magnificent but awe-inspiring sight.

The first indication of its near approach was a sudden gusty wind which sprang up and shrilled over our heads. We hurried on our slickers and remained on deck. The thunderbolts seemed to break directly above us in one continuous rattle. Instinctively we cowered under the deafening cannonade. So quick upon one another were the lightning flashes that the whole world seemed lit up in one weird blaze of light; only the dense walls of mangroves showed up blackly. And then the great drops of rain began to patter down on leaf, deck and river. Faster and faster they fell, until it was as if the floodgates of heaven had been opened. They drummed on the leaves, they spluttered and hissed upon the deck, and they sang upon the river. It seemed a regular carnival of the elements.

As we looked out to sea where the ghostly scud and the drifting rain scurried over the gleaming, phosphorescent waves, we suddenly beheld a striking spectacle. It was a boat driving before the wind under bare

poles in perilous proximity to the shore. Steadily and phantom-like she drove across the disc of our vision. There was such an air of unreality about her that at once thoughts of the *Flying Dutchman*, doomed to sail the seas for all time, were suggested to our minds. Then a flash of lightning, so vivid that we could see each stay and shroud, revealed to us the presence of five crouching figures on deck. In another instant the spit on the left bank of the river had hidden her from view, and she was gone.

"That was an uncanny sight," said the superstitious McNab.

"Did you recognise her?" Mr. Jiggers asked of me, ignoring the Scotsman.

"No," I replied.

"It was the cutter, the *Black Witch*," explained the American, "and those five figures were Messrs. Egan, Robertson, Grimes, and the two Filippinos!"

CHAPTER X

WE REACH THE PELLEW ISLANDS

HAD we sailed out of the river in that squall, we would have almost run into the very boat which I, at least, was most anxious to avoid. What they were doing so dangerously close in shore was a mystery, for the waters of this great gulf are so comparatively shallow, and in places so dangerous, that it seemed tempting Providence. Afterwards Jiggers gave it as his opinion that it had been the evident intention of the crew of the *Black Witch* that we should never leave the river, and they had lain in close so as to catch us coming out; but the storm upset their plans.

"Let's clap on sail and after them," he exclaimed; "now's the time to spoil their little games!"

"Wud ye temp' Providence?" snapped McNab wrathfully, regarding the truculent American with no little wonder. "An' what, might I ask, wud ye be after them for?"

Mr. Jiggers stared at him for a minute, as if trying to gauge the extent of his knowledge. Then something like a gleam of mischief came into his eyes.

"Do you mean to tell me you don't know what we chartered this boat for, and what we're doing with all these guns and cutlasses aboard? Do you calculate that we came out here to shoot sea-gulls and amuse ourselves, when you know mighty well we came to do a bit of filibustering and privateering on the high-seas? Shall I have to go down to the cabin and fish out the black flag with the skull and cross-bones that we've got handy, so as to convince you that there ain't no fooling about us? Don't be a silly ass, McNab; make up your mind to stand by the situation, for if you didn't quite understand it before, you do now."

His tone and manner were so convincing that had I not been in the secret it would certainly have puzzled me. As it was, it deceived the Scot; but, to do the latter justice, I never saw a man act so quickly and decisively. We were all crouching together just aft the windlass, when, without any warning, the wiry Celt sprang with the agility

of a cat full upon the astonished romancer, caught him by the throat, and hurled him overboard. Then, turning sharp round, and before we could prevent him, he snatched up the iron handle of the windlass and advanced upon us threateningly.

"Pirates ye are, are ye? Ah, weel, ye'll ship in another boat. Into the water wi' ye afore I knock out yer brains! D'ye hear?"

It was turning the tables upon us with a vengeance.

"Hold hard, for goodness' sake," I cried, making for the dinghy so as to go to the rescue of the hapless Jiggers. "Couldn't you see that the man was only fooling? Do you think if we were going pirating we'd go with a man like you! Catch hold of the painter."

In two minutes more the crestfallen Jiggers was hauled aboard. To do him justice, he took his ducking like a man, which fact finding favour with the Celt, moved him to express something that sounded like regret.

"I'm afraid I was to blame."

"Don't mention it," said Jiggers.

To my great relief the affair ended in a satisfactory manner.

Next morning, at break of day, we were all astir, took the dinghy on board, weighed anchor, and drifted down stream. The Government cutter had marked the channel by two or three tall beacons of mangrove poles, so that even had McNab not known it well, there would have been no trouble in finding the same. We passed over the bar without any mishap, hoisted the sails, and in a few minutes more were out in the open. There was a nice breeze blowing, and steering a north-easterly course, we were soon bowling gaily along.

We looked in vain for any signs of the *Black Witch*; she was nowhere to be seen on that great expanse of green, dancing, sun-lit waters. If she had not come to grief on that shelterless, shoaling coast, she must have drifted well out of sight under bare poles until those in her concluded that it would be easier to go on to the Pellew Islands, where the treasure was, than to beat back to the mouth of the Albert river. The fact that they had waited to waylay and surprise us seemed to indicate that they were not at all sure as to the exact position of our particular island. But they might have known that, in

the event of my capture—which would, beyond doubt, have meant my death—I would have taken very good care to destroy the chart.

Now it seemed they had taken by far the easier and more effective plan of achieving their ends; they might, if they knew enough, either enter into the concealed harbour on the island, and systematically search for the treasure in the various caves, or they could conceal their cutter in the lee of some neighbouring island, take their dinghy, and watch our movements unperceived, waiting until we had secured what we were in search of, swoop down upon us, wipe us out, burn our boat and make off with the plunder. It would be easy to destroy all traces of us; besides with the exception of a few wandering cannibal blacks in their canoes, no human beings ever visited this, one of the loneliest and least-frequented waterways on the face of the globe.

But thanks to the adventure-loving nature and enterprise of Mr. Jiggers, we had come to sea equipped in a fashion that ought to prove more than sufficient to cope with an enemy twice as formidable as the crew of

the *Black Witch*. With the huge punt-gun, for which Mr. Jiggers was now in the act of moulding huge round shot in a mould of clay, we would be able to blow them clean out of the water in the event of any attempt to board us. It was exceedingly unlikely, however, that such would be their line of action; they would be much more likely to attempt to achieve their purpose by surprising us when we were at a disadvantage.

True, in numbers we were equal, but then those who take the initiative, and get their blows in first, generally have the advantage. We could not well take the aggressive, unless by their actions they justified us in doing so, for taking men's lives on mere suspicion is a serious matter, one for which we might have to answer. I knew it would require some firmness on my part to prevent Mr. Jiggers attacking the crew of the *Black Witch* on sight, as this might lead to complications which would only prove fatal to my plans. Once we had the treasure on board, we could be sure of our hand.

My spirits rose as the breeze freshened, and the ketch sped on her course. What a glorious freshness and vitality there was in

the air! So different from the hot, stifling atmosphere we had been subjected to on the mainland; for without prejudice I will say this, that the neighbourhood of the Gulf of Carpentaria is one of the hottest spots on earth, only, perhaps, the Gulf of Persia being its equal.

Soon we were out of sight of the low coast-line, and by noon a small blue speck appeared ahead on the port bow. It grew on the sight, and soon took the form of a low, blue, conical hill.

"Look-Out Hill on Sweers Island," explained McNab; "we'll keep to the south, and run between Point Parker and Vanderlin Island. We're making splendid time."

We passed to the south of Vanderlin Island, and saw that it consisted of fairly open country, studded here and there with great trees. On the beach we could see large numbers of savages, who signalled to us. Some of them even put off in their canoes, but as McNab told us that they were very treacherous and dangerous we kept on our course. Towards evening the wind fell, and then for two days we chafed with impatience, drifting aimlessly about among

low, wooded islands, and dangerous shoals. To make matters worse, we grounded on a great sandy spit to the lee side of a low peninsula, densely wooded with mangroves, and had to jump into the water, and work in it for hours, in order to get the boat off. We had to keep a sharp look-out when doing this, as the sea was infested by sharks.

We had no sooner got her off than a nice breeze sprang up, and we thought to take advantage of it when, with a heart-sickening shudder, the ketch grounded again, and we knew that we were stuck fast till high tide next day; for one peculiarity of the Gulf of Carpentaria is, that there is only one tide in the twenty-four hours. Then, to add to our troubles, a large mob of savages came in sight round the peninsula in their canoes, and made for the ketch. They all carried spears and other weapons.

There being at least a hundred of them, it was quite evident they meant business of an unpleasant nature. But Mr. Jiggers quickly loaded the punt-gun and placed it in position. He signed to them to stop, but they came on with derisive shouts, shaking their spears at us. One or two of them

actually fixed them in their wimmeras or throwing-sticks, and discharged them, but they fell short.

"This must be stopped," quietly remarked Mr. Jiggers, turning the punt-gun upon them.

"Fire over their heads," I said. "Don't shoot them, whatever you do. I'll turn back at once if you take life unnecessarily. To frighten them will be quite sufficient."

"Right you are, boss," remarked the American.

He waited until the foremost canoe, which was a very large affair, and carried about a dozen savages, was within a hundred yards, and then, as they still advanced threateningly, he fired.

There was a roar and a flash which must have considerably astonished the savages, who could never have seen the like before. The ball struck the canoe somewhere above the water-line on the port side, and ripped her up like the shell she was. In the wild panic that ensued she upset, and in another moment the discomfited warriors were struggling in the water. This was quite enough for the others, who, fearful of meeting with a like fate, put about and disappeared round

the bend. The immersed black-fellows swam ashore, and dived into the mangroves. They did not trouble us again.

We remained aground on that spit for twenty-four hours, and missed a splendid breeze. It was intolerable to think that we had lost nearly three days through misadventure, while the chances were that the *Black Witch* had run safely through to the Pellew Islands, and perhaps succeeded in securing the treasure which to me meant so much. The mere contemplation of this was too horrible. It was maddening to think of it. But at last we got away again, and, with a fair breeze, sighted the first of the Sir Edward Pellew group in less than two days. There they were lying low like pale blue patches of haze on the horizon; the islands which I had come so far to seek, and where the treasure was hid which was to retrieve our fortunes.

"Better bear down upon them from the north side," said Mr. Jiggers. "The chances are they will have approached them from the south side where the harbour is. I would strongly advise putting quietly into some little cove if there is such a place, where we

will be able to reconnoitre. We'll have to keep a sharp look-out, for it won't do to let them get the drop upon us."

But just before sun-down, as we rounded the most northerly point of the nearest island, with numerous other smaller ones lying to the right of us, we saw a sail bearing away due north. It was the cutter clearing out for all she was worth. Before us, upon our port bow, lay the island of our quest; unmistakable it was, with its low, circular ridge lying a mile or two from the shore, and with its thickly wooded sides. To the west of it lay a larger island and numerous smaller ones. Had the *Black Witch* been too smart for us after all, and was she now clearing out with the treasure?

CHAPTER XI

THE OPENING IN THE CLIFF

It would be difficult to forget the heart-sickening apprehensions that took possession of me as I gazed after that disappearing sail. But these reflections were cut short by the voice of Mr. Jiggers shouting out orders, and immediately there was a creaking of blocks and tackle; the sails came flapping down; the anchor went splash overboard, and the vessel slewed round with her head to the wind.

"Won't do for them to spot us, you know," explained the American. "It may be that they're only hanging round these parts on the look-out for us, or it may be only a ruse. At any rate, it's no use going after them. I reckon that craft of theirs can give ours points; she's a smart, slap-up thing, you bet."

We were not more than a couple of miles from our island, which was unlike most of the others that we had passed, in that its

coast-line was deeply indented in places, and seemed free from the dangerous shoals which appeared to lie all about the others. It was high tide, and it would not do to lie long where we now were, for within a couple of hundred yards of us an odd and significant sight showed above the water. It was a couple of long strips of mangrove trees which sprang up as if from the sea. Doubtless low tide would reveal a bank of sand or mud-flat, which might extend right underneath where we were. As we looked towards the shore we suddenly saw a tall column of smoke arise in a series of spiral rings. They rose for a considerable height, and drifted away to leeward.

"Hullo!" I exclaimed, turning to McNab's semi-civilised black boy, and addressing him in the pidjin-English peculiar to his kind. "What name that one, Jacky?"

"That black-fellow!" grunted Jacky, his dark eyes sparkling. "That one bin send him up fire all like it that one, tell him 'nother fellow black-fellow alonga 'nother island come up quick."

He explained the fact that I was already familiar with concerning the different modes

by which the aboriginals communicate with each other at a distance.

Jacky's announcement was by no means welcome. None of us, with, perhaps, the exception of the adventure-loving Mr. Jiggers, cared about having more work on our hands just then, seeing it might be as much as we were able to do to find the harbour described on the chart, and then find the treasure, if treasure there really existed. For more than once grave doubts had suggested themselves as to whether, after all, the Hadji's story was not a fabrication pure and simple, conceived and believed in by a romantic, imaginative brain, weakened by illness and persecution.

At last the cutter faded from sight altogether, and it was determined we should run in to within half a mile or so of the island on the eastern side, where the chart indicated there was deep water; it would be folly to stay where we were. It was fast becoming dark, but it was up anchor again and hoist the sails; it was not likely the crew of the *Black Witch* could sight us now. We were soon clear of the dangerous shoals, and it was almost dark when we ran into a little

rocky bay where, by heaving the lead, we found a depth of about six fathoms, and dropped anchor. Then we had our ever-welcome supper with the inevitable pannikin of hot tea, and prepared to turn in so as to make an early survey of the island in the morning.

We kept, as usual, a sharp look-out that night for fear of being boarded by the savages, for more than one boat's crew in these lonely waters had been murdered as they slept, through not taking proper precautions. During my watch, which began at twelve midnight, I thought I could hear a sound of distant wailing. It was a weird, eerie, melancholy sound. At first I thought it was a pack of dingoes or wild dogs, whose graveyard howls are so well known to Australian bushmen, but they were altogether too long-drawn for that. Jacky lay alongside on the hatches, so giving him a gentle push, I roused him.

"What name you tink it that one, Jacky?" I asked.

The black-fellow sat up, and listened. A breath of wind at that moment coming from the dark mass of rocks and trees that showed

dimly in the moonlight, brought an increase of the noises.

"Some one black-fellow bin go dead," replied the black man, in an awe-stricken whisper. "That one gin (woman) bin plenty cry along a bush, and light 'em fire-stick to keep away debil-debil."

And sure enough, as I looked keenly in the direction he pointed out, I could see a number of faint lights flitting about like fire-flies. An hour or two later the cries seemed to die away again, the lights went out, and silence once more brooded over the mysterious depths of the dark woods and the grey waste of waters.

As soon as the first faint flush of dawn appeared in the eastern sky, and the harsh, mocking "*Ha! ha! ha!*" of the laughing jackass came to us from the forest, we lit our fire, had a steaming pannikin of coffee apiece, and a substantial breakfast, and prepared to go ashore to find out whether or not there was such a thing as a natural inland harbour before looking for a passage that might not exist. We lowered the dinghy over the side, and Jamie rowed us ashore, for I had decided to take Mr. Jiggers and Jacky

with me on my expedition of discovery, leaving McNab and the Cingalese on board to guard the ketch.

Mr. Jiggers loaded the punt-gun, and cautioned those left behind to keep a sharp look-out unless they wanted to be surprised and eaten by the savages. We in turn each took a repeating-rifle, a large size Colt's revolver, a belt full of cartridges, field-glasses, a canvas bag full of water, and a parcel of bread and meat for our lunch. It was our intention to steer right through the forest in a south-westerly direction, and ascend what we considered to be the highest part of the ridge. What lay beyond it was what we were dying with an anxious curiosity to know.

From its size and position on the chart, we knew that this was undoubtedly the island indicated by the Malay. There were two detached rocky pillars of conglomerate standing side by side at the northernmost point which were unmistakable. We could not have been more than twelve miles from the mainland, the low, uninhabited coast-line of which we could see distinctly. McNab had informed us that it was the haunt of large

mobs of cannibal blacks and great herds of wild horses.

When our dinghy ran into the little bay, we discovered, to our surprise and delight, that the rocks were simply covered with oysters. There must have been many thousands of tons of this delicious shell-fish along the rocky portions of the island. We could not, however, stay to indulge our appetites, so sent the boat back, and began our journey into the interior.

By this time the sun had risen out of the sea, and peeped over the rugged outline of the long island that lay to the east; noisy flocks of parrots and parroquets were whirling and screeching over our heads, and there was a growing buzz and hum proclaiming a rejuvenation of the insect world generally. We came to a sudden dip in the forest, where a blue gleam of water was to be seen through the trees; when suddenly there was a hoarse shout, the dull patter as of many hurrying feet over the sand, and a glimpse of fleeing black forms. We pressed forward, then all at once, in a beautiful little wooded hollow, at the foot of which a still pool lay, covered with purple and snow-white water-lilies,

flanked by the scattered huts of the savages, was a sight, the gruesomeness of which haunts me to this day with the persistency of some peculiarly vivid nightmare.

The ground all around resembled that of a slaughter-house. At least twenty human beings lay dead—men, women, and even children. They lay on the ground in every conceivable position, weltering in their blood. There was blood on the bodies, blood on the leaves, and blood on the grass! When I looked at the edge of the pool there was blood there too. There was blood everywhere!

The horrible carnage, and the huddled black bodies, distorted and stiffened in a death agony, was a sight not to be easily forgotten. It made me sick; but, while my companions pursued a hasty investigation, I could not tear myself away from the spot; it possessed some horrible fascination.

"Come away, Chilcot, come away, for Heaven's sake!" cried Mr. Jiggers at length, taking my arm and leading me off. "I've seen many a queer sight, but that's as ugly a one as ever I saw. Ugh!—women and children! The devils! No wonder the

Black Witch made such haste to clear out! The thing leaves a bad taste in my mouth!"

It was the first time I had ever seen the little American moved to such depths of feeling; he was terribly distressed.

"The brutes!" he continued excitedly, "they must have come either accidentally or by design upon that camp. Anyhow, the niggers were unprepared for them, only one or two had spears. The crew of the *Black Witch* must be well armed, for they managed to pot quite a few before they cleared out. I like fighting as well as any man, but I draw the line at that sort of thing. The noise you heard last night was the survivors mourning over the dead. Come on, John, to where we can look upon God's green grass unstained by the blood of women and children."

I had not suspected my companion capable of betraying so much emotion, and thought better of him from that hour. The tremor in his voice was that of a brave man, who stands aghast and horrified before vile murder. Even the black boy, Jacky, who must have seen some ugly sights in his time, was unstrung. There could be but little doubt that it was Charlie Egan, Dan

Robinson, and their cut-throat associates who had committed these fiendish atrocities. To the experienced eyes of the American and the aboriginal, Jacky, there were too many unmistakable signs to admit of doubt.

We crossed over a ti-tree flat, one or two ironstone ridges, and began the ascent of the great crater-like hill. Here in the gullies and ravines that led down from it we came upon many beautiful and wonderful growths of this lovel, tropical island. There were giant tree-ferns, picturesque groups of cycas and cabbage-tree palms; bottle-trees with their fantastic bulbous stems, rare orchids and trailing vines, hanging like mammoth festoons from the limbs of giant trees, and all shot over with crimson and white, purple and pink blossoms. There were thickets of golden wattle gleaming like shields of burnished gold in the delicate greenery, and everywhere noisy, gay-coloured birds and flitting butterflies, whose wings were glorified with all the colours of the rainbow.

We must have been getting somewhat tired, but still we pushed on. We were just beginning to think that the idea of a central harbour in this island was nothing but a myth

after all, when suddenly Mr. Jiggers, who was somewhat ahead of me, stopped short, and in another minute we stood on the brink of a great precipitous chasm. About a couple of miles to the south lay what seemed to be a circular lake, or, more properly speaking, a land-locked arm of the sea. The ragged lip of this old crater on which we stood sloped down brokenly for some few hundred yards, covered with an irregular undergrowth, to a wall of sheer rock, which was tunnelled and honeycombed in a truly remarkable fashion.

After the soul-sickening sights we had only a short time before witnessed, and the doubts that would suggest themselves to our minds, it was a refreshing sight to behold such substantial verification of the statement of the Hadji Seyid Rahimoon concerning the physical geography of the island. From our point of vantage we computed it would be about eight or nine miles from north to south, and four or five in breadth. The harbour could not have been more than a few hundred acres in extent, but we guessed it was very deep. To the east and west we could see other wooded islands, lying low on the ruffled

surface of the blue sea; to the south, stretching away as far as the eye could reach, was the faint blue, misty line of the mainland; while to the north was nothing but the boundless expanse of the ocean.

"This is what I call ripping!" exclaimed Mr. Jiggers delightedly. "I like the look of that harbour—looks as if there was something to see in it. Guess your friend from the land of burning mountains wasn't far out in what he said about it. I vote we go slap back to the boat, and get round to the south side of the island so as to find that passage by high tide and daylight. What do you say, John?"

"Right you are," I replied; "but don't you think we'd better have some lunch? I'm sure Jacky's hungry."

It was significant that it was only our coloured friend who felt like eating. I had a drink of water out of the canvas bag, and Mr. Jiggers had another, and one of his long cheroots, of which he always seemed to carry a supply.

We took comparatively little time to get back to the ketch, taking good care to avoid that gruesome camp of death, where doubt-

less now the gins and survivors were seeing to the burial of their friends.

We found all well on board, and at once weighed anchor, and set sail so as to take advantage of the tide. In a couple of hours we were hugging the south side of the island, under shortened sail, as close as we deemed prudent. The coast here was more rugged and broken, presenting a bold face to the sea. Numerous promontories ran down from it into the water, and had it not been high tide, it is exceedingly unlikely we could have found the passage when we did. In point of fact, we had coasted along slowly for a mile or two without seeing any opening, when suddenly Jacky uttered an exclamation, and pointed to what seemed a high slit in the cliff that we had just passed.

Down came the jib, and overboard went the anchor. Mr. Jiggers and Jamie, taking a rifle with them, jumped into the dinghy, and rowed back to the opening. When they reached it they disappeared as if by magic.

For half-an-hour at least they stayed away. I was dying with suppressed excitement, but McNab took the matter very coolly. He beguiled the time by telling me a story about

some distant relative of his grandfather's, who had once put a half-crown in the plate on Sunday in mistake for a penny—the poor man's eyesight had indeed been failing—and tried to recover the same; but the staunch pillar of the church, in the shape of the officiating elder, promptly frustrated his designs by snatching up the plate and placing it behind his coat-tails. Next Sunday another elder sat at the receipt of customs, and the relative of the McNabs, seizing his opportunity, and before he could be prevented, at once nipped up two shillings and fourpence in coppers and threepenny-pieces, which allowed the donation of a penny for that Sunday and another for the preceding one. It was a deed calculated to add lustre to the peculiar genius of the McNabs, but to me it was a most distressful yarn.

I hailed with delight the return of the dinghy, which lay-to alongside.

"All right," exclaimed Mr. Jiggers, "we'll have to tow the ketch in. Just make fast a rope somewhere, and chuck a few yards aboard. You and McNab use the sweeps, and we'll be in port in no time. Keep a sharp look-out above your heads, and your

guns handy for fear of the niggers. I've clapped eyes on many a queer shop, but this takes the cake."

It must have been by the merest accident that even the Malay ever discovered that passage, for it would have been the simplest thing in the world to sail right past it without detecting its presence. It pierced the cliff at an acute angle, and there was no more than room for our ketch to turn when we once entered. In another minute we were hemmed in on either side by huge brown, weather-beaten walls of rock, while beneath us the dark green colour of the water testified to its depth. In some places so narrow was the channel that we had to stave our boat off the rocks with the sweeps. And now a passage some hundred yards in length, lay ahead of us.

CHAPTER XII

A CHAPTER OF SURPRISES

It was one of the queerest entrances into a harbour I ever saw. The rugged cliffs on either side towered to a height of at least a hundred and fifty feet, in some places rising sheer up from the water without a break, and in others broken and shelving, with gaunt trees leaning over the brink. It would have been a very easy matter for an enemy above us to tip over some of the great, toppling rocks, sending them crashing through our frail decks, or to throw down a shower of spears upon our devoted heads. Immense ferns and plants, the like of which we had never before seen, grew from damp, gloomy crannies and shelves, while orange and green lichens sprawled fantastically over the black, slimy walls.

The dusk was coming on apace, and it was evident that the tide was on the turn as it took us all our time to make headway against the current that began to move outward.

But Mr. Jiggers and Jamie pulled at the oars in the dinghy, and McNab and I shoved and tugged at the huge sweeps so that we steadily forged ahead. We rounded one or two more bends, the passage widened, then all at once we shot into the land-locked harbour.

A remarkable sight met our gaze. We seemed to have sailed into the arena of a vast, natural amphitheatre. It was almost circular in shape, about half a mile in diameter, and was fringed by a narrow strip of golden sand at the foot of one of the most honeycombed cliffs I ever set eyes upon; from it the ground rose upwards in a series of terraces till it was silhouetted darkly against the sky. Some black, pillar-like rocks rose abruptly out of the water a few hundred yards to the right of us of a dirty, whity-brown colour. As we made for the centre of the harbour thousands of sea-gulls rose from these rocks, and such a deafening clangour went up as I hope never to hear again.

It was as if the very air were alive with these birds; they seemed to darken the face of the sky and eddied and whirled around us in one bewildering, kaleidoscopic cloud.

They got among the rigging, and flapped their long wings so aggressively in our faces that we had to put up our hands in order to shield them. It was a pandemonium with a vengeance. We could not hear ourselves speak with their maddening din. When, however, we pulled away from their head-quarters among the rocks, and they discovered we meant no usurpation of their rights, they suddenly left us, and in a few minutes more the whity-brown rocks were covered by densely-packed masses of their feathered denizens.

We strained our eyes in the waning light to make out the caves indicated by the Hadji, and there, surely enough, they were, showing blackly at the base of the eastern cliff. No sooner had we dropped anchor, and the cable-chain ceased to rattle through the hawse-hole, than I proposed to Mr. Jiggers to put ashore with the dinghy, and have a look at the third cave from the entrance. But the experienced American, wisely enough, advised me to wait till the morning, when we would have the light of day to assist us in our operations.

I was in a very fever of excitement to know

the result of our quest. So much—so very much, depended upon it. I almost feared to think of what my state of mind would be if we were doomed to disappointment. Was the golden treasure still lying undisturbed where it had been left so many years before by the Malay pirates, or had Charlie Egan and Dan Robinson been too many for us, and made off with it?

I could not sleep that night for thinking about it. We kept a sharp look-out for fear of an attack by the savages, and I noted that Mr. Jiggers took extra precautions of a defensive nature. To celebrate our arrival, Mr. Jiggers himself insisted on preparing a species of banquet. In the fore part of the day McNab and Jamie had succeeded in capturing a turtle and catching some mullet, which the latter began to cook with all the despatch and skill of a chef; he extemporised an extra fire-place out of an old oil-drum for the occasion. He opened a can of peaches, and another of pine-apples; so what with the oysters the Cingalese had gathered in the forenoon, and the fresh Johnnie cakes and fragrant tea, we soon had a spread fit for an emperor.

Mr. Jiggers was a dainty man, and actually

spread a white table-cloth on the hatches, which he laid after his own ingenious fancy. What with some large shells, curious sea-grasses, and gorgeous orchids we had gathered, the effect was quite beautiful and unique.

After supper, we put out the lantern on deck in case it might attract the attention of the savages, lifted the dinghy on board in case of accidents, and made things secure. It was a terribly hot, close night in that hemmed-in spot. Not a breath of air stirred, and I wondered what it would be like on the morrow when the fierce, tropical sun came out strong, and the sea and cliffs reflected back the glare.

Next morning I had a pannikin of hot coffee ready for the others before daybreak, for I had insisted on taking the morning watch, being utterly unable to sleep from suppressed excitement. We lowered away the dinghy, and then took our usual morning's bath by diving all together over the side, so as to frighten any sharks that might be prowling around. It was a splendid tonic in these latitudes, and seemed to brace one up for the day.

Breakfast was no sooner over than we

threw picks and shovels into the dinghy, and, as usual, taking our firearms with us, pulled towards what we considered the third cave, as indicated on the Malay's chart. We left McNab and Jamie aboard with strict injunctions to keep a sharp look-out, and to signal us at once in case of danger.

I can never forget with what heart-beatings I ran up the narrow strip of beach when the boat grounded, and entered the cave, and I can never forget, as long as I live, the heart-sickness that came over me on realising that we had come too late! There was a great hole at the far end of the cavern, which only penetrated a matter of ten yards or so into the cliff, and there was every evidence to prove that the stones and *débris* had only been thrown up within the last few days. It was also evident that at high tide the floor was covered with water, which would account for the obliteration of any footmarks.

Something like a groan escaped my lips, and I leant against the side of the cave. The thought of those whose future depended upon the success of my enterprise came home to me, and if ever I experienced bitterness

of spirit it was then. And it was all through my carelessness in having left the Hadji's chart exposed for a few minutes on deck on board the *Alacrity*, thus enabling the blackleg skipper, Dan Robinson, to retain in his mind's eye the significant red cross which marked the spot on Cannibal Island where the treasure was hid!

All our trouble and precautions had been in vain, and those who hated me and my family had triumphed. My father had put his trust in my ability to successfully accomplish the mission, and I had bungled it. I looked at Mr. Jiggers, and he was gazing somewhat blankly at the recent operations.

"Euchred!" he exclaimed disgustedly.

Suddenly an idea seemed to strike him, and he rushed from the cave. He entered the second one, and Jacky and I followed.

In it were also signs of recent operations. He ran to the fourth cave, and the rock had been laid bare at the far end. To me there was something unaccountable in all this.

"Look here, John," exclaimed Mr. Jiggers, looking vastly relieved and brightening up, "I don't believe those chaps knew in which cave the plunder was at all. They knew it

was in one of them, so they've just been sampling them all in turn. If you just come along with me, you'll find they've been trying some of the others, too."

We entered several of the caverns, and, surely enough, as he had said, the crew of the *Black Witch* must have searched for the treasure in each of them. In none of the caves were there signs that anything had been removed.

"It's my belief that after digging these holes," explained Mr. Jiggers, "they came to the conclusion they had made a mistake, and that, as they could not stay to search them all, they left so as to give us a chance. I wouldn't be surprised if they saw us coming, and only cleared out by way of a ruse, and that they'll loaf round about this island until they spot us once more upon the high seas, when they'll make haste to overhaul us."

"I'm inclined to think the Malay's story only existed in his own imagination," I observed despondently. "If the *Black Witch* persists in troubling us further, I hope you'll have that punt-gun ready for it, Mr. Jiggers." I was becoming just a little tired of Messrs.

Egan and Robinson's persecution, and inclined to take extreme measures.

"You leave that to me," observed the Yankee significantly. "But it's no use talking here. What do you propose doing?"

What I proposed doing we were very soon busily engaged in; it was nothing more or less than a systematic search of all the caves, lest by any chance the Malay had made a mistake in the marking of the same. Seeing we were on the spot, it would have been folly to turn away before thoroughly satisfying ourselves that no treasure existed.

To cut a long story short, for four days we worked like slaves in a galley, digging holes in the sand, and throwing up the rocks and gravel from the bottoms of the various caverns. Every one worked with the utmost readiness and goodwill. Even the aboriginal Jacky, much as he despised work and looked upon it as only an occupation suited to the inferior whites, took his turn at the pick or shovel with the rest of us. To my surprise, even McNab showed such a capacity for work, and, moreover, worked so well, that he fairly won the heart of the American.

A hotter spot than that little harbour it

would have been difficult to find on the face of the globe. The thermometer not unfrequently stood for hours together at 120 and even 125 degrees in the shade. It would have been impossible to have remained on the deck of the ketch during the day, for all the rays of the sun seemed focussed upon it in that hemmed-in amphitheatre. In the caves we worked stripped to the waist, and at night time we lay on the deck almost without anything on, panting and praying for a breath of wind that would not come.

We saw no more signs of the savages, but we thought it as well to sleep on board rather than risk seeking a cooler place ashore, where we might have been surprised as we slept. The sea-gulls seemed to have got accustomed to us, and were less resentful in their attitude. At meal times they invariably turned up punctually, and hovered around waiting to be fed with the remains. Some of them became so tame that they ate food from our hands, and I have even known them follow us into the caves.

And each day my hopes sank lower and lower. I believe I aged more in that one week than I had done in any previous two

years of my life. My hands were blistered with pick and shovel, and though I was a big, well-set-up fellow for my age, I believe the strain was telling upon me. Now and again Mr. Jiggers prevailed on me to spend a few hours in fishing or in gathering oysters by way of a change, but that gave me too much time to think, and I did not consider it prudent to stray too far from the boats.

One day McNab sat with his chin resting upon his hand, gazing intently at the shore. We had just finished our mid-day meal, and the others were enjoying a brief smoke. I asked him what he seemed so interested about.

"Did ye say it was the third cave the blackamoor marked on the map?" he asked laconically.

I admitted such was the case.

"Then ye havena' looked in the third cave!" he observed coolly.

I knew his love of disputation, and merely remarked that in that case I had yet to learn how to count. He retorted by saying it was extremely likely.

"Say, Mac," interposed Mr. Jiggers, "I

guess you'd argue with the Apostle Paul if he came to earth again."

"That I would," declared the Scot shortly; "if I kent he was wrang, and I thocht mysel' in the right, I'd argue wi' Solomon himsel' for a preen point."

We laughed heartily at this, but knowing that the Scotsman generally had a reason for any statement he made, I begged him to explain himself. What he so quietly told us fairly took my breath away, and caused us to jump to our feet.

He calmly pointed out to us that the cliff itself was of such friable material, and so subject to landslips, that it was all the time changing. It was continually falling in. In one or two places where caves had formerly existed, there now was nothing but a species of crevasse. He pointed out such a gap between number two cave and what we had considered number three. That was the spot doubtless indicated by the Malay.

It was indeed a revelation. So obvious, indeed, was the fact, now that it was pointed out, that hope which had almost altogether died within me suddenly sprang to life again. I shook McNab, despite his efforts

to prevent me doing so, warmly by the hand, and was rewarded by being told that it was dangerous to give way to "sic-like levity." As for Mr. Jiggers, he was so much struck by the idea that he hit the Scotsman a sounding blow between the shoulders. It was as well that he jumped out of the way a moment after he did so, or he would most assuredly, for the second time in his career, have gone over the side.

We left McNab and the Cingalese aboard the ketch, and bundled into the dinghy. We rowed to where we had left our tools, and took them to the long slip between the second and third cave, and set to work. We would have to remove many tons of *débris* before we could reach what had formerly been the floor of the cave.

How we toiled and perspired that sultry afternoon! And how my hopes ran now high, now low, as I speculated on the probable results of our labour! At last we came to some loose stones at what we considered was the end and floor of a former cave. I trembled with excitement in every limb. The big stones came out comparatively easily. At last Mr. Jiggers pulled up what looked

suspiciously like a piece of old gunny-sack, and there was a dull clink of metal under his feet.

I stooped down, and, brushing aside the sand, pulled at something that gleamed yellow. It was terribly heavy, but I succeeded in pulling it out. It was an image which might have measured about eighteen inches in height, and represented some heathen deity, with legs and arms akimbo. As soon as Mr. Jiggers saw it, he shouted hoarsely—

"Gold—solid gold! You've struck it at last, Johnnie, my boy."

As for myself, I could hardly suppress my excitement. What was the extent of the treasure?

"Let's dig farther!" I cried, setting the example. We came to another decayed piece of very coarse canvas, and cleared the *débris* from it.

"Pull," I said, gripping it with both hands. But we could not stir it.

Then, whipping out my jack-knife I cut the thick canvas clean across, drew it back, and a sight met my astonished gaze that made me for the moment wonder if I were

really awake and not merely dreaming. We saw a glittering mass of the quaintest-looking weapons, utensils and ornaments under the sun. There were quaintly-wrought heathen deities of benignity and ugliness; swords, daggers, and scimitars, with sheaths of solid gold, set with gleaming precious stones; fearfully-fashioned flagons and plate of a like material, chased with cabalistic designs; heavy, barbaric, gold chains, and other things of which we knew not the use. That it was the precious loot of Eastern palaces we could see at a glance. The sight seemed to exercise a spell over us, and we could only gaze upon the treasure open-mouthed.

And then a mocking voice over our heads cried—

"Thank you, gentlemen. I thought, if we only gave you rope as how you'd find the swag. We couldn't. And now, say your prayers; *we've got your rifles!*"

CHAPTER XIII

A FIGHT FOR DEAR LIFE

If a bomb-shell had been dropped in our midst we could not have been more surprised than to hear such an order quietly delivered over our heads. We looked up, and what I saw made me certain that my last hour had come.

There was Charlie Egan with his cruel white face, and his rifle at the "ready," grinning down upon us. At his elbow stood Dan Robinson, his black eyes gleaming from his puffy, purple cheeks, with his finger also on the trigger; he was the very incarnation of wicked brutality. In the faces of both men we could see that look of unholy exultation which the sight of the glittering treasure had communicated to them. I wondered they did not shoot us down then and there; it would have been such an easy thing to accomplish. As they had said, they had secured our rifles, which had been placed on

the ground before we began to dig. Egan explained the reason for not murdering us without warning when he again broke silence.

"Look surprised-like, you do," he grinned sardonically, showing his yellow fangs. "Yes, two mortal fine smart Alicks you both be with all your cocky ways. Ye don't neither of ye's know enough to carry a dead hog to a bear, ye don't. You've found the loot, but you've found it for us, as'll know how to blow it. I thought I'd like to tell you this before wiping you out." He paused as if expecting us to say something, and then addressed himself more particularly to me. "Is there any message you'd like me to send to your dear parpar, sonny, or that long-legged brat of a sister, as ye won't be able to send any yourself? We're going to save you the pain of an interview with your father, and hevin' to explain how ye come to let us collar the swag—and it is a Bobby-Dazzler of a swag, and no mistake!"

The cold-bloodedness of this simply bereft me of speech. I looked at Mr. Jiggers, who was standing directly opposite to me with both hands resting on the handle of his

spade. His face showed white under his sun-browned skin, and there was a cold glitter in his bird-like eyes. He did not move a muscle, and his gaze was fixed intently on the speaker.

"Guess you've got the dead drop on us, strangers," he remarked, with that peculiar drawl which so utterly concealed the emotions of the man, "and I reckon we'll have to vacate this claim." He addressed himself to me. "Call me no end of a blanked fool, John; it has been all through my carelessness that these chaps are holding us up now. You hear," he said to the men, "it's all my fault that you've got our rifles now."

"We hear," replied Egan, and somewhat raised his rifle; "and as for you, my joker, I want ye to know it's for being so mighty flip with that bloomin' shooting-iron of yours at the yards that we're going to plug you now. If fools will shove their noses in where they're not wanted, they've got to take the consequences, they has."

"Yes, poking your blessed beak into other people's business," seconded the worthless skipper.

"Well, I reckon that's something you

couldn't do," carelessly observed the American.

"Couldn't do! Indeed! How's that?" stupidly demanded the bottle-nosed one.

"Because people would twist such a danger-signal as yours, and be on their guard. Besides, the size of it would prevent——"

"Shut your mouth!" roared the skipper, who only refrained from shooting his man on the spot in order that he might have the last word.

It was a curious experience to hear men in such a position bandy compliments that reminded one of horse-play in a shearer's hut. From where I stood I could see the bow of the ketch indistinctly through a cloud of gyrating sea-gulls, as she seemed to drift at her moorings. Why had McNab and Jamie so far neglected their duties as to allow us to be surprised like this? Their negligence was going to cost us our lives, and, doubtless, theirs too. It was a pitiful business altogether.

I looked at Jacky, the black boy; he lay crouching back against the side of the crevasse. His big, black eyes were gazing intently upwards, as if he saw not his enemies,

but something that lay beyond them—something that astonished him still more. For the life of me I could not conjecture what it was.

"Say, misters," said the Yankee, breaking silence, "don't you think you're talking rot when you speak about plugging us? What good can that possibly do you?"

"Beggin' your pardin' for using such a venerable old saw," remarked Egan, "dead men tell no tales, you know."

"But if we're not back in Normanton before a certain time there are those there who know about you being on our track, and who'll follow you up if they've got to go to the end of the world to do it."

"Gammon!" sneered Egan. "Ain't there no such thing as painting the hull of the *Black Witch*, changing her name, and ours, too, for the matter of that, and making for some of the islands where we can lay low till the whole thing's blowed over?"

"You can't stick new finger-joints on that left paw, Mr. Egan, and you, Mr. Skipper, you can't very well paint that proboscis of yours. Neither of you are men who could disguise yourselves. You've got the drop

on us, there's no bones about that, so don't be fools, but let us go. If you do, when you're caught you won't have an interview with Jack Ketch, and that ought to be a consideration."

I felt in my heart that Mr. Jiggers was only wasting words; moreover, I questioned if they were not of a nature that did more harm than good. Every moment I expected to have a bullet sent crashing through my brain. The tension was terrible. I realised how beautiful God's earth and sunshine were, and the thought of those who were dear to me was a living agony. The sea-gulls seemed strangely disturbed, and I thought Jacky was going to have a fit.

"Now then!" cried Egan, and I saw their rifles go up in unison. The end of all things had surely come at last.

But suddenly it was as if an earthquake had taken place. Something whizzed over our heads and struck the treacherous bank right under the feet of the assassin, and cut short our death warrant almost before it was uttered; the side of the excavation collapsed, and with a wild shriek Egan fell forward into our midst, his rifle going off in air; there was

a roar like thunder from the ketch, and we knew that the punt-gun had fired an effective shot.

"Jump, John, jump!" cried the Yankee, and leapt clear of the falling earth.

I followed his example. Dan Robinson, however, was not going to allow us to escape so easily; he raised his rifle again so as to take aim at Mr. Jiggers, but just as he pulled the trigger a stone, flung by the expert Jacky, struck him on the side of the head, and he reeled where he stood, his bullet merely sending his victim's hat spinning into the air.

"You take it that one for yourself, big fool—you!" exclaimed Jacky complacently.

In a second I had sprung up the steep bank, and dashed my fist full in the ugly face of the skipper. What a world of evil and hate there was in his black eyes!

I had him by the throat; the rifle flew from his grip, and in another moment we were wrestling together for dear life. We fell and rolled together back into the hole, where Charlie Egan and Mr. Jiggers were also struggling for the mastery.

"You young demon!" hissed Dan Robin-

son, as I gripped him round the body and tried to force my knee into his chest.

His face was very close to mine—it was as if some loathsome, hideous reptile was trying to get at me. In his blind rage he actually snapped at me with his horrible yellow teeth. He uttered the most terrible imprecations as I gradually forced him back into the crumbling soil. But I felt my strength could not hold out much longer against his frenzied struggles, for he was a fairly powerful man. Why did not Jacky come to my assistance?

Suddenly he lay still, and I thought he had given in, when all at once his hand stole down to his side, my shirt went *rip*, and something cold pricked me in the side. I pressed my knee into his chest in agony, and squeezed my fingers into his throat. I knew he had stabbed me somewhere in the ribs. In a frenzy I dashed his head again and again into the earth until the whites of his evil eyes turned upwards. I dug my knee into his chest, his grip loosened on the knife, and he lay senseless.

I turned to the American and Egan. To my horror the latter had regained possession

of his rifle and was forcing my friend back against the side of the crevasse. He had clubbed his Winchester, and was about to bring it down on his head. The slimly-built American had proved too light a weight for the long, powerfully-built Egan. As the rifle swung back I caught it, and, without any trouble whatever, jerked it out of his hands. At the same moment I drew back my right fist and hit him full between the eyes with all the strength that was left in me. He staggered, and, quick as thought, I drew back again and gave him another.

"One for the imp of a girl and another for the cub!" I yelled at him.

I will never forget till my dying day the look he gave me, as, catching him by the throat, Mr. Jiggers sent him sprawling on his back. In another instant we were both on top of him. In less time than it takes to write it, we had tied his hands behind his back with his own belt, and made fast his feet as well. And all the time I felt the warm blood trickling down my side. It had been a deadly little struggle while it lasted, but the victory was ours—a most unexpected victory.

"Hello!" exclaimed Mr. Jiggers. "There's our bottle-nosed friend coming to and sitting up."

In two minutes more he also was bound hand and foot.

"Now, gentlemen," said Mr. Jiggers pleasantly, "have you any messages to send to your respective families before we pay you the compliment you were about to pay us?"

But they could only glare at us like trapped hyenas, speechless in the impotency of their rage. I almost expected that the skipper would have a fit. He was talking wildly to himself, and literally foaming at the mouth.

A shout from the truant Jacky made us turn our eyes in his direction, and there another surprise awaited us. He was standing at the top of the crevasse with the American's rifle in his hand, evidently haranguing one or more persons who stood some little distance off. Mr. Jiggers caught up Egan's rifle, and, picking up my own from the spot where Dan Robinson had left it, we climbed up the broken gully until we stood on the top of the cliff, or what constituted the first of a series of terraces.

There, overlooking and facing us, in the form of a great semi-circle, was a large mob of naked savages. They must have been witnesses of the whole scene.

"Gewhitaker!" exclaimed Mr. Jiggers, giving vent to his feelings in a low whistle. "Well, I guess things are getting lively now, and no mistake. I don't mind facing the music so long as we've got the enemy in front, but when it crawls up from behind it's a different thing. This is a little bit of all-right."

"All wrong, you mean," I exclaimed, somewhat nettled at the cool way in which he took this new danger. Here were at least a hundred savages right in front of us, every one with spears or weapons of some sort in his hands, and still the man looked as if he were glad to see them!

"Pooh, my dear John!" he said laughingly; "they're *in front of us*, and it's merely a question of exercising our wits and the time-honoured game of bluff. It's what I call a heaven-sent opportunity of having a good time."

"You can have all such times for me if you like," I retorted, thinking of the

treasure, the two desperadoes on our hands, and goodness only knew what more we might not have before we were done with the business.

"Pooh, pooh!" he laughed. "You make too much of trifles, John. We're perfectly safe. Look there at the ketch. The great McNab has got Mons Meg trained on the enemy. It was because of the rocks and the sea-gulls that he didn't see them sooner."

I looked, and sure enough we could see the ketch lying broadside on to us, and McNab and the Cingalese standing by the punt-gun.

"Jiggers," I said, "I believe that beggar Dan Robinson has pricked me on the side with his knife. I wish you'd just have a look at it. I'll keep my eye on the niggers while you do so."

The American at first seemed surprised and concerned. He quickly looked at the wound, which he assured me was, fortunately, only a flesh one. If I could only hold out, he said, for a matter of ten minutes or so, he would sew it up when we got to the ketch. He had done quite a bit of surgery in his time. It was impossible to retire while

the savages were so near. We must first get rid of them.

He turned to Jacky.

"Here, Jacky," he said; "you ask these gentlemen to what we owe the honour of this visit? Say it's not our day for receiving visitors; to-morrow we'll hold an 'At Home' on board the yacht. Say there'll be music—I've got a mouth-organ in my kit."

The black-fellow grinned, and I put the question to him in such a way as he could understand.

He hailed the savages, and an old grizzled warrior, with white hair and long beard, stepped forward. He had a great, grey feather stuck through his nostrils, which gave him a most ferocious appearance. His body was fantastically ornamented with curious bands of white; his eyes were picked out in a like fashion, which gave him the appearance of wearing a huge pair of spectacles, and he wore his hair low down over his shoulders. He did not trouble about wearing anything else. In his hand he held the bough of a tree, signifying that he meant to parley.

"Ah," remarked Mr. Jiggers, eyeing him

critically, "interesting old party, very. Looks somewhat like a humanised Bengal tiger. Guess he *is* a bit of a man-eater, by the way. Say how-d'ye-do, and ask him what he wants, Jacky."

Jacky asked him, and straightway the old king or chief began a long rigmarole, Jacky interpreting for our benefit. It was to this effect—

His name was Mururo, the King of the Yuculas; his proper home was on the mainland, but these islands were in his tauri, or kingdom. When the moon was smaller, two hands of days ago, these men whom we had just overcome in battle, with two others, had come to their island, and, stealing upon a camp, had taken it by surprise. They had brutally killed men, women, and children, with their make-thunders. They were as devil-devils, and had spared not. Since then there had been much cutting and gashing of bodies to show their grief for those who were dead. Then the murderers had sailed away when our ship came up, but they had come back again, and had been watching us for some days back. He, Mururo, had gathered his followers together from the

mainland and the neighbouring islands, and was about to close in upon them when the fight took place. When the great make-thunder had suddenly roared from the big ship, and the unseen devil tore the ground from under the feet of the enemy, they had been afraid to approach lest they also might incur its displeasure. But the bodies of the murderers whom they saw bound, down in the hollow, what about them? Were we keeping them so as to roast them alive, or what? Would the white chief hand one of them over? It was but fair. Every man of his people was dying to eat a morsel of the enemy.

"It's clear they want the prisoners," observed Mr. Jiggers, "and I'm blowed if I don't think they're in the right. I know these savages are a treacherous, blood-thirsty lot, and cannibals to boot, but that didn't give the prisoners the right to initiate a massacre. What do you think, John?"

"I think that what you say is correct. Of course, we saw the murdered people, too, but we can't go on circumstantial evidence. We must make certain before we do anything that

Egan and Robinson are the men who did the devil's work. Let's have them up and confront them with their accusers, I say."

"That's so. You ought to have been a judge, John. Jacky, tell these chaps to stop where they are until we produce the prisoners. If they make a move, the devil-devil on board the big canoe will speak again."

Jacky did so, and Jiggers and I went down into the crevasse. We undid the feet of the prisoners, and told them to walk before us. If they made the slightest attempt to escape they would be dead men.

When the two murderers stood on the terrace, and saw the savages, I never beheld two men more taken aback. Egan regained his hardened, callous demeanour quickly, but Dan Robinson shook with sheer terror like a paralysed man. His knees literally knocked together.

At the sight of them the savages became terribly excited. They uttered hoarse, guttural shouts, stamped on the ground like wild animals, and brandished their spears threateningly. They were only prevented from advancing by the restraining influence of the old chief.

"Jacky, ask them if any of them actually saw the two prisoners commit the murders."

Several of them at once speaking together put the matter beyond all doubt.

"Now you, Egan and Robinson," said Mr. Jiggers, addressing them, "you are accused of committing vile murders. We happened to see the dead bodies ourselves. Whither do you want to be taken—to Normanton, and handed over to the authorities, or to be dealt with on the spot by these your accusers? So far as the murders are concerned, which you contemplated in our cases, immediate death is what you deserve, but as Christian men, and under the circumstances, we can afford to say 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.'"

The terror of the wretched skipper was pitiful to witness, but Egan picked up courage.

"White men, you call yourselves!" he sneered; "and you'd hand us over to a parcel of niggers! No, I say, we demand, as white men and British subjects, to be took on board your boat, and tried proper by whites."

There was a cunning, inscrutable leer on the fellow's face as he spoke.

"Nice cups of tea you'd be on board our boat!" replied Mr. Jiggers. "A couple of pet Bengal tigers or cobras would be angels for safety compared to you!"

"You'd have the drop on us. What could we do?" Dan Robinson summoned up enough courage to ask. His tongue rolled backwards and forwards in his mouth as if the latter were parched.

"Ah! shows in what line your thoughts are running. No, we shan't risk your turning on us. At the same time we shan't hand you over just yet to these niggers. We'll put you where you'll be safe enough until we've determined what to do with you."

"Where can we put them?" I whispered to Jiggers.

"On the low rocks near where the sea-gulls are in the middle of the harbour. The place swarms with sharks. They can't get away."

CHAPTER XIV

A NIGHT OF TERROR

I CONFESS Mr. Jiggers' project of putting the prisoners on the low rock, which was only a few inches above the surface of the water at high tide, rather startled me. This tiny island was only a few square yards in extent, and could hardly be called anything but a guano deposit. It was only some sixty feet or so from where our ketch was moored, and some thirty from the tall pillar-like rocks which appeared to be the headquarters of the gull world. It seemed an awful place to put human beings.

"Mr. Jiggers," I said, "you might as well kill them as put them there."

"Well, I will kill them, if you like; it's what we ought to do. It is merely out of consideration for you that I don't. Think of their crimes, and what they would have done to you and yours. You don't want your father to get your fingers sent to him

through the parcel post, do you? Take them aboard and they'll take us unawares as sure as my name is Joseph."

"You're quite right," I said. "Jacky, tell them that at present the prisoners are our property. To-morrow we shall decide on what has to be done. In the meantime they must quietly retire. When the sun, which is now going down, rises again, we will expect to see them, and if they behave themselves many presents shall be theirs. We must see them go back towards the lip of the mountain."

At first I thought the blacks would object to this. They grouped together and carried on an animated discussion, but we saw that at length our counsel prevailed, and they were inclined to wait until the morrow to accomplish their vengeance. We warned them that if they attempted to molest us, the ship, or the prisoners, we would let loose many devil-devils upon them and terrible would be the consequences.

There is no doubt in my mind now that it was only because these savages saw that the crew of th *Black Witch* were our deadly enemies that they forebore from making an

attack upon us. Moreover, it is more than likely that the old chief, Mururo, realised, by former experiences with the whites, we had unusually strong backing in the shape of the *Petrel*, and that he might only be defeating his own ends by interfering.

At a signal from their chief the blacks retired, and when they had got to what we considered was a safe distance, we made our prisoners descend the crevasse and step into the dinghy. I took the oars while Mr. Jiggers and Jacky kept their rifles pointed at their heads. They were warned that if they made a wrong move they would be instantly shot. As for the treasure, we noticed that it had been again covered by the fall of earth; we knew that it would be safe enough till the following day. As for the *Black Witch*, it was unlikely that she would interfere with our plans. If she did, we would surely be more than a match for her.

As we pulled off from the shore I noticed that Egan, whose nose had begun to bleed, leant his head over the side. Suddenly he jerked it violently back; his face was ghastly white, and there was an expression of terror in his eyes. He was trembling and

staring at something in the water alongside. I looked and saw the great dirty-white belly of a huge shark as it turned just under the spot where the scoundrel's head had been. One minute more, and there were three of those fierce, horrible man-eaters following up the boat. They had been attracted and emboldened by the sight and taste of blood.

"I guess I'll have my bath on deck to-morrow morning, John," remarked Mr. Jiggers. "I hardly thought these brutes would show up like that. Phew! They'd make precious short work of a man, wouldn't they?"

"Or any other species of shark," I said, possessed with a grim idea. I knew now that it was exceedingly unlikely the prisoners would try to leave the rock.

As we neared it the sun was just going down, and the sea-gulls were retiring for the night. As our boat struck it gently, and they saw that their territory was about to be usurped, the birds rose in one great cloud with a bewildering flapping of wings and angry shrieks. They flew in our faces and brushed against us, whether by design or accident it was hard to say. The tumult was

so sudden and frightful that the two prisoners were obviously scared. There was something so uncanny in such a scene.

"You don't mean to say you're going to leave us on that rock with them birds?" falteringly asked Egan, with the only signs of fear on his face that I had yet seen.

"You're certainly not going to be our guests for the night on board the ketch," replied Mr. Jiggers. "We'll see what can be done with you to-morrow."

"I believe them gulls be devils, not birds; they will kill us before then!" groaned Dan Robinson, with quivering lips.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did," observed Mr. Jiggers; "they're wonderful knowing things are birds. Quick! Jump on to the rock, and I'll undo your hands. Steady! or the sharks will get you."

As the two stepped on the rock Mr. Jiggers removed the straps from their wrists, and none too soon, for I verily believe the sea-gulls would have done them some grievous injury. To me it was a weird, horrible sight to see these two men blaspheming and fighting the seabirds with their hands.

"For Heaven's sake take us off this rock!"

they cried. "Tie us up as you like, but don't leave us here."

"When they find that you mean to stay, they'll quieten down," said the American. "We'll send you over a blanket or two, and some grub immediately."

As he spoke an angry bird flew full in the wretched skipper's face. He caught it in his hand, rent it apart in his fury, and flung it into the water. Next moment some predatory fish caught it, and pulled it under. It was a sickening, horrible spectacle to see these two men, murderers though they were, fighting as if for their lives with the angry birds. The legend of Bishop Hatto and the rats came into my mind. I pleaded with Mr. Jiggers to take them aboard the ketch, but the American doubtless had his own good reasons, and would not be moved.

We boarded the ketch, got some blankets and some food, and rowed back to the rock. The short twilight had sped, but as the moon was nearly full it was almost as clear as in the daytime. The two men had at last vanquished the seabirds, and driven them off. Only one or two maimed, squawking things sprawled helplessly about the rock, dragging

their broken limbs behind them. These the two human brutes kicked savagely into the water with curses on their lips. My anger rose at the sight, and I blamed myself for allowing the American to give the prisoners such an opportunity of hurting them.

"Here you are," said Mr. Jiggers, "content yourselves till morning. Is there anything more you want?"

"Well, I think you might let us have some baccy, mates. You see, we'd just run out of it before we fell in with you," said Egan.

"An' I say, maties, couldn't you let us just hev' a go or two of rum?" snivelled the skipper. "You see it's mighty damp on this here rock, not to say dirty and not over sweetly scented, an' I'm awful subject to rheumatics."

"There's tobacco," said Mr. Jiggers, throwing them some, "and it's more than you would have done for us. As for rum, Mr. Skipper, you ought to have swallowed enough in your time to last you for the rest of your natural life. Is there anything more you want?"

"Yes; a tomahawk to split your cursed

head open and that young whelp's!" cried Egan, at length giving way to the baffled passion that possessed him. He drew in his breath in long, sobbing gasps. He reminded me for all the world of a wild animal at bay; his face was distorted with rage, and his long talon-like hands twitched and worked convulsively in front of him.

"Yes; split your heads open," mumbled Dan Robinson, as usual making a show of backing up his mate.

"Oh, that's the way the wind blows, is it?" coolly remarked Mr. Jiggers, as we pushed off. "Look, there's some more of your mates, gentlemen. It's wonderful how old pals look each other up."

He pointed with his fingers to the dull, glassy surface of the water, and there we saw two little dark, triangular objects travelling just a few inches above the surface within a short distance from one another. They were the back fins of sharks. I could see the look of repulsion and terror in the faces of the ruffians as they caught sight of them. As is the case with many uneducated men, they were blindly superstitious. Either of them would doubtless rather have faced half-

a-dozen enemies than have met with anything in the shape of an accredited omen.

"Looks as if they were waiting for something," remarked Mr. Jiggers significantly.

We hoisted the dinghy on board lest by any chance any one might make use of it in the event of boarding us. and then we had supper. McNab was in high spirits over the efficacy of the shot he had fired with the punt-gun in the afternoon. He explained to us that the rocky pillars and the sea-gulls had prevented him sighting the enemy sooner. He, however, had done well on espying them. Having no small boat he could not come to our assistance. He was very much interested in the treasure, and I half expected he would moot the idea of shares; but he did not. McNab had this one great virtue that, when he had made a bargain, and given his word, it was his bond. Had we been on a filibustering expedition, it would have been another matter.

As for myself, despite the rather unpleasant nature of some of our late experiences, when I thought of the treasure, and what it meant to me and mine, my spirits rose, and I could almost have danced on the deck with

joy. I could see indistinctly through the soft moonlight haze, the very spot where it lay covered with a thin coating of earth. It would be a terrible thing if any one would come through the night and make away with it. I noticed that Mr. Jiggers was getting his fire-works out of the cabin, and placing them on deck where they would be handy. His task seemed so childish and unaccountable that I asked him what it all meant.

"To give the niggers a treat, John," he said, "in case they take it into their heads to pay us a surprise visit—unfortunately, you can't take a savage's word. It's a thousand chances to one that they've never seen, far less heard of such things, and it would save us resorting to extreme measures. I know you don't care about doing that."

"No, I do not," I replied; "not when there isn't any necessity for it. I'd rather not have the treasure at all than have it at the price of blood, and I'm certain my father wouldn't, let alone the others."

"I believe you, my boy. We'll manage to have a lively enough time without that. It's only cowards who take life unnecessarily."

We could see the prisoners distinctly sitting on their blankets on the low rock. They were smoking and talking earnestly together. We came to the conclusion that next day, after we had secured the treasure, we would have to risk taking them on board and transporting them to Normanton, where they would have to answer for their crimes to the authorities. As for the *Black Witch*, the chances were that she would sight us, and there would be some trouble with her crew. That contingency seemed to find favour in Mr. Jiggers' eyes.

"It won't be like fighting niggers," he said. "There'll be Grimes, as tough a pirate as ever rammed a shot or swabbed decks; and then there's those Filippinos, as sweet a brace of cut-throats as one could wish to cross cutlasses with. The whole outlook is charming!"

I did not quite see it, but turned in to sleep till midnight, Mr. Jiggers and the Cingalese taking the watch until then. Partially undressing, I lay down on my blanket under the shadow of a sail. There was not a sound to be heard save the occasional scream of some wakeful night-bird, and the far-away

booming of the surf on the outer shore of the island. It was like the muffled roar of a great city heard from a quiet by-street.

It must have been past one o'clock when the Cingalese awoke me.

"Your spell now, sir," he said, "and all's well."

He was going to awake McNab when I stopped him.

"There's no necessity for three of us to watch," I explained. "I see Jacky's up; we can do well enough between us. McNab must be dead tired; he did the work of two men to-day."

"Then keep your eyes about you, John," observed Mr. Jiggers, as he lay down. "Remember, if you go to sleep it may mean death for all of us." And so saying he stretched himself on his blankets and drifted unconcernedly into the land of dreams.

I went to the bow of the boat and lay down where I could command a view of the two prisoners on the rock. In the bright moonlight they were easily discernible as they lay within a few feet of each other on their blankets. The night was rather sultry and wonderfully still. There was not a

sound to be heard save that of the ever-restless sea. Alongside me the sleepers were breathing heavily. Jacky, with his back propped against the foremast, was smoking silently, peering shoreward with his great, dark eyes into the black shadows that indicated the caves.

A couple of hours must have passed and still we sat watching. Everything was so painfully quiet that we seemed to fear the sound of our own voices. The terraces of the great crater loomed up mysteriously, and the shadows were more distinctly defined. One of the prisoners, Egan, I thought, raised himself on his elbow and seemed listening intently. The other turned and muttered restlessly in his sleep. I wondered how such wretches could sleep with the thought of innocent blood upon their souls. Such a spell did the overpowering silence exercise over me that I almost felt inclined to cry out and break it. A prescience of something being wrong possessed me, and I was about to spring to my feet in alarm, when Jacky suddenly seized me by the arm. He shook me slightly, and pointed with his finger to something floating on the water.

I looked hard at the shadowy surface, and it was for all the world as if three or four water-rats were making for the island; little specks of black they were, creating wedge-shaped ripples as they swam. Sharks, I thought at first, but sharks' fins do not make tiny waves; they cut the water like knives.

I looked at Egan. His face showed ghastly white in the moonlight. He shook his companion, and he also sat up on his elbow. It seemed to me that the drunken skipper's eyes glistened like an animal's in that half light. His mouth was open, and his jaw dropped as if in terror.

"What is it, Jacky?" I whispered.

"You look," he said laconically.

I did, and what I saw froze me for the moment with a nameless dread; the whole thing seemed so unreal, and was such a piece of dumb show. The black spots reached the side of the island, and then from the water there rose, like fearsome marine monsters, several dark bodies which crawled noiselessly on to the rocks. The water glistened in the moonlight as it dripped from their backs.

"Black-fellow!" exclaimed Jacky, and I

knew that the savages had come for the murderers of their people.

With shouts of horror the wretched prisoners leapt to their feet at the same time as I shouted out to the others to awake. In a moment there was a scene of the wildest excitement. The blacks rushed upon their victims, but two powerful white men are more than a match for most savages at close quarters when met before they can properly use their primitive weapons.

Egan knocked a couple of them by unexpected blows clean into the water before they could level their spears, and wrested a nullah-nullah from a third, with which he kept the others off. With the skipper it was different. Two or three blacks jumped unexpectedly upon him, but in a frenzy of despair he shook himself free, and struck out skilfully with his fists. With his eyes starting from his head, and blaspheming wildly the while, he called on us to come to his aid. I never saw a man in my life so much the victim of a mortal terror.

"Quick, lend a hand here, and lower away the dinghy!" cried Mr. Jiggers. "Scoundrels as they are, we can't see them

murdered before our eyes. Chuck them a cutlass, John, it will help them to defend themselves."

Taking one from the heap, I threw it with all my strength at the rock. My aim was good; it landed close to Egan. A blackfellow tried to prevent him picking it up, but he cracked his skull like a glass bottle with his club, and gained possession. Splash! went the dinghy into the water; hurriedly McNab, the Cingalese and I jumped in and pushed off from the side. Mr. Jiggers and Jacky remained to guard the ketch.

The first thing I became aware of was that our boat was bobbing up and down among a sea of shaggy mops of hair. They were blacks swimming to the island to assist their fellows. But they did not seem to mind us; it was other prey they were bent on just then. The next thing I knew was that the soft moonlight gave place to a great yellow blaze of light so brilliant that night seemed turned into the broad glare of noon.

I knew it was attributable to Mr. Jiggers' stock of fireworks. The savages gave vent to their feelings in a great hoarse shout o wonder, and some of them dived from the

rock into the water again; the others stood aghast for the moment confronted with what they took to be the supernatural.

This was Egan's chance He split a bl k-fellow's head open as if it had been a potato, and severed a hand that raised a club aloft exactly at the wrist. It was easy to see he had used a cutlass before, and was no mean hand with it either. As for Dan Robinson, he was down on his back, and a huge savage sat on his chest. With his lithe, strong fingers he held the skipper by the throat, and was pounding his head mercilessly against the rocks. A hoarse, agonised gurgle was the only sound that came from the victim's lips. I fired at the black, but missed him. At the same moment Egan, who had cleared the rock of the other savages, espied him, and the next, with one sweep of his cutlass, he all but severed his head from his shoulders. The black fell forward heavily on top of his victim.

"Now, then, put that cutlass down, and retire to the other end of the rock," I cried to Egan, when we got within a few yards of him.

His eyes glared at me like some wild

animal's; they seemed drunken with the lust of blood.

Quick as thought his hand flew back with the cutlass in it, and there was the look of an exultant devil in his eyes. There was a shout of warning from some one, but it came too late.

"Take it, then, you whelp!" he cried, as he hurled it with all his strength full at me.

CHAPTER XV

MR. JIGGERS' MAGIC

I saw the gleaming steel come whirling in my face, and it would most certainly have struck and killed me, had not, just at that moment, McNab given me a sudden poke in the stomach, which doubled me up, and made me duck my head. That cutlass actually grazed my shoulder as it whizzed past. At the same instant the brilliant light went out, and there was nothing but blank space before our eyes; the change had been so sudden and complete. We heard the splash of a body entering the water, and, in a few moments, when our eyes got accustomed again to the moonlight, Egan was nowhere to be seen. He must have essayed to swim ashore with the savages.

"Secure the skipper," cried Mr. Jiggers from the ketch. "Don't mind Egan; the niggers will see to him."

Our boat struck the rock, and McNab

and I jumped ashore. The dead blackfellows looked horrible in that wan light as they lay prone on their backs and faces. We reached the skipper, and the awful sight his crushed and bleeding head presented haunts me to this day. Murderer though he was, I was unspeakably shocked. He was still alive, and opened his eyes as we bent over him.

"Is there aught ye have to say?" asked the Scotsman, with a gentleness for which I had hardly given him credit.

He fixed his black eyes upon me; and as momentary intelligence and life came into them, he found his voice, and said—

"Only as how I'm mighty sorry I didn't blow out your brains that time I had the drop!"

Then came the death rattle in his throat, and he went to give an account of himself elsewhere.

I was horribly upset, seeing I had only a few minutes before done my level best to kill him. I put my hand to my head and groaned.

"Come awa, my laddie, come awa," said the Scot in a kindly voice, taking me by the

arm. "Ye did naething but what it was your bounden duty to do. It was a clean case of self-defence. Od, and he wadna hae lived sae lang if I had been in your shoon!"

We left the island, and boarded the ketch again. Suddenly we heard a great commotion on the shore, and in the dim light could make out a dark form running up one of the broken gulches pursued by many others. Above the confusing din that the startled seabirds had again begun to make we could hear the hoarse cries of the savages. It was Egan who had escaped the sharks, and had managed to swim to the shore.

But although he was fleet of foot and made good running, he was no match for his pursuers. He ran along a terrace, and it was evident that now his cool bravado had deserted him, for he shrieked loudly for help. Mr. Jiggers lit one of his powerful yellow lights, and flung it on to the rock where it lit up the whole harbour without dazzling us. By it we could see distinctly the last act in the gruesome tragedy.

Egan had knocked down a black who had endeavoured to stop him, and gained possession of his club. When he found that his

pursuers were close upon him he stopped, and, placing his back against a rock, stood at bay. A few paces from where he stood the cliff went sheer down for sixty feet and more to the water's edge. On came the savages with clubs, spears, and stones in their hands, but it was evident that they did not wish to kill him outright. They doubtless meant to make his death as painful as possible.

They rushed in upon him, but Egan wielded his club with the fury and despair of one who has the horror of death in his heart. He sent them spinning right and left, and we could hear the ominous thud of the blows as they struck home. A boomerang had hit and cut his right temple. The black who had done it he forced to the brink of the precipice, then sent him flying into space with a broken skull. But the blacks c ed in on him; stones and clubs struck him on the face and body, and his strength gave way. Then with a hoarse shout of fury and triumph his antagonists rushed in upon him, and pinned his arms to the rock.

We could do nothing to avert the horrible rite that was about to follow. Fortunately

the bright light went out, and veiled the spectacle from the gaze of the other fascinated onlookers.

The first cold glimmer of dawn showed over the rugged lip of the crater; the lurking shadows disappeared, and the grey rocks and trees grew on the sight. It was difficult to realise that amphitheatre had been the scene of such lurid adventures on the preceding night. We could see a great company of blacks massed together on one of the terraces, and they were still chanting their wild song of triumph. In their midst some one carried a long pole, and stuck on the top of it was something that filled me with horror. It was Egan's head!

Breakfast was soon ready, but I did not feel like eating; a good drink of hot coffee was all I could take. I was anxious to secure the treasure and get away from the scene of so much bloodshed.

We held a council of war as to our programme, and came to the conclusion that the savages must be allowed to carry away their dead from the island, and that the body of Dan Robinson would have to be properly buried. Villain as the latter had been, it

would not do to allow the remains of a white man to be mutilated by savages. As for Egan's body, the mischief was already done, but we could try and stop them from offering further indignities to the dead. We must attract their attention and call a parley. We lowered the dinghy and prepared to go ashore.

As we were about to get into it, Jacky suddenly uttered a very pronounced ejaculation, and, looking to see what had so excited him, we beheld a somewhat disconcerting sight. Sailing majestically into the harbour noiselessly and steadily, one after the other, came a long procession of canoes filled with black paddlers.

"My word!" exclaimed Jacky. "That fellow plenty wantum fight."

"Stand to your guns, gentlemen," cried Mr. Jiggers, "and we'll give them their fill of it if that's their little game."

His face beamed with satisfaction as he stepped to the punt-gun, which he had christened Mons Meg, and saw that it was all ready for eventualities.

It was, indeed, a picturesque spectacle to see their canoes glide into the arena, and

slowly circle round like mimic battleships preparatory to taking up their position in a fight. It was quite evident that they were not unexpected by the other savages, for at sight of them the latter raised hoarse shouts, and descended the terraces to meet them.

There were fifteen large canoes in all, and each one held five or six warriors. They passed within a hundred and fifty yards, and though we could see them watching us with considerable curiosity, they made no sign of assuming the offensive. Nevertheless, it was obvious that they meant to go on the war-path, for they were got up in all the barbaric glory of white paint and feathers.

"Mr. Jiggers," I remarked, "wouldn't it be as well to have an understanding with these chaps at once before they can hatch mischief?"

"Yes, John, you're right," he replied. "Stand by, boys."

He took up a species of fog-horn, and blew a furious blast on it that nearly sent the sea-gulls crazy. It echoed from one side of the harbour to the other, and seemed to have a disconcerting effect upon the savages. Mr.

Jiggers made signs that he would like to speak to the old chief, Mururo. In a minute or two we saw the old potentate, accompanied by a gigantic woman with long, ape-like arms, who was evidently the queen or his principal wife, get into one of the largest canoes, and pull towards us. A couple of canoes followed him by way of escort. When they were within a few yards of the ship they stopped, regarding us inquiringly. Mr. Jiggers invited the old chief and his giant spouse on board, but signified that he could not have any of the others. Then, somewhat to our surprise, the invitation was accepted, and the big canoe came alongside.

It was a strange thing to note how the old savage and his wife, though doubtless very much surprised and impressed by what they saw, and not a little nervous, still restrained any expression of curiosity or fear. The old king had doubtless in his day performed many valiant deeds, and ruled his people by his superior intelligence and prowess, but now he was like a child as he took everything in with nervous, bird-like eyes, and tried to express his approval by his somewhat forced smile.

As for Mr. Jiggers, I never thought he could behave in such a silly fashion. One would have imagined he was receiving very important royal personages indeed, by the way he bowed and scraped. I would have really thought he was trying to persuade himself it was the King and Queen of Great Britain he was welcoming to the ketch, had it not been for the fact that his right hand never strayed to any inconvenient distance from his hip-pocket where he kept his revolver.

These savages must have thought the whites were funny people. For the occasion Mr. Jiggers wore his great pith helmet, which seemed to impress his visitors more than anything else. Seeing that Her Majesty the Baboon-Woman eyed it with envious glances, the American at once, through Jacky, begged her acceptance of the same.

This gift was supplemented by a huge necklace of blue beads, which Her Royal Highness promptly tied round her waist, and a huge Jack-in-the-box which nearly scared these guileless children of the forest out of their wits when the catch was accidentally pressed, and Jack popped up with an unearthly screech. The old king and each of

the suite were then presented with some of the trumpery Mr. Jiggers had, with commendable foresight, bought in Burketown.

Mr. Jiggers opened the more serious part of the conference by suggesting through Jacky, that His Royal Highness should give orders to remove the dead bodies of his people from the island. As for the body of the white man, the American stipulated that it must not be interfered with.

The old king here demurred. He claimed that, seeing it was one of his men who killed the skipper, the body belonged to him. He wanted the head particularly as a match for the other one—that of Egan. After the obsequies for the dead, they were going to hold a great corroboree, in which the skulls in question would figure in a most important light.

Here Mr. Jiggers quietly but firmly insisted that not only must he keep the body on the rock, but the head of the man they had already killed must be placed alongside the body, and both be properly buried.

This the old king said was a very stupid request of the white chief. He, Mururo, wanted the body on the rock, and he intended to have it. As for the body belonging to

the head on the shore, that was already cut up into pieces.

Mr. Jiggers said that under the circumstances the head at least could be buried. Any further display of the latter on the top of a pole would at once call for expostulation of a forcible nature on his part. As for the body on the rock, he had spoken, and that was sufficient.

The old king must have been a plucky sort of man upon the whole, as, while he was yet on the enemy's deck he asked how it was possible the white chief could prevent him doing whatever he liked, seeing his forces were as the trees in the forest.

Mr. Jiggers laughed, and quietly indicated that he would favour Mururo with a trifling exhibition of the magic which he could employ against his forces if he chose. He took a dynamite cartridge from his pocket, and beckoned his audience to the side of the ketch. There was a school of mullet plainly visible some twenty yards or so from the side. He carefully prepared the cartridge, and threw it from him into the water. Unfortunately, however, the rowers in the potentate's canoes seeing the white chief's

magic consigned to the deep, at once conceived the idea of watching it as it sank. With a few bold strokes, and despite the warning shouts of Mr. Jiggers which they probably mistook, they were over the spot where it disappeared, craning their necks to catch sight of it.

"Get back, you fools!" yelled the American excitedly. "It's a dynamite cartridge, and will blow you all to Kingdom Come!"

But he might as well have shouted to the winds. They only grinned and jabbered in reply.

"Now, John," cried Mr. Jiggers, "things are going to get lively. Stand by, gentlemen!"

The words were hardly out of his mouth before there was a violent commotion on the surface of the sea, and a great column of water was shot up into the air. It took that canoe and the inquisitive black-fellows with it, snapping it in two as if it had been the merest plaything, and in another minute the niggers were descending half-dead with fright, but not quite so dead as the fish that accompanied them.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TREASURE CAVES

I EXPECTED that there would be trouble when Mr. Jiggers' dynamite cartridge exploded under such unfortunate circumstances right underneath the old king's state barge, but the affair passed off comparatively quietly. The explosion gave us all more or less of a shock; the second canoe nearly upset, and the ketch staggered as if she had been struck by a heavy sea.

The old king tried to look as if the whole affair was only an innocent little piece of acting got up specially for his amusement, but with his huge queen it was different. She watched her rowers tossed into the air with a look of unmistakable anxiety on her face, her eyes were starting from their sockets. With one hand she kept the great pith helmet on her head, and with the other tightly grasped the white man's ju-ju, as if by so doing her own personal safety would

be assured. Next moment the surface of the sea was strewn with struggling black-fellows, dead fish, and broken pieces of canoe. Mr. Jiggers himself ran and gave some of them a hand into the boat. The other canoe picked up the rest. Fortunately, beyond a severe shaking and a very bad fright no one had been injured, the result being that these niggers very soon recovered the use of their tongues, and jabbered away at a fearful rate. The remarkable feature of the case was that they did not ascribe their late disaster to Mr. Jiggers' dynamite cartridge, the nature of which they could not understand, but to some huge fish, which they now looked for in vain. They thought that it had been suddenly pressed into active service by a sign from the American. They admitted that he had done his utmost to warn them back from annihilation, but who would have thought a fish as large as a whale had found its way into the harbour! Harmony having been restored, Mr. Jiggers proceeded with his entertainment.

He produced a large mouth-organ, and straightway began to play "Yankee Doodle." In a moment these savages were capering

about the deck in a most fantastic fashion. Even the old king so far forgot the dignity of state as to hold his hands above his head, and stamp solemnly round in a circle, uttering hoarse grunts the while. As for Her Majesty the Baboon-Woman, her conduct was, to say the least of it, undignified, especially for a queen, and calculated to make me apprehensive lest she would become even more demonstrative.

There must have been something infectious about that weird dance, or McNab must have inherited to a striking degree the love of his countrymen for dancing, for I could see him also begin to shuffle his feet about in a restless fashion. In another moment, to our intense surprise, he sang out to Mr. Jiggers—

"Strike up a guid reel, man, and I'll gie ye a bit step mysel'!"

"Good shot, McNab!" replied the American. "There's a big glass of whisky attached to this business. Git thar, Jean!"

The next moment Mr. Jiggers struck up a tune that evidently fired the blood of the McNab, for, facing Her Majesty, he too raised his hands above his head, and began

a spirited step that took me completely by surprise. I had not dreamt the staid and circumspect Scot could so far forget himself as to skip about like a ballet dancer, snapping his fingers and shouting "Hooch!" as if he had suddenly gone mad.

And all this before a partner who wore little else beside a huge pith sun-hat and an expansive smile; and who, moreover, held a child's Jack-in-the-box at arm's length as if it were something to be admired.

That the old lady was enjoying herself there could be little doubt. She imitated the steps of the Highlander in a truly wonderful fashion. To my dying day I will never forget the grotesqueness and the absurdity of the sight. I thought Jamie, the Cingalese, and Jacky would have died of laughing.

When Mr. Jiggers was forced through lack of breath to desist, and the frivolous ones collapsed upon the deck through sheer fatigue, the former appeared to be wonderfully well pleased with himself.

In the meantime, the niggers in the spare canoe had been gleefully picking up the fish which the charge of dynamite had killed,

keeping, however, a wary look-out all around lest the great fish with the mighty tail should put in another appearance on mischief bent. I noticed that the niggers on the shore and in the other canoes were getting impatient, so notified Mr. Jiggers of the fact. I was also afraid that, in a weak moment, he might again seek happiness in the mouth-organ.

"Oh, blow those niggers, John!" he remarked. "Something's sure to chip in when people are just going to have a lively time. If they'd only cut up rusty there'd be some sense in it."

Mr. Jiggers was always as ready to fight as to amuse himself.

After the royal visitors left, the canoes came over to the rock, and removed the bodies of the savages. They did not attempt to molest the body of the skipper. Mr. Jiggers had Mons Meg trained on the spot lest by any chance they would. When they had done their work, Mr. Jiggers and McNab pulled off in the dinghy, and, taking the body of the skipper, buried it in the soft sand of the opposite beach.

When the dinghy returned, it was resolved that Mr. Jiggers, Jacky, and myself should

go ashore and remove the treasure, while McNab and the Cingalese should watch the ketch, and keep Mons Meg in readiness so as to cover our movements. Putting some more presents in the boat for the blacks, we pulled off for the caves.

CHAPTER XVII

ON DANGEROUS GROUND

As we approached them my heart beat quickly with the thought of all that the successful accomplishment of our mission meant to me and mine. We had been so near taking the treasure with us on the previous day, and we had been so near losing it altogether, and our lives as well. Our escape, indeed, had been little short of miraculous. Surely there were to be no more slips 'twixt the cup and the lip.

Our boat grounded on the beach, and we leapt ashore. We pulled it well up on the shingle, lest the blacks might be tempted to take liberties with it, and shouldered our rifles and spades. As soon as the natives had caught sight of us coming, they came down *en masse*, and a right fearsome sight they presented, with their bodies all streaked with white and otherwise decorated. I confess I did not half like the presence of these

gentry. They looked such a bloodthirsty lot. When Mr. Jiggers saw my discomfiture he remarked that it was all right, and they would help to keep us lively.

"Lively!" I commented. "They're more likely to stick our heads upon poles!"

"Pooh! pooh! my dear John," he rejoined, in his usual airy manner; "you really take things too seriously. I'll not only get the treasure safely out of this, but I'll make the beggars unearth it for us—you just wait! Ah, here's the Queen of Sheba herself; come to look for her Highland laddie, I'll bet. How d'ye do, madam?"

He made one of his courtly bows as the baboon-woman came forward wearing the huge helmet, and looked as if he were really glad to see her. Surely enough, the first thing Her Royal Highness did was to ask why the white chief who could corroboree so divinely was not one of our party. Whereupon Mr. Jiggers explained that the McNab was conserving his powers so as to put forward a supreme effort in the dancing line later on when they had successfully accomplished their mission. He further said, with a suavity and daring which considerably

astonished me, that if Her Majesty would only order some of her subjects to jump into the hole and remove the earth which his magic had caused to fall in, the sooner would his friend be able to give an exhibition of his powers.

To my astonishment, the baboon-woman turned and said a few words to those standing around her. In two minutes half-a-dozen brawny niggers had jumped into the crevasse and were scooping the earth and sand out with their hands as if their lives depended on it. It was a happy idea of Mr. Jiggers, for a considerable quantity of *débris* had fallen, completely covering the treasure. We stood on the edge and kept a sharp look-out; for the savages were in such numbers that they could have rushed us, and the rest would have been easy.

I confess to having been very anxious indeed as to our personal safety. I believe the only thing that kept those niggers in check was the fear of our fire-arms, or devil-devils as they styled them. Mr. Jiggers laughed and joked, and appeared as if he were, as usual, thoroughly enjoying himself. To me his levity seemed out of place, but

afterwards he explained that he was in reality almost as anxious as myself, only it would not have done to have shown it. In that event they would have given us short shrift.

The niggers toiled and perspired, and appeared to be thoroughly enjoying themselves digging that hole. The sun had come out strong, and glared relentlessly down upon us, as it generally does in these latitudes. In less than half-an-hour the hole was pretty well cleared of the *débris*. At last one of the savages gave a hoarse shout, and laid bare a piece of the curious coarse sacking. They redoubled their efforts until at last the gleaming, confused mass of strange weapons and ornaments were exposed to the light of day.

It was a dazzling, intoxicating sight. It was as much as Mr. Jiggers and I could do to keep cool and conceal our wild elation. One of the savages pulled out an open, round globe of yellow metal, curiously chased, and set with divers coloured, gleaming stones. There were curiously wrought chains attached to it. It was evidently heavy, but he flung it up carelessly at Mr. Jiggers' feet for his examination.

"It's some sort of hanging lamp, John, of

solid gold, and these things that look like pieces of coloured glass are diamonds, turquoises and amethysts; it's worth a tidy pile of dollars, you bet. It'll do as a sort of locket to propitiate the old lady."

I thought it rather cool of him, but, not wanting to appear mean, said nothing.

He turned to the baboon-woman, whom he had styled the Queen of Sheba, and approaching her, hung the massive globe round her neck by means of the suspending chains. The huge woman had to stoop so as to permit the American investing her with the cumbersome regalia. At first Her Majesty seemed very much pleased with her precious bauble, but when she felt the weight of it the grin died out of her face. I believe Mr. Jiggers gave her this exceedingly inconvenient trinket in order to put a check on her acquisitiveness.

And then such a collection of weapons, utensils, strange gods, and ornaments as perhaps never wanderers gazed upon were flung up in a great heap on to the bank. There were articles of gold and silver and ivory, and nearly everything was studded with precious stones. The amount of riches that confronted us was incredible, I had not

dreamed, on setting out on my quest, to meet with such wealth.

There was something that savoured of the fantastic and the unreal about the whole scene and its surroundings. If I were not dreaming, then there was bullion before my eyes that would not only wipe out the comparatively trifling sum my father was owing the banks, but there was enough to keep all of us far beyond the reach of care for the rest of our natural lives—that is to say, as far as money goes, for the latter is by no means the most important aid to happiness.

And all the time the savages were turning over the various articles, examining them with wonder and curiosity.

One huge, evil-looking black would certainly have made off with an immense scimitar, the handle and blade of which were encrusted with gems, if Mr. Jiggers had not stopped him, and made him put it back. The American then distributed his gaudy-coloured beads and trinkets, which, being lighter, the blacks doubtless preferred.

As we would have to make two journeys with the dinghy to get the treasure aboard, Jacky and I rowed over to the ketch with the first boat-load, the American insisting on

staying behind to look after the remainder. I thought it was a risky thing to do, so begged him to come with us, and let the treasure take its chance. But he only laughed, and insisted on having his own way. I thought it was foolhardy on his part, for some of the warriors had been barely civil to us, and it was evident their attitude was undergoing a change.

Savages are like children. They seldom remain in the same mood for any length of time. One minute they may be brimming over with apparent good-nature and kindliness, and the next they may be just the reverse. The Australian aboriginal, of all savage people, is with strangers, perhaps, the least to be depended upon. His love of killing is so strong that it overcomes all other considerations.

Jacky and I were handing the last of the precious articles to the astonished McNab and the Cingalese, who stowed them away in the hold, when unexpectedly there rang out six revolver shots in rapid succession.

"Losh guide us!" cried the Scot, "the blackamoors are murdering Jiggers!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE UNEXPECTED

I LOOKED towards the caves, and witnessed an alarming sight; the savages had attacked Mr. Jiggers, who now stood at bay in a species of alcove in the side of the crevasse. He had caught up a wooden shield belonging to one of the blacks, and was cleverly defending himself against the missiles that were being thrown at him.

"Quick! the punt-gun, or they'll have him killed," I cried, leaping on board, and, quicker than it takes to write it, McNab had manœuvred Mons Meg and brought it to bear upon the enemy.

There was a flash and a roar, the ketch shook from stem to stern, and the grape-shot with which the American had thought fit to charge our field-gun, ploughed its way among the legs of the niggers, causing several of them to bite the dust. Some of the feebler spirits took to their heels, but the greater

number of them stood. They were evidently determined to do for Mr. Jiggers.

"Load again," I shouted to McNab, "and let them have it if you think there's danger. Come on, Jacky, we'll go to the rescue. I didn't think those niggers were so treacherous."

We jumped into the dinghy and pulled towards the shore. When we got within sixty yards of the crevasse, a remarkable sight confronted us. There was Mr. Jiggers standing facing his enemies, holding a shield in his left hand, and a revolver in his right. Mons Meg had evidently given him time to reload. He was warding off the spears and other missiles with a dexterity that was truly remarkable in a white man. Every now and again he levelled his revolver, and some particularly dangerous black-fellow retired to be dangerous no more. There were no signs of fear upon the American's face; indeed, the reverse; it fairly beamed with satisfaction, and there was no doubt whatever but that he was, as usual, thoroughly enjoying himself. I could see he was more than holding his own. Between him and his assailants lay the remainder of the treasure, a large

"HE WAS, AS USUAL, ENJOYING HIMSELF."

Page 224.

glittering pile of gold, silver, and precious stones.

The American presented a bizarre appearance, with a towel twisted turban-wise round his head in lieu of a hat, and nothing else on save a pair of canvas trousers and a pair of tennis-shoes. What with the revolver in his right hand, and the savage's painted shield in his left, it would have been difficult to determine what manner of man he was. It was an odd scene altogether.

Not wishing to resort again to harsh measures if we could possibly avoid it, I cried to Jacky to hail the savages as we approached the beach. But the moment he did so we were saluted with a regular shower of spears and boomerangs. Fortunately none of them struck us, though we had several narrow shaves.

"This won't do," I said to Jacky, and taking up my rifle I aimed at the burly warrior who had tried to go off with the scimitar, and who was evidently the leader of the malcontents. Still, I did not wish to kill him if I could help it, for despite their treachery, I reckoned these savages had in the first place been foully treated by Egan and Robinson.

"Ping! Zip!" and the bullet struck the long-grained disc of wood sideways, splintering it like a stick of crystal. It, however, succeeded in diverting the bullet. Finding himself unhurt, the savage, who was evidently graduating for the chieftainship of his tribe, raised his spear, which was already fixed in a woomera or throwing-stick, and prepared to hurl it full at me. But before he could lever it home, there was a sharp "ping," and his arm dropped helplessly to his side. A bullet from Mr. Jiggers' revolver had broken the bone just above the elbow.

The niggers rallied, and again came towards us in a body, with the evident intention of taking us by a rush. Jacky and I fired together, and two blacks fell, but still they came on. The Queen of Sheba herself led the van, beating the huge, round hanging lamp which hung in front of her after the manner of a drum. I began to think it was all up with us, when suddenly there was a loud roar from the direction of the ketch, and a big round shot ploughed its way through the dense mob of savages. They literally went down before it like ninepins. This

settled the matter; they made off as fast as they could, dragging their wounded with them, and took up their position on one of the adjacent terraces.

The excitement and the exertion had caused the wound which Dan Robinson had given me to pain considerably. Moreover, I did not like the extreme measures we had to employ to gain the treasure. There had doubtless been enough bloodshed connected with it in the old days. I was becoming anxious to bring the venture to a close, and get back to Queensland again. My people were sure to be anxious about me. There seemed to be nothing but horror upon horror attached to the securing of the treasure. It had aroused the hate and avarice of Egan and Robinson, and lured them to their doom, and something told me that our troubles were by no means over.

"Jiggers," I said, when we were alongside him, "I'm sick of all this slaughter. Let's get out of this harbour; we've more than enough stuff for every one on board the boat."

"All right, John," he remarked coolly; "but those niggers brought all this trouble on themselves; and you must recollect a

touch of the white man's power will have a salutary effect upon them. Just think of the crews of the pearl-shell and bêche-de-mer boats that these same savages have murdered when prospecting on this coast. Sentiment is all very well, but it must have a limit."

"And so must liveliness," I remarked. "Come on; let's get back to the boat. I'm not scared of the niggers one little bit, but I don't quite see that there's any credit attached to fighting them."

"Then you and Jacky shove these remaining trinkets in the dinghy, and I'll keep a look-out. If we take back-water and show the white feather before them now, it will be all the worse for any whites who happen to come here after us. It would be a mistake to leave any of these things behind."

CHAPTER XIX

BREAKERS AHEAD!

WHEN we were having supper Mr. Jiggers said it was a pity we had not made some endeavour to find out the whereabouts of the *Black Witch*. It was tolerably certain she must be hovering round the island somewhere, most likely about the northern coast. Grimes and the Filippinos must be wondering what had become of their mates, Egan and Robinson. But it had been impossible to scale the terraces in the time at our command, and to look around. What we had been most concerned about was to get the treasure safely on board, and sail out of that fateful little harbour, where dangers seemed to confront us at every turn.

We knew that Grimes and his mates were cut-throats of the very lowest type, who would stick at nothing; but armed as we were, we were surely more than a match for them. Still, we did not want to meet them,

for if we did it was tolerably certain it would mean more bloodshed, and of that I was heartily sick. No doubt Mr. Jiggers had enjoyed himself to his heart's content—the excitement and the fighting were the two things he seemed to live for; and Jacky had openly expressed his love and admiration for Mons Meg, because it made "plenty fellow fun." But as for McNab, the Cingalese, and myself, though we probably enjoyed adventure and unique experiences as much as any men, we would have found them quite as congenial if they had not entailed the loss of human lives.

"We must keep a sharp look-out this night," remarked Mr. Jiggers after a pause; "these niggers mean business now, or I'm very much mistaken. Hello! What're they up to with them trees?"

"Rafts," explained the practical McNab. "I'm thinking we'll ha'e some kittle wark yet."

"Well, if they mean to open the ball again they must just do it," said Mr. Jiggers. "If the silly asses would only chum it with us, as they did this morning, we could have a lively enough time to fill the bill."

"I wish you could give them a little more

of your magic, Mr. Jiggers—without hurting them, you know—should they try to board us again. I'm sure it would serve our purpose equally as well."

"All right, John. There's none of us cowards, so we can afford to be patient and take a little bluff from these poor blackfellows; as you say, they don't know any better. I'll treat them to fireworks—a regular pyrotechnic display."

"Splendid!" I exclaimed. "By Jove, won't it give them a surprise! Just fancy the effect when we give them a few rockets and a Catherine wheel all at the same time."

Mr. Jiggers seemed to catch on to the idea, though I afterwards learned that it was indeed to impress the savages with our power, and save extreme measures, that had first suggested his buying the fireworks. He now got them up from below so that they would be in readiness when the proper time came.

As it rapidly grew dark we noticed that the blacks collected a large number of dead logs together at a place not far from the water's edge, but they did not attempt to place them in position, in their simplicity imagining that we had not divined their intentions. We could see the tall, striking

form of the huge queen as she stood on the brink of the high terrace watching us. She was a weird, striking figure in that waning light, with the huge helmet on her head, and the drum-like, swinging-lamp hanging in front of her. With her long, ape-like arms she produced a loud, metallic, monotonous sound from it with a human leg-bone. She kept lifting her great feet up and down like a soldier marking time.

"Sweet girl!" commented Mr. Jiggers musingly. "I believe, McNab, she's serenading you."

"She doesn't seem to trouble much about her guid man," remarked the Scot.

"No, I guess His Majesty has felt the weight of that same leg-bone before now," observed the American.

The sea-gulls had gone to sleep on the high rocks, and night came on apace. The moon was now on the wane, and would not rise for some little time, so that the great amphitheatre lay in shadow. But high in the inscrutable heavens above us gleamed God's own light-givers, and in the dark, still waters between us and the narrow channel the glowing Southern Cross was distinctly reflected. The night was hot, close and still; so much

so, indeed, that we could hear the muffled bark-like sounds that strange nocturnal bird, the morpoke, made away over the ridge at the far end of the island.

At intervals on the terraces we caught sight of tiny specks of fire flitting about like fire-flies, and we knew it was the savages with their little lighted sticks without which they seldom move about after dark, in order to ward off evil spirits. It is one of the beliefs of the Australian black-fellow that, after death, some of his relatives employ their spiritual time in roaming about the dim glades of the forest, and even haunting the neighbourhood of his lonely gunyahs, for the express purpose of playing him scurvy tricks.

We had made Jamie, the Cingalese, and Jacky lie down and go to sleep, seeing that the previous night had been one of wakeful horror and action. Mr. Jiggers and McNab had begged me to lie down, too, and though, to tell the truth, I was worn out with fatigue and the excitement of the day, I insisted on sitting up. With my back against the main-mast I sat, and nodded. Again and again I strove with sleep, and pulled myself together, but at last sleep prevailed.

CHAPTER XX

ENFORCED DELAY

When Mr. Jiggers seized my arm and woke me, it was difficult for the minute to realise where I was.

The Cingalese and Jacky had been awakened, and we all lay together amidship flat on our faces, each with a cutlass and revolver ready at his hand; but we had arranged that they were only for use in the event of our being in actual danger.

As the rafts, of which there were several, grew on the sight, we could see that they hardly deserved the name of rafts; they were exceedingly primitive and frail crafts indeed, being in most cases only two or three tree-trunks lashed together for the occasion. The niggers sat on them, and silently and laboriously worked themselves along by means of short paddles. They were all around us, and gradually crept nearer and

nearer. I was trembling with excitement, and could hardly restrain my impatience.

So still was the night, and so noiseless the approach of the enemy, that we almost felt inclined to hold our breaths lest the latter would hear us. There must have been a great calm out at sea, for the usual heavy boom of the surf was hushed to the merest moan. In the great stillness we could hear the far-off chant of the morpoke as it responded to the spirit of the night in some shady clump of golden wattle. Overhead the stars gleamed coldly in the blue. There was something horribly unreal about the whole situation. I pulled myself together to make sure I was not dreaming. Were those savages never going to begin operations?

Then a smell as of burning paper that had been steeped in saltpetre met my nostrils, and I knew that Mr. Jiggers had, unseen, managed to ignite the fuse attached to the Catherine wheel fixed to the mainmast, and some of the other fireworks. There was a grating sound underneath the bows as something struck the cable. Then I could distinctly see a number of black forms swarm up over the bulwarks on to the deck. There

was a patter of naked feet from more than one part of the ship, as these savages, thinking they would surprise us in our sleep, came towards us as we now crouched behind a sail. But the next moment there was a great blaze of light as the Catherine wheel ignited and whizzed round and round, sending great showers of sparks in all directions. It was for all the world like some furious, fiery demon venting its spleen.

The savages stood for a moment as if paralysed by sheer amazement, then a handful of Chinese crackers was thrown amongst them, and as these exploded with a series of loud bangs, and jumped about amongst their legs, never were savages so much taken aback and badly scared. They went splash headlong into the water with a noise that must surely have attracted the attention of the sharks. They did not attempt to regain their primitive rafts, but swam ashore, mostly under water, as fast as they could, a mortal terror lending speed to their movements.

Their weapons had dropped from their hands through sheer fright, when the Catherine wheel began operations, and now strewed the deck. The affrighted sea-gulls

rose from the rocks and made a most unearthly clangour. They must have wondered what had come over their usually peaceful surroundings. Suddenly from the shore we heard a weird, metallic, measured beat. It seemed strangely out of place in such a wild spot, and yet there was something about it that seemed familiar.

"What on earth is that?" I asked.

"That's the Queen of Sheba contributing the musical part of the programme," answered Mr. Jiggers.

There was a pause, during which we listened to the curious medley of sound. Suddenly Mr. Jiggers exclaimed—

"Great Scott! I never thought of it. Let's give them a rocket or two with coloured lights."

We placed a large rocket in position, lit the fuse, and, with a great rush, it flew upwards into the gloom, leaving a train of fiery sparks behind it. When it had attained its full height there was a loud explosion, and a number of crimson lights began slowly to descend. All at once they changed to a beautiful violet hue, and floated away towards the lip of the crater. That must have

settled the matter with the savages, who doubtless thought it was the very king of devil-devils, for we saw no more signs of them during the rest of the morning, or, indeed, while we remained in the harbour. They must have fled precipitately over and along the terraces, and hid in the forest country that lay to the north. Although they had acted treacherously towards us, I was glad that the whole affair passed over without further bloodshed.

"It's no use trying to sleep any more now, gentlemen," remarked Mr. Jiggers. "I vote we have a good hot cup of coffee to put some life into us. It'll be daylight in another hour or so, and then we'll have breakfast. After that we'll have to learn our fate in regard to those rocks that bar the passage. If we can't shift them it'll be a blue look-out for us."

We had been faced with a fresh difficulty, one that hitherto Mr. Jiggers had kept from me. The savages had somehow contrived to lever over a huge rock, so that the narrow outlet could not be negotiated.

It seemed as if fate was against us.

Breakfast over, Mr. Jiggers allowed

twenty minutes for a smoke, during which time I helped the Cingalese to clear away. It was with inexpressible relief that at last I heard Mr. Jiggers exclaim—

"Now, gentlemen, I think it's about time to learn our fate. McNab, you bring up those drills of yours and that hammer. I'll look after the gunpowder and the dynamite. John, you'll come with us in the boat and do sentry-go over us with the guns. Jamie and Jacky, you'll stick to the ketch, and keep a sharp look-out around. Jamie, you're not a bad hand with Mons Meg; see to it that she's in readiness. Now, then, all hands to lower away the dinghy."

CHAPTER XXI

'IT'S A TOSS UP!'

We lowered away the dinghy, and pulled over to where the huge mass of rock blocked the passage. Fortunately it was of a comparatively soft, friable nature, and was not more than some four or five feet above the surface, but these four or five feet were just as conclusive as a mountain. Mr. Jiggers and McNab left the dinghy, taking their tools and explosives with them, while I moored the boat in a handy place, and took up a position commanding the movements of the workers. Mr. Jiggers and McNab, like most men who have pursued nomadic careers, had both in their time been gold miners, so they at once started to bore holes in the rock. The one turned the drill while the other wielded the hammer.

I thought that forenoon would never pass; the drilling seemed such terribly slow work.

Once or twice I went over to my companions to see how they were getting on, but I could see nothing save a few holes which they had made in the rock. It seemed hard to realise that such a huge mass could be moved by a few charges of gunpowder and a little dynamite. About twelve o'clock Mr. Jiggers sang out—

"Just leave the rifles handy, John, and row over to the ketch, and tell Jamie to get dinner ready. We shan't be ready to leave yet awhile."

It was very annoying, for I had expected that within an hour or two at least we would be able to ascertain the nature of the obstruction. But there was no help for it. I did as Mr. Jiggers directed, and rowed back to the toilers. When I took them over to the ketch, Mr. Jiggers was strangely silent. I ventured to ask him if he thought his operation would prove successful.

"It's a toss up, John—a toss up," he answered. "We're going to try and bust that rock with one grand set-to. If we carry it clean away all at once, then we're all right; if we can't, and leave any of it under water, then we're no worse off than at present."

Mr. Jiggers seemed somewhat tired, although he would not admit it; but McNab, who was as tough as nails, looked as if the exercise had merely refreshed him.

After dinner we towed the *Petrel* to the far end of the harbour, in case any of the *débris* from the projected blasting operations might damage her. Then back we went to the rock.

It was a stifling hot day, and the sun blazed down upon the spot where the two men worked on with hammer and drill unceasingly. There was not a scrap of shade for them, and as the thermometer at midday had registered 112 degrees in the shade, it must have been terribly trying. Poor Mr. Jiggers! I regretted the chivalry that had led him to part with his great sun helmet; it would have come in handy now. It was annoying to think of that great savage queen strutting about with it on her head when he wanted it so badly.

Clink, clank—clink, clank, went the eternal hammer with a monotonous regularity that was positively maddening. It all seemed so slow—so horribly slow! But it appeared that the tide was ebbing, and they

were boring holes lower down the rock. It was with a feeling of inexpressible relief when, about three o'clock in the afternoon, the clink of the hammer ceased, and I saw that the workers were about to charge the various blasts.

I stood by with the dinghy; the tools were put on board, and McNab and Mr. Jiggers at once began to charge and "tamp" the holes. In twenty minutes their task was completed. Then the fuse was attached so that the explosions would be as nearly as possible simultaneous. McNab got into the boat, and Mr. Jiggers stood by to fire the train.

"Now, John," he said; "steady there, and I'll be with you in two twos."

Coolly he applied the match, and then, without any undue haste, got into the dinghy.

"Now row round the corner as slippery as you like," he cried.

I pulled at the oars for all I was worth. On rounding the bend we got out, and ran up into one of the caves. There was not a sound to be heard anywhere save the eternal chirrup of the cicada. We held our breath expectantly for the shock that was to come,

but still none came. The suspense was terrible.

"Say," exclaimed Mr. Jiggers, "I'm blowed if I don't think that fuse has fizzled out. Guess I'll go and see what's the matter."

"Juist bide a wee," remarked McNab, gripping him by the arm. "Dinna be tempting Providence. Time enough half-an-hour after this."

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Mr. Jiggers, "that's canniness with a vengeance. Why, man, it stands to reason that that fuse must have gone out; it was only timed for four minutes."

But McNab and I managed to control the American's impatience. Ten minutes later and it seemed, as Mr. Jiggers had said, the fuse had surely fizzled out. It was resolved to go and have a cautious look at it, for, as the McNab said, he had often known fuses to hang fire for an unconscionable time. We were just in the act of proceeding down the beach to the boat when suddenly the earth seemed to tremble beneath us; there was a roar that must have been heard miles away, and from the mouth of the passage a great,

black shaft of rocks and *débris* shot up into the air, like matter vomited from a volcano.

Instinctively we ran back to the cave, and none too soon, for we had barely entered it when there was a shower of rocks and stones all around that would certainly have made short work of us. Some of them fell into the harbour with a noise that must have considerably astonished the sharks, while one stone about the size of a cricket ball actually landed on the deck of the ketch, and smashed Jamie's cooking-stove to pieces, much to his disgust and chagrin.

"Gee-whizz!" exclaimed Mr. Jiggers, "that was away up!"

"And I'm thinking you had a narrow escape of going away up, too," commented the McNab.

We rowed round to the scene of the blasting operations. The rock had certainly been blasted away, but there was still *débris* in the shallow channel, and as the tide was now running out, it meant that we could not negotiate it that day.

Another night in that fateful harbour! It really was too bad; but still I had no cause to complain. Indeed, I had much to be

thankful for. The passage was all but clear, and on the morrow, when the tide was high, we would pass through it, and out into what seemed that other world where the blue sea gleamed cheerily in the sunlight. Oh, the thought of it! And had it not been for the foresight of Mr. Jiggers the chances are we would have been bottled up in that harbour, without the means of forcing our way out. I certainly would never have dreamt of taking a supply of powder in the ketch.

Next morning we towed the *Petrel* close to the passage, and then Mr. Jiggers and I went ashore to reconnoitre. We walked for some considerable distance along the top of the narrow waterway, and then, making sure that there were no savages in the immediate neighbourhood, returned to the ketch. Then as before, Mr. Jiggers and I got into the dinghy and prepared to tow the ketch through, while McNab and the Cingalese worked at the sweeps. It was high tide; still, when we passed over the spot where we had blasted the rocks, the keel of the *Petrel* grated ominously for a minute or two over some of the *débris*. My heart was in my mouth lest she should stick altogether. B

to my intense relief, she passed over safely, and once more we knew we were in deep water. I pulled at my oar as if my life depended on it; I was so apprehensive lest anything should happen to us just when we were leaving that wretched place.

Slowly we forged ahead, and then at last we came to the sharp bend. But McNab and the Cingalese turned the ketch skilfully, and in another minute the sound of the breakers burst upon our ears. It was the sweetest music I had heard for many a long day. The dinghy began to bob up and down significantly. I felt the cool breeze blowing at my back. We had now passed out into open water, and the ketch stood out from the cliff. A few strokes more and I ventured to look round.

And there, before me, was a glorious expanse of blue sea, and I knew that now we had begun the voyage home in real earnest.

CHAPTER XXII

THE 'BLACK WITCH'

It would be difficult to describe my sense of elation on realising that so far at least we were safe, and that the horrible fate of being bottled up in that miserable harbour was averted. It was as if I had secured a new lease of life. Already I was looking forward to my home-coming. How glorious and refreshing was that vista of blue sea and sky! How delicious to feel once more the salt sea breezes fanning one's cheek, and to hear the swish of the waves. It was as if I had been liberated from some prison-house. Everything around me seemed instinct with life and gladness.

We towed the ketch a little farther out, and then, as McNab and Jacky loosened her canvas, and the Cingalese took her tiller, we again boarded the *Petrel* and hauled the dinghy on board. The sails bellied to the breeze, and we began to stand out from the

rocky shore. I happened to look back at the cliff close to the passage, when, suddenly, I became aware of an extraordinary sight. It was the huge Queen of Sheba—the baboon-woman—standing on the brink of the precipice, beating her precious tom-tom with the human leg-bone.

We shaped our course due east. What a magnificent day it was, to be sure, and how the release from our late difficulties affected our spirits. We were for all the world like a lot of schoolboys just off for the holidays. Even McNab unbent, and proceeded to favour us with one of his country's songs, which, after he had sung at least twenty-four verses, still promised to go on indefinitely. As for Mr. Jiggers and I, we did not mind it much, but his music had the same effect upon poor Jacky as a cornet solo has upon a dog.

There was a nice fresh breeze from the N.W., and we bowled along at a good pace. I was leaning over the low taffrail, watching the long trail of seething bubbles in our wake, and the fast-disappearing island, when my day-dreams were suddenly and rudely dispelled by the voice of Mr. Jiggers. He

had climbed up to the cross-trees and was sweeping the horizon with field-glasses.

"A sail on the port bow!" he sang out.

There was nothing very wonderful in this, so I said nothing, and waited for further developments. It was probably the Government cutter come to look for us. But what was the Queensland boat doing in Northern Territory waters? I knew that a boat was a very rare thing indeed in that uninhabited corner of the Gulf, but I was not of a particularly inquisitive turn of mind, so went on dreaming. I was roused again, a few minutes later, by Mr. Jiggers coming down the halyards rather quickly hand over hand from the cross-trees. I looked at his face; it was fairly beaming with satisfaction, and his dark eyes were bright as a bird's.

"Hello, Jiggers!" I remarked, "what's up? You seem to be pleased with the look of things."

"You bet, John," he observed, taking a comprehensive view of the deck. "I reckon we're going to have a slap-up lively time of it. That sail I sighted is the *Black Witch*, with that pirate Grimes and the two Filippinos on board, and she's bearing down on us!"

If a bomb had been dropped on deck I could not have been more taken aback. I had quite forgotten the existence of the *Black Witch* with her cut-throat crew, and now here she was overhauling us, with what designs it was not difficult to determine. I might have known she would be cruising round somewhere in the immediate neighbourhood, waiting for Egan and the ex-skipper. The question was, did they know or would they suspect that we had the treasure on board? If they did, I had not the slightest doubt in the world but that these adventurers and desperadoes would fight us to the death to gain possession.

"Now, then, gentlemen," observed Mr. Jiggers; "let's clear the decks for action. These chaps mean business, or I'm very much mistaken. See that Mons Meg is in good working order, McNab, and cover her with a tarpaulin, so that they won't see her; and, John, you and I'll just step below and fetch up a few guns and cutlasses, so as to be prepared for emergencies."

We went below and brought up one or two large tin-lined cases, which we placed close to the mizen-mast, in order to conceal

our arms, and give us some sort of cover should Grimes and his crew fire upon us.

"It seems silly, John, to fetch up such things," remarked Mr. Jiggers; "but it's not good enough to be shot down by miserable devils like these. We must make a good fight for it."

"You think, then, they'll attack us?"

"Almost certain to. If they've only got the faintest suspicion that we have anything of value on board, they'll go for us. It may be difficult for you to understand it, but these men are such bloodthirsty villains that to fight and scuttle a boat is to them a real treat —that sort of thing is in their blood, and they can't help it."

"That's pleasant," said I; "but do you think we ought to give them an opportunity of gratifying their bloodthirsty instincts?"

"Well, I'm afraid we shan't be able to prevent it. You see, the *Petrel*'s a tub compared to the *Black Witch;* she's sure to overhaul us in another hour or two. But we can clap on every spare inch of sail we've got and give them a run for it; to play hare is just about as lively as playing hound."

We arranged the cases and placed our

weapons of defence in readiness. I took the precaution of strapping on my revolver-pouch, and then turned my attention to the *Black Witch*.

She was now plainly discernible from the deck, but still she must have been at least three or four miles off. I went aloft to the cross-trees, and with the field-glasses had a good look at our pursuers. She was a cutter, and the *Black Witch*, beyond all doubt. Steadily she bore down upon us from our weather quarter, but still it would be some two or three hours at least before she could overtake us. Many things might happen before then.

I descended to the deck, and there we held a council of war. Mr. Jiggers was for training Mons Meg upon them, and, when they were within a couple of hundred yards or so, opening fire without further preamble. This both McNab and myself promptly negatived. What right had we to take for granted the nefarious designs of another? We had no actual experience of the present crew of the *Black Witch;* all we knew about them was merely from hearsay. We must be certain that they intended to injure us before assuming

the aggressive. There might be risk in so doing, but we had embarked on a perilous undertaking, and, therefore, it was only meet that we should take chances.

How the water churned under the bows of the *Petrel* as she dashed bravely on, heeling over to starboard in a truly alarming fashion until the water bubbled in at the lee-scuppers! Sometimes we passed between dangerous shoals, where the waves broke with one perpetual roar, and there was nothing to be seen but fields of foam. There was a school of porpoises racing us and playing all sorts of antics before the bow of the ketch. They gave me considerable amusement watching them. I cannot understand some people who make a practice of shooting at these harmless and playful creatures.

On, still on; but the wind began to fail, and the *Black Witch*, contrary to Mr. Jiggers' prediction, gained steadily. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and there was not more than a cable's length between the two boats. We could hear Grimes hailing us, but still we kept on our course.

"Don't you think, John, it's rather undignified to run away like this?" asked Mr.

Jiggers. "Don't you think we'd better shorten sail and hear what they've got to say for themselves?"

"They'll be alongside us in another five minutes," I replied. "I don't quite see that we're expected to slow down to a skipper who hails us with a loaded rifle in his hands."

"That's so," he acquiesced.

In five minutes more the cutter was abreast of us on the port side, ploughing her way through the waves in a most workmanlike fashion. She took the wind out of our sails, and we dropped somewhat astern. She made as if to cross our bows.

"Hullo, there!" cried Mr. Jiggers to Grimes, who was holding on to the halyards with his left hand and nursing his rifle with his right. "What do you want? Can't you sheer off? You'll run into us if you don't look out."

Grimes was a smooth-faced, fair-haired man who looked as if he were on the best of terms with himself. He grinned insolently as he shouted back—

"Well, hang it, why in thunder can't you slow down when any one speaks you?"

"That all depends upon who it is who

hails," replied Mr. Jiggers, and I could see his bird-like eyes become ominously bright, and the warm blood flush his dark skin.

Grimes turned and said something to one of the Filippinos, and immediately the *Black Witch* shortened sail. She was now within easy speaking distance. I thought the two Filippinos, or more properly-speaking Spanish-blacks, were two of the most evil-looking wretches I had ever seen.

"That's better," remarked Mr. Jiggers to Grimes; "I guess you'll find there's lots of room for both of us."

I saw a wicked, shifty expression on Grimes' face as the American addressed him. It was evident he had met with one who was his match.

"Did you see our mates on the island?" sang out Grimes after a brief pause.

"Yes; did you think we had them on board this boat?" asked Mr. Jiggers.

"Well, I wasn't quite sure," was the reply. "I wouldn't have been surprised if they had been, but then you coves wouldn't have been where you are now," and he grinned superciliously. This man, who could not have been more than forty years of age, and who

had earned such an unenviable reputation, was evidently a strange combination of conceit, impudence, and villainy.

"I guess you're right there," rejoined Mr. Jiggers; "it wasn't their fault that they didn't capture our boat. If you want to know where they are, I may as well tell you that they're both dead as red-herrings—reckoned without their hosts—a stumbling-block some people would do well to avoid."

I thought that for the moment Grimes looked queer on hearing this cool announcement, but he speedily recovered his customary air of *sang-froid*.

"I suppose you potted them?" he remarked inquiringly, with a forced grin.

"You seem to know that they would run foul of us. Why don't you try and find out the truth for yourself? You're going in the wrong direction."

"Well, perhaps we will find out, and that jolly quick. Did you get what you were after?"

"Aha, Mr. Man," laughed Mr. Jiggers, "I guess that's something you'd like to know! But we ain't giving you or any one else any points. If you want to know where

Dan Robinson is—he's dead and buried on that island. He was killed by some blacks whose relatives he murdered. As for Egan, the blacks killed him, too. The last I saw of him was his head stuck at the end of a long pole. Now, that's all I've got to tell you. Good-day!"

I saw that Mr. Jiggers was getting tired of shouting across the intervening space to the self-satisfied scoundrel, and meant to bring the conversation to a close.

I saw Grimes turn to the Filippino who was at the tiller, and suddenly the latter brought it round sharply to starboard.

"Look out, there!" cried Mr. Jiggers warningly, "or you'll run us down. Hard a-port, Jamie! McNab, uncover Mons Meg and let 'em have it!"

CHAPTER XXIII

IN TROUBLED AND CALM WATERS

McNab flicked the tarpaulin off Mons Meg, and brought her into position so as to command the *Black Witch*. But before he could take aim and fire, Grimes had raised his rifle, and McNab dropped to the deck all of a heap. I thought at the time he was killed.

Crash! and the *Black Witch* had run into us. Our bowsprit and martingale were carried away; but I had no time to think of consequences. Mr. Jiggers and the Cingalese had jammed the tiller hard to port and the ketch yawed badly as she drew off from the cutter. But it was only for a minute or two, for Grimes had seized the tiller and again the *Black Witch* was hugging us. I had no time to operate with Mons Meg upon the enemy, for almost before I could divine their intentions, the two burly Filippinos ran forward and prepared to jump on board. In

their right hands they held revolvers, and in their left long, gleaming daggers or krisses. There was murder in their wicked black eyes.

"Look out, John!" yelled Mr. Jiggers, as he took a hitch round the tiller with a rope and seized his rifle.

But the boom had swung over to port, and he could not see what was going on.

Quick as thought I picked up a cutlass, and, just as the first Filippino sprang on deck, with the evident intention of putting a bullet through McNab, who was now crawling towards Mons Meg, I sprang forward, and brought it down upon his head with all the strength that was in me.

On realising that I had killed my man, my attention was turned to the other Filippino. When he had sprang aboard the first person he encountered was Jacky, who promptly fired at him with his revolver, but, owing to the *Petrel* giving a great lurch just then, his bullet merely grazed his adversary's shoulder. Before the latter had time to retaliate, Jacky, who was a splendid specimen of an aboriginal, rushed in upon him with a truly marvellous celerity, and caught him by the wrists. The Filippino lost his footing and fell on

his back on the sloping deck. Jacky fell with him, but atop, and the Spanish black did not rise again.

"John, lend me your jack-knife, quick; and get under cover."

It was Mr. Jiggers who spoke, and he spoke none too soon, for at that moment a bullet from Grimes' revolver struck the mizen-mast close to my head and glanced off at an angle. I lay down flat on the deck behind the case.

"Now then, John, take your revolver and keep friend Grimes amused while I shorten sail and undo the tiller."

I did as he told me, and Mr. Jiggers, with a coolness and hardihood that with him seemed second nature, ran to the halyards and lowered the main-sail. He then released the tiller. The *Petrel* ceased to heel over, and in two minutes more the *Black Witch* had forged ahead. Grimes had now seized his rifle and was blazing away at us, but evidently his nerves were shaken, for his furious fusillade did no damage.

McNab now crawled to Mons Meg. He trained the gun on the *Black Witch*, and took careful aim. There was a flash and a roar,

and next moment the round shot had struck the enemy's dinghy, sending the woodwork flying in all directions. We saw Grimes disappear down the companion-way. It looked as if something had struck him. The *Black Witch* drifted wildly on, while we managed to bring up in lee of a long low island. We were now in comparatively calm water.

Mr. Jiggers ran quickly below and brought up his surgical case. He ripped open McNab's trousers, and found that, fortunately, the latter's wound was only a flesh one. He treated it with all the skill of a surgeon, and bound it up.

"You'll be right as a trivet in a week, McNab, my boy," he said cheerily; "and live to have many a lively time yet."

McNab, who all through the operation had never once winced, smiled feebly. I ran below and got him some brandy and water.

As for Jacky, the wound in the fleshy part of his right arm was a clean cut. I assisted Mr. Jiggers to sew it up, and the plucky black-fellow bore the prick of the needle with all the stoicism peculiar to the savage.

It was now late in the day, and as it would have been folly to continue on our course in

these dangerous shoaling seas, we dropped anchor. Within half-an-hour it was dark.

"Great Cæsar! Look there!" suddenly cried the American. "I guess things are getting lively on board that boat."

We looked and beheld a truly weird and terrible sight. The cutter was on fire, and great sheets of flame were rolling up from her decks, causing the hull and white sails to stand out with spectral effect. She burned so quickly and fiercely that in a few minutes the sea was lit up all around for miles, and the glare was reflected in the heavens, flickering ominously like the play of lightning in a tropical thunderstorm. It was an awe-inspiring scene.

"Mr. Jiggers," I cried; "there's that wretched man Grimes aboard. Don't you think we should try and get him off."

"And save him for the scaffold? Well, if you wish it we might try; but I'm afraid we'll arrive much too late. Look, there he is!"

Clearly silhouetted against the shaft of flame we could see the figure of a man standing close by the taffrail of the cutter. As we looked the flames seemed to envelop him in their fiery folds. There was a loud ex-

plosion, and the mast and sails went overboard. The hull flared up spasmodically for a minute or two, and then, as it heeled over and the sea poured in, the flames went out, and intensified darkness once more shrouded the face of the deep.

So perished miserably the last of those who neither revered God nor regarded the lives of His creatures.

The following morning Mr. Jiggers and I were astir at break of day. McNab and Jacky were doing well, and, despite a little stiffness in the injured limbs, there was promise of speedy recovery. We hoisted sail and continued on our course. Next day we were off the mouth of the Norman river. There we overtook the little steamer *Dugong*, which saved us the long and tedious tacking voyage up the tortuous Norman by taking us in tow. It was such a delightful experience to see and speak once more with honest men, and to think we were with friends. All the tragedy of the past seemed like the imaginings of some troubled dream.

The first thing I did on landing was to have McNab and Jacky put under the care of the best surgeon in the township. He

declared that had Mr. Jiggers been a professional surgeon he could not possibly have done more for them. It was only a question of a week or two before their wounds would be healed. I then went to my former acquaintance, the agent of the firm, to whom I had letters of introduction, and with him went to the bank manager. We took a dray down to the place where the *Petrel* had been left in charge of Mr. Jiggers, and, putting the treasure in sacks, loaded up.

I never saw such astonishment depicted on men's faces as on the banker's and the agent's when they saw the pile of gleaming gold and precious gems lying in the bottom of the hold.

In five minutes we were at the telegraph office, and my father had five thousand pounds wired to his credit at Roma. I also despatched a telegram to my people telling them of my safe arrival. Afterwards I learned that my wire was sent none too soon, for, in a couple of days, the banks, which had exercised great forbearance, would have been obliged to close upon our station property, and that, of course, would have meant ruin.

Truly, we had much—very much—for which to be thankful.

* * * * *

The sun shone brightly overhead, and the large buggy drawn by four horses, in which sat my father, Mr. Jiggers, McNab, and myself, was fast approaching our station-buildings. We were now in the great horse paddock, and I could see the corrugated iron roofs of the house and shearing sheds gleaming white over the glaucous-hued gum-trees. I could hardly speak for joy; there was so much of thankfulness in my heart.

And there, riding alongside the buggy, on her bay mare, Highflyer, was my sister Mary. She had ridden into the terminus, some twenty miles, at daybreak to meet us; but still she seemed as fresh and trim as if she had just come out for a ten minutes' canter.

We had done well in Brisbane with the treasure. It had realised what to me was a fabulous sum, and now it was exceedingly unlikely that any of us would ever want for the world's goods in the future. My father, who had come down to the capital to meet me, had insisted on Mr. Jiggers and McNab taking what they themselves declared was

more than they had any reason to expect. Jamie, the Cingalese, had gone back to his own country with a tidy sum in his pockets. With it he could spend the rest of his days in comparative ease.

As for Jacky, he declared that "big-fellow cheque was plenty gammon." All he wanted was "one-fellow pound with which to buy plenty tobac and one-fellow shirt." The Australian black-fellow seldom looks beyond the morrow. Jacky was coming with me to the station, and, it is needless to say, he will never want for the tobacco or shirts if I can help it.

As for Mr. Jiggers and McNab, they were coming to be our honoured guests until such time as they might choose to take their departure. One happy feature of the situation was that the drought was at an end, and now the great dam was full of water. We certainly had suffered severely in the matter of cattle and sheep, but we had now money enough to re-stock the run six times over. As for my doughty friend McNab, who was wonderfully clad in an old bottle-green coat with brass buttons, which he had brought with him from the old country twenty years

before, he was now discoursing learnedly to my father on artesian wells and sundry other things.

As for my dear father, now that the heavy load of care was lifted from his heart, he seemed ten years younger. It was a glorious home-coming.

As for the poor Hadji Seyid Rahimoon, I did not forget his memory in this hour of triumph.

And then when we turned the bend of the drive leading up to the dwelling-house, there were my mother and sister Amy waiting for me on the verandah steps, and my heart went out before me.

THE END

Richard Clay & Sons, Limited, London and Bungay.


Bell & Cockburn's
EMPIRE
REWARDS
W.G.L.