

FICTION

Louis Tracy

His Unknown Wife

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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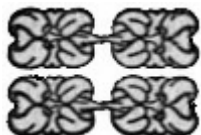
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FICTION

HIS UNKNOWN WIFE

BY
LOUIS TRACY

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THE WINGS OF THE MORNING,
FLOWER OF THE GORSE, Etc.



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CHAPTER I

SHARP WORK

"Prisoner, attention! His excellency the President has permitted Senor Steinbaum to visit you."

The "prisoner" was lying on his back on a plank bed, with his hands tucked beneath his head to obtain some measure of protection from the roll of rough fiber matting which formed a pillow. He did not pay the slightest heed to the half-caste Spanish jailer's gruff command. But the visitor's name stirred him. He turned his head, apparently to make sure that he was not being deceived, and rose on an elbow.

"Hello, Steinbaum!" he said in English. "What's the swindle? Excuse this terseness, but I have to die in an hour, or even less, if a sunbeam hasn't misled me."

"There's no swindle this time, Mr. Maseden," came the guttural answer. "I'm sorry I cannot help you, but I want you to do a good turn for a lady."

"A lady! What lady?"

"I don't know."

"If *you* don't know the lady that is a recommendation in itself. At any rate, what sort of good turn can a man condemned to death do for any lady?"

"She wants to marry you."

Then the man who, by his own showing, was rapidly nearing the close of his earthly career, sprang erect and looked so threatening that his visitor shrank back a pace, while the half-caste jailer's right hand clutched the butt of a revolver.

"Whatever else I may have thought you, I never regarded you as a fool, Steinbaum," he said sternly. "Go away, man! Have you no sense of decency? You and that skunk Enrico Suarez, have done your worst against me and succeeded. When I am dead the 'state' will collar my property--and I am well aware that in this instance the 'state' will be represented by Senor Enrico Suarez and Mr. Fritz Steinbaum. You are about to murder and rob me. Can't you leave me in peace during the last few minutes of my life? Be off, or you may find that in coming here you have acted foolishly for once."

"*Ach, was!*" sighed Steinbaum, nevertheless retreating another step towards the door and the watchful half-caste, who had been warned to shoot straight and quickly if the prisoner attacked the august person of the portly financier. "I tell you the truth, and you will not listen. It is as I say. A lady, a stranger, arrived in Cartagena last night. She heard of you this morning. She asked: 'Is he married, this American?' They said, 'No.' Then she came to me and begged me to use my influence with the President. She said: 'If this American gentleman is to be shot, I am sorry; but it cannot matter to him if he is married, and it will oblige me very much.' I told her--"

The speaker's voice grew husky and he paused to clear his throat. Maseden smiled wanly at the mad absurdity of it, but he was beginning to believe some part of Steinbaum's story.

"And what did you tell her?" he broke in.

"I told her that you were Quixotic in some things, and you might agree."

"But what on earth does the lady gain by it? Suarez and you will take mighty good care she doesn't get away with my ranch and money. Does she want my name?"

"Perhaps."

Maseden took thought a moment.

"It has never been dishonored during my life," he said quietly. "I would need to be assured that it will not be smirched after my death."

Steinbaum was stout. A certain anxiety to succeed in an extraordinary mission, joined to the warm, moist atmosphere of the cell, had induced a copious perspiration.

"*Ach, Gott!*" he purred despairingly. "I know nothing. She told me nothing. She offered to pay me for the trouble--"

"Ah!"

"Why not? I run some risk in acting so. She is American, like yourself. She came to me--"

"American, you say! Is she young?"

"I think so. I have not seen her face. She wears a thick veil."

Romance suddenly spread its fairy wings in that squalid South American prison-house. Maseden's spirit was fired to perform a last act of chivalry, of mercy, it might be, in behalf of some unhappy girl of his own race. The sheer folly of this amazing marriage moved him to grim mirth.

"Very well," he said with a half-hearted laugh. "I'll do it! But, as *you* are mixing the cards, Steinbaum, there must be a joker in the pack somewhere. I'm a pretty quick thinker, you know, and I shall probably see through your proposition before I die, though I am damned if I can size it up right off."

"Mr. Maseden, I assure you, on my--well, you and I never were friends and never will be, but I have told you the real facts this time."

"When is the wedding to take place?"

"Now."

"Great Scott! Did the lady come with you?"

"Yes. She is here with a priest and a notary."

Maseden peered over the jailer's shoulder into the whitewashed passage beyond the half-open door, as though he expected to find a shrouded figure standing there. Steinbaum interpreted his glance.

"She is in the great hall," he said. "The guard is waiting at the end of the corridor."

"Oh, it's to be a military wedding, then?"

"Yes, in a sense."

The younger man appreciated the nice distinction Steinbaum was drawing. The waiting "guard" was the firing-party.

"What time is it?" he demanded, so sharply that the fat man started. For a skilled intriguer Steinbaum was ridiculously nervous.

"A quarter past seven."

"Allow me to put the question as delicately as possible, but--er--is there any extension of time beyond eight o'clock?"

"Senor Suarez would not give one minute."

"He knows about the ceremony, of course?"

"Yes."

"What a skunk the man is! How he must fear me! Such Spartan inflexibility is foreign to the Spanish nature.... By the way, Steinbaum, did you ever, in your innocent youth, hear the opera 'Maritana,' or see a play called 'Don Cesar de Bazan'?"

"Why waste time, Mr. Maseden?" cried the other impatiently. He loathed the environment of that dim cell, with its slightly foetid air, suggestive of yellow jack and dysentery. He was so obviously ill at ease, so fearful lest he should fail in an extraordinary negotiation, that, given less strenuous conditions, the younger man must have read more into the proposal than appeared on the face of it.

But the sands of life were running short for Maseden. Outwardly cool and imperturbably American, his soul was in revolt. For all that he laughed cheerfully.

"Waste time, indeed!" he cried. "I, who have less than forty-five minutes to live!... Now, these are my terms."

"There are no terms," broke in Steinbaum harshly. "You oblige the lady, or you don't. Please yourself."

"Ah, that's better. That sounds more like the hound that I know you are. Yet, I insist on my terms."

"I was dragged out of bed in my pajamas at four o'clock this morning, and not even permitted to dress. They hardly waited to get me a pair of boots. I haven't a red cent in my pocket, which is a figure of speech, because I haven't a

pocket. If you think you can borrow from an old comedy just so much of the situation as suits your purpose and disregard the costume and appearance of the star actor, you're mistaken.

"I gather from your furious grunts that you don't understand me. Very well. I'll come straight to the point. If I am to marry the lady of your choice, I demand the right to appear at the altar decently clad and with enough good money in my pocket to stand a few bottles of wine to the gallant blackguards who are about to shoot me.

"Those are my terms, Steinbaum. Take them or leave them! But don't accuse *me* of wasting time. It's up to you to arrange the stage setting. I might have insisted on a shave, but I won't.

"The lady will not expect me to kiss her, I suppose?... By gad, she must be a person of strange tastes. Why any young woman should want to marry a man because he's going to be shot half an hour later is one of those mysteries which the feminine mind may comprehend, but it's beyond me. However, that's her affair, not mine.

"Now, Steinbaum, hurry up! *I'm* talking for the mere sake of hearing my own voice, but *you're* keeping the lady in suspense."

Maseden had indeed correctly described his own attitude. He was wholly indifferent to the personal element in the bizarre compact proposed by his arch-enemy, on whom he had turned his back while speaking.

The sight of a bloated, angry, perplexed face of the coarsest type was mentally disturbing. He elected rather to watch the shaft of sunlight coming through the long, narrow slit in a four-foot wall which served as a window. He knew that his cell was on the northeast side of the prison, and the traveling sunbeam had already marked the flight of time with sufficient accuracy since he was thrust into that dismal place.

He had been sentenced to death just one hour and a half after being arrested. The evidence, like the trial, was a travesty of justice. His excellency Don Enrico Suarez, elected president of the Republic of San Juan at midnight, and confirmed in power by the bullet which removed his predecessor, wreaked vengeance speedily on the American intruder who had helped to mar his schemes twice in two years.

There would be a diplomatic squabble about the judicial murder of a citizen of the United States, of course. The American and British consuls would protest, and both countries would dispatch warships to Cartagena, which was at once the capital of the republic and its chief port. But of what avail such wrangling after one was dead?

Dead, at twenty-eight, when the world was bright and fortune was apparently smiling! Dead, because he supported dear old Domenico Valdes, the murdered president, and one of the few honest, God-fearing men in a rotten little South American state which would have been swept out of putrid existence long ago were it not for the policy of the Monroe Doctrine. Maseden knew that no power on earth would save him now, because Suarez and he could not exist in the same community, and Suarez was supreme in the Republic of San Juan--supreme, that is, until some other cut-throat climbed to the presidency over a rival's corpse. Steinbaum, a crafty person who played the game of high politics with some ability and seldom failed to advance his own and his allies' interests, had backed Suarez financially and would become his jackal for the time.

It was rather surprising that such a master-plotter should have admitted a fore-knowledge of Maseden's fate, and this element in the situation suddenly dawned on Maseden himself. The arrest, the trial, and the condemnation were alike kept secret.

The American consul, a Portuguese merchant, possessed enough backbone to demand the postponement of the execution until he had communicated with Washington, and in this action he would have been supported by the representative of Great Britain. But he would know nothing about the judicial crime until it was an accomplished fact.

How, then, had some enterprising young lady--

"By the way, Steinbaum, you might explain--"

Maseden swung on his heel; the matrimonial agent had vanished.

"The senor signified that he would return soon," said the jailer.

"He's gone for the clothes!" mused Maseden, his thoughts promptly reverting to the fantastic marriage project. "The sly old fox is devilish anxious to get me spliced before my number goes up. I wonder why? And where in the world will he raise a suitable rig? Hang it all, I wish I had a little longer to live. This business becomes more interesting every minute!"

Though he was sure the attempt would be hopeless, Maseden resolved to make one last effort. He looked the half-

caste squarely in the face.

"Get me out of this before Senor Steinbaum comes back and I'll give you twenty thousand dollars gold," he said quietly.

The man met his glance without flinching.

"I could not help you, senor, if you paid me a million dollars," he answered. "It is your life or mine--those are my orders. And it is useless to think of attacking me," he added, because for one moment black despair scowled menacingly from Maseden's strong features. "There are ten men at each door of the corridor ready to shoot you at the least sign of any attempt to escape."

"The preparations for the wedding are fairly complete, then?"

Maseden spoke Spanish fluently, and the half-caste grinned at the joke.

"It will soon be over, senor," was all he could find to say.

The condemned man knew that the fellow was not to be bribed at the cost of his own life. He turned again and grew interested once more in the shaft of sunlight. How quickly it moved! He calculated that before it reached a certain crack in the masonry he would have passed into "yesterday's seven thousand years."

It was not a pleasing conceit. In self-defense, as it were, he bent his wits on to the proposed marriage. He was half inclined to regret the chivalrous impulse which spurred him to agree to it. Yet there was a spice of humor in the fact that a man who was regarded as an inveterate woman-hater by the dusky young ladies of San Juan should be led to the altar literally at the eleventh hour.

What manner of woman could this unknown bride be? What motive swayed her? Perhaps it was better not to ask. But if the knot were tied by a priest, a notary and a European financier, it was evidently intended to be a valid undertaking.

And why was Steinbaum so interested? Was the would-be Mrs. Maseden so well endowed with this world's goods that she spared no expense in attaining her object?

The most contrary emotions surged through Maseden's conscience. He was by turns curious, sympathetic, suspicious, absurdly eager to learn more.

In this last mood he resolved to have one straight look at the lady. Surely a man was entitled to see his bride's face! Yes, come what might, he would insist that she must raise the "thick, white veil" which had hitherto screened her features from Steinbaum's goggle eyes--supposing, that is, the rascal had told the truth.

A hinge creaked, and the half-caste announced that the senor was returning. In a few seconds Steinbaum panted in. He was carrying a gorgeous uniform of sky-blue cloth with facings of silver braid. As he dumped a pair of brilliant patent-leather top-boots on the stone floor a glittering helmet fell from among the clothes and rolled to Maseden's feet.

"See here, Steinbaum, what tomfoolery is this?" cried the American wrathfully.

"It is your tomfoolery, not mine," came the heated retort. "Where am I to get a suit of clothes for you? These will fit, I think. I borrowed them from the President's *aide-de-camp*, Captain Fernando Gomez."

Maseden knew Captain Gomez--a South American dandy of the first water. For the moment the ludicrous side of the business banished all other considerations.

"What!" he laughed, "am I to be married in the giddy rig of the biggest ass in Cartagena? Well, I give in. As I'm to be shot at eight, Fernando's fine feathers will be in a sad mess, because I'll not take 'em off again unless I'm undressed forcibly. Good Lord! Does my unknown bride realize what sort of rare bird she's going to espouse?..."

"Yes, yes, we're losing time. Chuck over those pants. Gomez is not quite my height, but his togs may be O. K."

As a matter of fact, Philip Alexander Maseden looked a very fine figure of a man when arrayed in all the glory of the presidential *aide-de-camp*. The only trouble was that the elegant top-boots were confoundedly tight, being, in truth, a size too small for their vain owner; but the bridegroom-elect put up with this inconvenience.

He had not far to walk. A few steps to the right lay the "great hall" in which, according to Steinbaum, the ceremony would take place. Very little farther to the left was the enclosed *patio*, or courtyard, in which he would be shot within thirty minutes!

"I'm dashed if I feel a bit like dying," he said, as he strode by Steinbaum's side along the outer corridor. "If the time was

about fourteen hours later I might imagine I was going to a fancy dress ball, though I wouldn't be able to dance much in these confounded boots."

The stout financier made no reply. He was singularly ill at ease. Any critical onlooker, not cognizant of the facts, would take him and not Maseden to be the man condemned to death.

A heavy, iron-clamped door leading to the row of cells was wide open. Some soldiers, lined up close to it in the hall, were craning their necks to catch a first glimpse of the Americano who was about to marry and die in the same breath, so to speak.

Beyond, near a table in the center of the spacious chamber, stood a group that arrested the eye--a Spanish priest, in vestments of semi-state; an olive-skinned man whom Maseden recognized as a legal practitioner of fair repute in a community where chicanery flourished, and a slenderly-built woman of middle height, though taller than either of her companions, whose stylish coat and skirt of thin, gray cloth, and smart shoes tied with little bows of black ribbon, were strangely incongruous with the black lace mantilla which draped her head and shoulders, and held in position a double veil tied firmly beneath her chin.

Maseden was so astonished at discovering the identity of the lawyer that he momentarily lost interest in the mysterious woman who would soon be his wife.

"Senor Porilla!" he cried. "I am glad you are here. Do you understand--"

"It is forbidden!" hissed Steinbaum. "One more word, and back you go to your cell!"

"Oh, is that part of the compact?" said Maseden cheerfully. "Well, well! We must not make matters unpleasant for a lady--must we, Steinbaum?... Now, madam, raise your veil, and let me at least have the honor of knowing what sort of person the future Mrs. Philip Alexander Maseden will be!"

The only answer was a stifled but quite audible sob, and Maseden had an impression that the lady might put a summary stop to the proceedings by fainting.

Steinbaum, however, had recovered his nerve in the stronger light of the great hall, especially since the soldiers had gathered around.

"The senora declines to unveil," he growled in Spanish. "Begin, *padre!* There is not a moment to spare."

The ecclesiastic opened a book and plunged forthwith into the marriage service. Maseden was aware that the shrinking figure by his side was trembling violently, and a wave of pity for her surged through his heart.

"Cheer up!" he whispered. "It's only a matter of form, anyhow; and I'm glad to be able to help you. I don't care a red cent what your motive is."

Steinbaum gurgled ominously, and the bridegroom said no more. Clearly, though he had given no bond, he was imperiling the fulfillment of this unhappy girl's desire if he talked.

But he kept his wits alert. It was evident that the lady understood little Latin and no Spanish. She was quite unable to follow the sonorous phrases. When the portly priest, who seemed to have small relish for the part he was compelled to play in this amazing marriage, asked Maseden if he would have "this woman" to be his wedded wife, the bridegroom answered "Yes," in Spanish; but a similar question addressed to the bride found her dumb.

"Say 'I will,'" murmured Maseden in her ear.

She turned slightly. At that instant their heads came close together, and the long, unfamiliar fragrance of a woman's well-tended hair reached him.

It had an extraordinary effect. Memories of his mother, of a simple old-world dwelling in a Vermont village, rushed in on him with an almost overwhelming force.

His superb self-possession nearly gave way. He felt that he might break down under the intolerable strain.

He feared, during a few seconds of anguish, that he might reveal his heartache to these men of inferior races.

Then the pride of a regal birthright came to his aid, and a species of most vivid and poignant consciousness succeeded. He heard Steinbaum's gruff sponsorship for the bride, obeyed smilingly when told to take her right hand in his right hand, and looked with singular intentness at the long, straight, artistic fingers which he held.

It was a beautifully modeled hand, well kept, but cold and tremulous. The queer conceit leaped up in him that though

he might never look on the face of his wedded wife he would know that hand if they met again only at the Judgment Seat!

Then, in a dazed way which impressed the onlookers as the height of American nonchalance, he said, after the celebrant: "I, Philip Alexander, take thee, Madeleine--"

Madeleine! So that was the Christian name of the woman whom he was taking "till death do us part," for the Spanish liturgy provided almost an exact equivalent of the English service. Madeleine! He had never even known any girl of the name. Somehow, he liked it. Outwardly so calm, he was inwardly aflame with a new longing for life and all that life meant.

His jumbled wits were peremptorily recalled to the demands of the moment by the would-be bride's failure to repeat her share of the marriage vow, when it became her turn to take Maseden's hand.

The priest nodded, and Steinbaum, now carrying himself with a certain truculence, essayed to lead the girl's faltering tongue through the Spanish phrases.

"The lady must understand what she is saying," broke in Maseden, dominating the gruff man by sheer force of will.

"Now," he said, and his voice grew gentle as he turned to the woman he had just promised "to have and to hold," "to love and cherish," and thereto plighted his troth--"when the priest pauses, I will translate, and you must speak the words aloud."

He listened, in a waking trance, to the clear, well-bred accents of a woman of his own people uttering the binding pledge of matrimony. The Spanish sentences recalled the English version, which he supplied with singular accuracy, seeing that he had only attended two weddings previously, and those during his boyhood.

"Madeleine"--he would learn her surname when he signed the register--was obviously hard pressed to retain her senses till the end. She was sobbing pitifully, and the knowledge that her distress was induced by the fate immediately in store for the man whom she was espousing "by God's holy ordinance" tested Maseden's steel nerve to the very limit of endurance.

But he held on with that tenacious chivalry which is the finest characteristic of his class, and even smiled at Steinbaum's fumbling in a waistcoat pocket for a ring. He was putting the ring on the fourth finger of his wife's left hand and pronouncing the last formula of the ceremony, when he caught an agonized whisper:

"Please, *please*, forgive me! I cannot help myself. I am--more than sorry for you. I shall pray for you--and think of you--always!"

And it was in that instant, while breathlessly catching each syllable of a broken plea for sympathy and gage of lasting remembrance, that Maseden's bemused faculties saw a means of saving his life.

Though a forlorn hope, at the best, with a hundred chances of failure against one of success, he would seize that hundredth chance. What matter if he were shot at quarter to eight instead of at eight o'clock? Steel before, he was unemotional as marble now, a man of stone with a brain of diamond clarity.

If events followed their normal and reasonable course, he would be free of these accursed walls within a few minutes. Come what might, he would strike a lusty blow for freedom. If he failed, and sank into eternal night, one or more of the half-caste hirelings now so ready to fulfill the murderous schemes of President Suarez and his henchman Steinbaum would escort an American's spirit to the realm beyond the shadows.

He did not stop to think that an unknown woman's strange whim should have made possible that which, without her presence in his prison-house, was absolutely impossible; still less did he trouble as to the future, immediate or remote. His mind's eye was fixed on a sunbeam creeping stealthily towards a crack in the masonry of that detestable cell.

He meant to cheat that sunbeam, one way or the other!

CHAPTER II

TIME *VERSUS* ETERNITY

Henceforth Maseden concentrated all his faculties on the successful performance of the trick which might win him clear of the castle of San Juan. Nothing in the wide world mattered less to him than that the newly-made bride should stoop to sign the register after he had done so, or that by turning to address Steinbaum he was deliberately throwing away the opportunity thus afforded of learning her surname.

When an avowed enemy first broached the subject of this extraordinary marriage, he had made a bitter jest on the use in real life of a well-worn histrionic situation. And now, perforce, he had become an actor of rare merit. Each look, each word must lead up to the grand climax. The penalty of failure was not the boredom of an audience, but death; such a "curtain" would sharpen the dullest wits, and Maseden, if wholly innocent of stage experience hitherto, was not dull.

He scored his first point while the bride was signing her name. Beaming on Steinbaum, he said cheerfully:

"I bargained for money, Shylock. You've had your pound of flesh. Where are my ducats?"

Steinbaum produced a ten-dollar bill. He even forced a smile. Seemingly he was anxious to keep the prisoner in this devil-may-care mood.

"Not half enough!" cried Maseden, and he broke into Spanish.

"Hi, my gallant *caballeros*, isn't there another squad in the *patio*?"

"*Si, senor!*" cried several voices.

Even these crude, half-caste soldiers revealed the Latin sense of the dramatic and picturesque. They appreciated the American's cavalier air. That morning's doings would lose naught in the telling when the story spread through the cafes of Cartagena.

And what a story they would have to tell! Little could they guess its scope, its sensations yet to come.

"Very well, then! At least another ten-spot, Steinbaum... But, mind you, sergeant, not a drop till the volley is fired! You might miss, you know!"

The man whom he addressed as sergeant eyed the two notes with an amiable grin.

"You will feel nothing, senor--we promise you that," he said wondering, perhaps, why the prisoner did not bestow the largesse at once.

"Excellent! Lead on, friend! I want my last few minutes to myself."

"There are some documents to complete," put in Steinbaum hastily, with a quick hand-flourish to the notary.

Senor Porilla spread two legal-looking parchments on the table.

"These are conveyances of your property to your wife," he explained. "I am instructed to see that everything is done in accordance with the laws of the Republic. By these deeds you--"

"Hand over everything to the lady. Is *that* it? I understand. Where do I sign? Here? Thank you. And here? Nothing else ... Mrs. Maseden, I have given you my name and all my worldly goods. Pray make good use of both endowments.... Now, I demand to be left alone."

Without so much as a farewell glance at his wife, who, to keep herself from falling, was leaning on the table, he strode off in the direction of the corridor into which his cell opened. It was a vital part of his scheme that he should enter first.

The jailer would have left the door open. Maseden was determined that it should be closed.

Captain Gomez's tight boots pinched his toes cruelly as he walked, but he recked little of that minor inconvenience at the moment. In four or five rapid paces he reached the doorway and passed through it. There he turned with his right hand on the door itself, and his left hand, carrying the helmet, raised in a parting salute. He smiled most affably, and, of set purpose, spoke in Spanish.

"Good-by, senora!" he said. "Farewell, gentlemen! I shall remember this pleasant gathering as long as I live!"

The half-caste was at his prisoner's side, and enjoying the episode thoroughly. He would swill his share of the wine, of course, and the hour of the *siesta* should find him comfortably drunk.

Maseden flourished his left hand again, and the plumed helmet temporarily obscured the jailer's vision. The door swung on its hinges. The lock clashed. In the same instant the American's clenched right fist landed on the half-caste's jaw, finding with scientific accuracy the cluster of nerves which the world of pugilism terms "the point."

It was a perfect blow, clean and hard, delivered by an athlete. Out of the tail of his eye, Maseden had seen *where* to hit. He knew *how* to hit already, and put every ounce of his weight, each shred of his boxing knowledge, into that one punch.

It had to be a complete "knock-out," or his plan miscarried. A cry, a struggle, a revolver shot, would have brought a score of assailants thundering on each door.

As it happened, however, the hapless Spaniard collapsed as though he were struck dead by heart-failure or apoplexy. Maseden caught the inert body before it reached the stone floor, and carried it swiftly into the cell. Improvising a gag out of his discarded pajamas, he bound the half-caste's hands and feet together behind his back, utilizing the man's own leather belt for the purpose.

These things were done swiftly but without nervous haste. The very essence of the plan was the conviction that no forward step should be taken without making sure that the prior moves were complete and thorough.

He had detached from the jailer's belt a chain carrying a bunch of keys and the revolver in its leather holster. Before slipping this latter over the belt he was wearing, he examined it. Though somewhat old-fashioned, it seemed to be thoroughly serviceable, and held six cartridges with bull-nose bullets of heavy caliber.

Then he searched the unconscious man's pockets for cigarettes and matches. Here he encountered an unforeseen delay. Every Spaniard carries either cigarettes or the materials for rolling them, but this fellow seemed to be an exception.

Now, a cigarette formed an almost indispensable item in Maseden's scheme; but time was even more precious, and he was about to abandon the search when he noticed that one button-hole of the jailer's tunic was far more frayed than any other. He tore open the coat, and found both cigarettes and matches in an inside breast pocket.

Not one man in a million, in similar conditions, would have been cool-headed enough to observe such a trivial detail as a frayed button-hole.

Next he examined the bunch of keys, and came to the conclusion, rightly as it transpired, that the same large key fitted the locks of both doors; which, however, were heavily barred by external draw-bolts.

Jamming on the helmet--like the glittering boots, it was a size too small--he lowered the chin-strap, lighted a cigarette, and limped quickly along the corridor towards the *patio*, which filled a square equal in size to the area of the great hall.

As he left the cell he heard the half-caste's breathing become more regular. The man would soon recover his senses. Would the gag prove effective? Maseden dared not wait to make sure.

He could have induced a more lasting silence, but even life itself might be purchased too dearly; he took the risk of a speedy uproar.

Unlocking the door, with a confident rattling of keys and chain, he shouted:

"Hi, guards! Draw the bolts!"

The soldiers in the *patio* were ready for some such summons, though the hour was slightly in advance of the time fixed for the American's execution, so the order was obeyed with alacrity. Maseden appeared in the doorway, taking care that the door did not swing far back. He blew a great cloud of smoke; growled over his shoulder: "I'll return in five minutes," pulled the door to, and swaggered past the waiting troops, not forgetting to salute as they shouldered their rifles.

A long time afterwards he learned that he actually owed his escape to Captain Ferdinando Gomez's tight boots. One of the men was observant, and inclined to be skeptical.

"Who's that?" he said. "Not el Capitan Ferdinando, I'll swear!"

"Idiot!" grinned another. "Look at his limp! He pinches his toes till he can hardly walk."

At the gateway, or porch, leading to the *patio*, stood a sentry, who, luckily, was gazing seaward. Maseden conserved the cigarette for another volume of smoke, and pulled down the chin-strap determinedly.

He got beyond this dragon without any difficulty. Indeed, the man was taken by surprise, and only noticed him when he had gone by.

Maseden was now in a graveled square. Behind him, and to the left, stood the time-darkened walls of the old Spanish fortress. In front, broken only by a line of trees and the squat humps of six antiquated cannons, sparkled the blue expanse of the Pacific. To the right lay the port, the new town, and such measure of freedom as he might win.

He had yet to pass the main entrance to the castle, where, in addition to a sentry, would surely be stationed some sharp-eyed servants, each and all on the *qui vive* at that early hour, and stirred to unusual activity by the morning's news, because Cartagena regarded a change of president by means of a revolution as a sort of movable holiday.

At this crisis, luck befriended him. In the shade of the trees opposite the main gate was an orderly holding a horse. The animal's trappings showed that it did not belong to a private soldier, and the fact that the man stood to attention as Maseden approached seemed to indicate that which was actually the fact--the charger belonged to none other than the president's *aide-de-camp*.

Fortune seldom bestows her favors in what the casino-jargon of Monte Carlo describes as "intermittent sequences," or, in plain language, alternate *coups* of red and black, successive strokes of good and bad luck. The fickle goddess rather inclines to runs on a color. Having brought Maseden to the very brink of the grave, she had decided to help him now.

As it turned out, Gomez's soldier servant had been injured during the overnight disturbance, and the deputy was a newcomer.

He saluted, held bridle and stirrup while Maseden mounted, and strolled casually across the square to inquire whether he ought to wait or go back to his quarters. He succeeded in puzzling the very sergeant who was mentally contriving the best means of securing the lion's, or sergeant's, share of twenty dollars' worth of wine.

"Captain Gomez has not gone out," snapped the calculator. "Get out of the way! Don't stand there like the ears of a donkey! I have occupation. The Senor Steinbaum is putting a lady into his car, and she is very ill."

So the trooper was unceremoniously brushed aside. A little later he might have reminded the sergeant of the folly of counting chickens before the eggs are hatched.

Maseden was a first-rate horseman, but, owing to the discomfort of excruciatingly tight boots and a wobbly helmet, he did not enjoy the first half mile of a fast gallop down the winding road which he was obliged to follow before he could strike into the country. Beneath, to the left, and on a plateau in front, were respectively the ancient and modern sections of Cartagena. But, having succeeded thus far, he had made up his mind inflexibly as to the course he would pursue.

He meant to reach his own ranch, twelve miles inland, within the hour. He reckoned that, in the easy-going South American way, it would not be occupied as yet by an armed guard. An officer had rummaged among his papers that morning, but came away with the others.

In any event, in that direction, and there only, lay any real chance of ultimate safety.

On his estate there were two men at least in whom he might place trust; and even if he could not enter the house, one of them might obtain for him the clothes and money without which he had not the remotest prospect of getting away alive from the Republic of San Juan.

He had pocketed Steinbaum's twenty dollars in order to hire a horse, but the unwitting hospitality of Captain Gomez had provided him with a better animal than was to be picked up at the nearest *posada*. Indeed, with the exception of an automobile, a luxury that was few and far between in Cartagena, he could not have secured a swifter or more reliable conveyance than this very steed, which would cover the twelve miles in less than an hour, and had also saved him a quarter of an hour's running walk, an experience savoring of Chinese torture when undertaken in tight boots.

The notion of possible pursuit by a party of soldiers in a car had barely occurred to him when he heard the rapid panting of an automobile in the rear.

He slackened pace, took a shorter grip of the reins, and loosened the revolver in its case. Flight was ridiculous, unless he made across country; a last resource, involving a fatal loss of time.

He took nothing for granted. Steinbaum was one of the half-dozen car-owners in Cartagena, and this was surely he, escorting Senor Porilla and the lady back to the town.

They might pass him without recognition. If they didn't, he would shoot Steinbaum and put a bullet into a tire. There

would be no half measures. Suarez and his ally had declared war on him to the death, and war they would have without stint or quarter.

It was a ticklish moment when the fast-running car drew near. Maseden affected to bend over and examine the horse's fore action, as though he suspected lameness or a loose shoe. He gave one swift underlook into the limousine as it sped by and fancied he saw Porilla, seated with his back to the engine, bending forward.

That was all. The car raced on and was speedily lost in a dust-cloud.

So far, so good. He was dodging peril in the hairbreadth fashion popularly ascribed to warriors on a stricken field. Yet his mount was hardly in a canter again before he was plunged without warning into the most ticklish dilemma of all.

Steinbaum's car had just turned to the left, where the road bifurcated a few hundred yards ahead, when another car came flying down the other road--that which the fugitive himself must take for nearly half a mile; and this second menace harbored no less a personage than Don Enrico Suarez, president of the Republic of San Juan!

It was an open car, too, and the president was seated alone in the tonneau.

Maseden jumped to the instant conclusion that his enemy was hurrying to witness his execution, probably to jeer at him for having ventured to cross the predestined path of a conqueror. But, even though he passed, Suarez would know that the gaily bedizened horseman was not his glittering *aide-de-camp*.

To permit the president to reach the Castle meant the beginning of an irresistible pursuit within five minutes. However, that consideration did not bother the Vermonter if for no better reason than that he was determined it should not come into play.

He smiled thoughtfully, adjusted the helmet once more, and voiced his sentiments aloud.

"Good!" he said. "This time, Enrico, you and I square accounts!"

Pulling up, he took the middle of the road, wheeling the horse "half left," and holding up his right hand. The chauffeur saw him, slackened speed, and finally halted within a distance of a few feet. From first to last, the man regarded the newcomer as being Captain Gomez. The wind-screen was up, and the roads were dust-laden, so he could not see with absolute accuracy. Moreover, events followed each other so rapidly that he was given no chance to correct an erroneous first impression.

The car being stopped, Maseden moved on, passing by the left. Drawing the revolver, he fired at the front right-hand tire at such close range that it was impossible to miss. The reports of the weapon and the bursting tube were simultaneous.

The next shot would have lodged in the president's heart if the startled horse had not swerved. As it was, quite a nasty hole was torn in the presidential anatomy; Suarez, himself fumbling for an automatic pistol, sank back in the tonneau a severely if not mortally wounded man.

For one fateful instant, the eyes of the two had met and clashed, and recognition was mutual.

A third bullet plowed through the back right-hand tire, and Maseden galloped off, the horse being only too eager to get away from the racket.

The American did not look behind to ascertain what the chauffeur was doing. It really did not matter a great deal. Speed and direction were the paramount conditions during the next fifty minutes. The die was cast now beyond all hope of revocation. He was at war with the Republic, and, although he had rendered its citizens a valuable service in shooting their rascally president, they might not regard the incident in its proper light until a period far too late to benefit the philanthropist.

As a matter of fact, interesting historically and otherwise, the chauffeur was convinced that Captain Ferdinando Gomez had assassinated his master, and said so, with many oaths, when he summoned assistance from a neighboring house. It may also be placed on record here that about the same time the gallant *aide-de-camp* had come to suspect that his beautiful uniform, if not returned promptly, might be sadly smirched by a score of bullets, with accessories; and was kicking up a fearful row because no one could get at the jailer and rescue that gala costume before the prisoner was led forth to execution.

In a word, the Republic's presidential affairs were greatly mixed, and remained in inextricable confusion until long after Maseden drew rein on a blown horse at the gate of his own *estancia*.

The ranch, known as Los Andes, and one of the finest estates in San Juan, provided the original bone of contention

between Maseden and Suarez. It had been built up, during thirty lazy years, by a distant cousin of Suarez, an elderly bachelor, who grew coffee and maize, and reared stock in a haphazard way.

Seven years earlier he had met the young American in New York, took a liking to him, and offered to employ him as overseer while teaching him the business. The pupil soon became the instructor. Scientific methods were introduced, direct markets were tapped, and the produce of the estate was quadrupled within a few seasons.

Then the older man died, and left the ranch and its contents to his assistant. There was not much money--the capital was sunk in stock and improvement--so a number of free and independent burghers of Cartagena received smaller amounts than they expected.

Suarez was one of the beneficiaries, seven in all. Six took the situation calmly. He alone was irreconcilable, and blustered about legal proceedings, only desisting when persuaded that he had no case, even for the venal courts of San Juan.

And now, on that sultry January morning, the lawful owner of the Los Andes ranch, while awaiting the appearance of a peon, who, he knew, was tending some cattle in a byre behind the lodge, was wondering whether or not he might urge a tired charger into a final canter to the door of his own house without bringing about a pitched battle when he arrived there.

At last came Pedro--every second man in South America is named after the chief of the Apostles--a brown, lithe, Indian-looking person. But he was Spanish enough in the expression of his emotions.

"By the eleven thousand virgins!" he cried joyously, after a first stare of incredulity, for the eyes rolled in his head at sight of Maseden's garb, "it is not true, then, master, that you are a prisoner!"

"Who says that I am?" inquired Maseden.

"They say it up there at the *estancia*, *senor*," and Pedro jerked a thumb towards an avenue of mahogany trees.

"They say? Who say?"

Pedro was scared, but Maseden had taught his helpers to answer truthfully.

"Old Lopez said it, *senor*. He told me the president's men had charged him to touch nothing till they returned."

Maseden's heart throbbed more furiously at that reply than at aught which had befallen him during the few pregnant hours since dawn.

"Those rascals have gone, then?" he said, so placidly that the peon was bewildered.

"*Si, senor*: Did they not go with you?"

"Yes. I was not sure of all... Close and lock the gate, Pedro. Leave other things. Saddle your mustang and mount guard at the bend in the avenue, from which you can watch the Cartagena road. If you see horses, or an automobile, coming this way, ride to the house and tell me."

"*Si, senor*."

Pedro hurried off. Maseden rode on at the best pace the spent horse was capable of. He might lose a potential fortune--though the shooting of Suarez should remove the worst of the hostile influences arrayed against him--but surely he could now save his life.

He had never realized how dear life was at twenty-eight until that morning. Hitherto he had given no thought to it. Now he wanted to live till he was eighty!

CHAPTER III

ADIOS, SAN JUAN

Suarez was not dead. He was not even dangerously wounded. A two-ounce bullet had dealt an upper left rib a blow like the kick of a horse, but at such an angle that the bone deflected its flight. Consequently, a fractured sternal costa, loss of blood, and a most painful flesh wound formed for Suarez the collective outcome of Maseden's disturbed aiming.

In effect, the president regained consciousness about the time Captain Gomez had succeeded in persuading several members of the new government that it was not he, but an escaped prisoner, who had so grievously maltreated the head of the Republic.

A doctor announced that Senor Suarez must be given complete rest and freedom from public affairs during the ensuing week or ten days. Even the wrathful president himself, after making known the true identity of his assailant, felt that he had no option other than placing the affairs of the nation temporarily in the hands of his associates.

He made the best of an awkward situation, therefore, and issued a vainglorious decree announcing the change.

Now, even San Juan could not provide a second revolution within twelve hours. States, like human beings, can experience a surfeit of excitement; moreover, the next gang of office-seekers had not yet emerged from the welter of parties. Sometimes, too, in South America, a disabled president is preferable to an active one, because the heads of departments can do a little pilfering on their own account.

So San Juan became virtuously indignant over the "attempted assassination" of that renowned "liberator," Enrico Suarez. A hue and cry was raised for the scoundrelly American, several supporters of real law and order in the State were arrested, and cavalry and police rode forth on Maseden's trail.

This planning and scheming and explaining consumed valuable time, however. It was high noon when a party of horsemen, headed by a well-informed guide, in the person of the ranch superintendent, "old" Lopez, tore along the avenue of mahogany trees at Los Andes.

Lopez, a wizened, shrewd, and sufficiently trustworthy half-breed, was not betraying his employer. He was merely carrying out explicit instructions. Maseden had no desire to place his faithful servants in the power of the Cartagena harpies. He was literally fighting for his life now. He meant to meet violence with greater violence, guile with deeper guile.

When a Covenanter buckles on the sword, let professional swashbucklers take heed; when an honest man plots, let rogues beware. A clear-headed American, armed against oppression, can be at once a most lusty warrior and the astutest of strategists.

"It is the unexpected that happens," said Disraeli in one of his happiest epigrams. A few strenuous hours spent in the Republic of San Juan in Maseden's plight would have yielded the cynic material for a dozen like quips, if he had survived the experience.

When Maseden reached the *estancia* he was received by Lopez with even greater amazement than was displayed by the peon. Being a privileged person, the old fellow expressed himself in absolutely untranslatable language. After a lurid preamble, he went on:

"But, thanks to the heavenly ones, I see you again, senor, safe and sound, though in a strange livery. Is it true, then, that the president is dead?"

"Yes. Both of them, I believe."

Maseden laughed wearily. He was tired, and the day was only beginning. He knew, of course, that Lopez meant Valdez, having probably, as yet, not so much as heard of Suarez as chief of the Republic.

"I'll explain matters," he said. "Stand by to catch me if I fall when I dismount. The devil take all dudes and their vanities! These boots have nearly killed me."

In a minute the offending jack boots were off and flung into the veranda, the helmet after them. The horse was given over to the care of a peon, and Maseden went to his bedroom.

A glance at a big safe showed that the letter lock had defied curiosity, and no serious attempt had been made to force it.

He saw that the drawers in a bureau in the adjoining room had been ransacked hastily. Probably, the new president's emissaries were instructed to look for a list of "conspirators"--of well-affected citizens, that is--who meant to support the honorable *regime* of Valdez.

"Now, listen while I talk," said Maseden, tearing open the tight-fitting blue coat. "I can put faith in you, I suppose?"

"Senor--"

"Yes, I take it for granted. Besides, if you stick to me you may come out on top yourself. Valdez is dead. He was murdered last night, and Enrico Suarez stepped into his shoes.... Oh, I know Enrico's real name, but I haven't a second to spare. I was sentenced to death early this morning, and married about an hour ago, just before being taken out to be shot.... Well, I got away; how--is of no concern to you. In fact, it is better that you shouldn't know.

"A lady will come into possession here. She will call herself the Senora Maseden. Senor Porilla will introduce her. She and the lawyer are playing some game to suit Suarez and Steinbaum, the German consul at Cartagena. My escape may bother them a bit, but I cannot guess just how things will work out. What orders did Enrico's lieutenant give you?"

The foreman's wits were rather mixed by his master's extraordinary budget of news, but he answered readily.

"He told me, senor, if I valued my life, to see that nothing was disturbed in the *estancia* till the president came or sent a representative."

"I thought so. That gives me a sporting chance."

Maseden had changed rapidly into his own clothes, an ordinary riding costume suitable to a tropical climate. He opened the safe, stuffed some papers into his pockets, also a quantity of gold, silver, and notes.

Then he wrote a letter, and filled in a check. Having addressed and stamped the envelope, he handed it to his assistant.

"In five minutes or less, you will be riding at a steady gallop towards Cartagena," he said. "If possible, deliver that letter yourself to Senor Peguero, the American consul. By 'possible' I mean if you are not held up by soldiers or police on the way. Otherwise, keep it concealed, and post it when the opportunity serves."

Lopez knew the pleasant methods of his fellow-republicans.

"They may search me, senor," he said.

"Not if you do as I tell you. Curse me fluently enough, and they'll look on you as their best friend."

"Senor!" protested the old man.

"Yes. I mean it. Call me all the names you can lay tongue to. When I leave this room I'll follow you, revolver in hand. Be careful to scowl and act unwillingly. I want some food and a couple of bottles of wine, also a leather bottle full of water and a tin cup. Saddle the *Cid*, and see that three or four good measures of corn are put in the saddle-bags with the other things.

"When I vanish rush to the stables, pick out a good mustang, and be in Cartagena within the hour. If not interfered with, take the letter to Senor Peguero. Don't wait for an answer, but hurry at top speed to the Castle, where you must tell some one that I came back to the ranch and ordered you about at the muzzle of a revolver.

"Lead the soldiers straight here. If Captain Gomez is in command, assure him that you rescued his uniform, and he'll be your friend forever. Should you meet them on the way, turn back with them. You understand? You're for the president and against me."

Lopez smiled till his face was a mass of wrinkles. He was beginning to see through the scheme, and was Spaniard enough to appreciate the leaven of intrigue.

"But when and where shall I find you, senor, if you are taking a long journey?" he said, still grinning.

"Not a mile away, if all goes well. Soon after dusk come to the Grove of the Doves at sunset. I'll turn up. If you are delayed, and it is dark, hoot like an owl, and I'll answer. If you don't come at all I'll know it's too dangerous, and will be there again at dawn, at noon, and at sunset to-morrow. Pick up some news in Cartagena. You will be told, of course, that I have shot Suarez. Be careful to show your horrified surprise, and ask if the dear man is really dead. If he is, try and find out who is in power. Of course there's a bare chance that Porilla may be made president, in which case I might be given a fair trial when an American man-of-war is anchored in the roads.... Oh, by the way, you might find out who the lady is I married this morning."

"Senor!" gasped Lopez, in sheer bewilderment.

"I haven't the remotest notion who she is, or even what she looks like," laughed Maseden. "Now, there's no more time for talk," and he raised his voice. "Obey me at once, you lazy old hound, or I'll blow your brains out! Send a peon for the Cid. Fail me in one single thing, and I'll put a bullet through your head!... Margarita! Some bread and meat, quick! I'll soon show you who is master in this house. Suarez may give orders in Cartagena, but I give them here!"

Lopez hurried out, wringing his hands. Maseden followed, brandishing the revolver. Some timid servants, who had gathered in the *patio* at the news of their employer's return, made as though they would run, but he stopped them with a fierce threat, and, while munching the food brought by an aged housekeeper, behaved and spoke so outrageously that they thought he was mad.

Poor creatures! They had served him well in the past. Now he was trying to save their lives by giving them something to say against him when questioned by the president's henchmen.

Meanwhile, he had a sharp ear for the hoof-beats of a galloping horse. Pedro, knowing nothing of the scene in the *estancia*, was still on guard at the bend in the avenue, and might be trusted to give warning of the enemy's approach. But Maseden was allowed to eat his fill.

A very terrified Lopez brought a hardy-looking mustang to the gateway, and his master saw a repeating rifle slung to the saddle. That was a thoughtful thing. Such a weapon might be exceedingly useful.

"Where are the cartridges?" he thundered.

"Here, most excellent one," stammered the other, producing a bandolier.

The American swung into the saddle, swore at his co-conspirator heartily, and was off.

So Lopez had a fine tale to tell when his mustang loped up to the entrance of the Castle of San Juan. He had a fine tale to hear, too, as he rode back to the ranch with a body of horse led by the fastidious and color-loving Ferdinando Gomez.

The servants, of course, bore out the superintendent's story of Maseden's extraordinary behavior. Obviously, no one at the *estancia* was to blame for this daring prisoner's second escape. The officer who had arrested him at daybreak should have left a guard in charge, but the plain truth was that the Cartagena men had been so anxious to take part in the stirring doings anticipated at the capital that no heed was given to this flaw in the procedure.

That night, however, when Maseden met Lopez at the rendezvous, the Spaniard's account of events was not reassuring.

Suarez was living, and not very badly hurt, it was true; but every man's hand seemed to be against the foreigner who had tried to kill him. Maseden was puzzled, at first, by this excess of patriotism on the part of the citizens of Cartagena and San Juan generally.

"What do they think has become of me?" he inquired.

"They argue, senor, that you have ridden into the interior, and telegrams have been sent to all the inland towns ordering your instant arrest. If you resist you are to be shot dead, and a reward of one thousand dollars will be paid when you are identified."

"Do they pay for me dead only?"

"They offer two thousand for you alive, senor."

"Just to have the pleasure of potting me as per schedule.... Any fear that you have been followed to-night, old friend?"

"None, senor. The soldiers at the *estancia* believe you are many miles away. Moreover, I have put good wine on the table."

"Who is in charge there? Captain Gomez?"

"No, senor, a stranger. *El capitan* went back to Cartagena. He nearly wept when he saw his boots. You had split them."

"You gave the consul my letter?"

"I dropped it in his box, señor. I thought that was wiser."

"So it was. I should have remembered that. What of the lady?"

"The lady you married, señor?"

"Of course. You wouldn't have me interested in some other lady on my wedding day, you old reprobate?"

The half-breed laughed softly.

"Even that wouldn't be so strange a thing as what has really happened, señor. No one knows who the lady is. One man, a distant cousin of mine, told me he heard she landed from a ship only late last night."

"Great Scott!" muttered Maseden in English, "what a Sphinx-like person! She must be descended from the Man in the Iron Mask." Then he went on:

"Didn't your cousin know where she was staying in Cartagena? Surely there must have been a good deal of public curiosity about her. Twenty people were present at the marriage. It was no secret."

"I understand that she had gone to Señor Steinbaum's house. She fainted after the ceremony, my cousin said, and had to be carried into an automobile, but he knew nothing more."

The veiled Madeleine had felt the strain, then! Somehow the knowledge of her collapse touched a chord of sentiment in Maseden's heart, but his own desperate plight effectually banished all other considerations at the moment.

True, he was safe for the night, and for many days to come, if the foreman's fidelity remained unshaken. The ranch was called Los Andes because it contained a chain of little hills all covered with valuable timber, among which he could hide without real difficulty.

But of what avail this precarious lurking on his own estate? He must take speedy and effectual steps to get clear of San Juan altogether until such time as he could secure adequate protection, and have his case thrashed out by a tribunal to whose decision even Enrico Suarez, the president of the Republic, must bow.

One thing was quite certain--never again could he settle down in unmolested possession of his property. Though the shooting of Suarez was an unfortunate necessity, its effect would be enduring and disastrous.

He had thought out every phase of the problem during the long, hot hours beneath the trees, and the half-breed's account of the trend of public feeling decided his adoption of the boldest course of all. He would go to Cartagena, where he was hardly known, save to a few merchants and shopkeepers, a banker and one or two members of the Consular community, and board some outward-bound vessel.

Fortunately, he had plenty of money, and, glory be, could speak both Spanish and the San Juan patois like a native. If his luck held, he would cheat Suarez yet.

"Lopez," he said, after a long pause, "I must leave the ranch for many a day, probably forever. If I stay here I'll only plunge you into trouble and get myself captured. Now, do me one last service. Have you any clothes belonging to that *vaquero* nephew of yours who broke his neck in a race last Easter?"

"I have his overalls, a *fiesta* jacket, some shirts and a sombrero, señor."

"Bring them, and speedily. I'll give you a good price."

"They are yours for nothing, señor."

"I don't deal on those terms, Lopez. Off with you. I'll wait here."

"Anything else, señor?"

"Yes. I was nearly forgetting. Bring his saddle, too. My own saddle might be recognized. I have a long ride before me, so hurry."

Within half an hour the good-hearted old foreman was richer by five hundred dollars, while Maseden, a dashing cowboy, though unkempt as to face and hands, was riding across country by starlight.

He did not tell Lopez his real objective. There was no need. The old fellow occasionally indulged in a burst of dissipation, and if his tongue wagged then he might blurt out some boastful phrase which would bring down on him the merciless wrath of the authorities.

At dawn the fugitive received another slice of real luck. He had just entered a main road leading from San Luis, a town thirty miles from Cartagena, when he came upon a cowherd sitting by the roadside and bemoaning his misfortunes. The man was commissioned to drive some cattle to a sale-ring in the city, and had scratched an ankle rather badly while whacking one of the steers out of a bed of thorns.

Such an incident was common enough in his life, but on this occasion either the thorn was poisonous or some foreign matter had lodged in the wound, because the limb had swollen greatly and was so painful that he could hardly walk.

Maseden played the Good Samaritan. He ascertained the drover's name, his master's, and the address of the salesman; the rest was easy. Helping the sufferer into a wayside hovel, he promised to send back a messenger later with an official receipt, took charge of the animals himself, and reached Cartagena as Ramon Aliones, the accredited representative of a San Luis rancher.

The sale-ring was near the harbor, and he mounted a man on his own broncho to deliver the drover's voucher for the safe arrival of the herd at its destination. He asked for, and obtained, a duplicate, which he kept. This same emissary readily disposed of the horse and saddle at a ruinous price when told that the newcomer was not only thirsty, but meant to see the sights of the capital.

A cheap restaurant, some wineshops, and a vile billiard saloon provided shelter for the rest of the day. Before night fell, Maseden had ascertained three things: He was supposed to be riding hard into the interior; the lady he had married was really a stranger and was Steinbaum's guest, and a large steamer, the *Southern Cross*, flying the Stars and Stripes, was due to leave port at midnight.

She should have sailed some hours earlier, but the drastic changes in the marine department entailed by the day's happenings had delayed certain formalities connected with her manifests.

"For a time, senor," explained the ship's chandler who gave him this latter information, "no one would sign anything. You see, a name on a paper would prove conclusively which president you favored. You understand?"

Maseden understood perfectly.

"It is well that you and I, senor, have no truck with these presidents, or we might be in trouble," he laughed. "As it is, another bottle, and to the devil with all politicians!"

Under cover of the darkness the American slipped away from his boon companions, now comfortably drunk at his expense. Having no luggage, he bought a second-hand leather trunk and some cheap underclothing, such as a muleteer might reasonably possess. He also secured the repeating rifle and cartridges which he had left in a restaurant, and, thus reinforced, made for the Plaza, where Cartagenians of both sexes and all ages were gathered to enjoy the cool breeze that comes from the Pacific with sunset.

From that point he knew he could see the *Southern Cross* lying at anchor in the roadstead. She was there, sure enough, nearly a mile out, and he was puzzling his wits for a pretext to hire a boat and board her without attracting notice when chance solved the problem for him.

Two men passed. They were talking English, and he heard one addressing the other by name.

"Tell you what, Sturgess," the speaker was saying, "I'd be hull down on Cartagena to-night if the skipper would only bring up at Valparaiso. But his first port of call is Buenos Ayres, and I've got to make Valparaiso before I see good old New York again, so here I'm fixed till a coasting steamer comes along. Great Caesar's ghost, I wish I were going with you!"

The second man, Sturgess, was carrying a suitcase, and the two were evidently making for a short pier which supplied landing places for small craft at various stages of the tide.

Maseden quickened his pace, overtook them, and said in Spanish that he wished to book a passage to Buenos Ayres on the *Southern Cross*, and, if the Senor Americano would permit him to board the vessel in his boat, he (Maseden) would gladly carry the bag to the pier.

Sturgess evidently did not understand Spanish, and asked his companion to interpret. He laughed on hearing the queer offer.

"Guess I can handle the grip myself, and the gallant *vaquero* is pretty well loaded with his own outfit," he said, "but he is welcome to a trip on my catamaran, if it's of any service."

Maseden, however, insisted on giving some return for the favor, and secured the suitcase. Now, if any sharp-eyed

watcher on the pier saw him, he would pass as the traveler's servant.

Within half an hour he was aboard the ship, and had bargained for a spare berth in the forecabin with the crew. He would be compelled to rough it, and remain as dirty and disheveled as possible until the ship reached Buenos Ayres. Obviously, no matter what his personal wrongs might be, he could not make the captain of the *Southern Cross* a party to the escape from Cartagena of the man who had nearly succeeded in ridding the republic of its president.

But the prospect of hard fare and worse accommodations did not trouble him at all. He had nearly ten thousand dollars in his pockets. If the note sent through Lopez to the American Consul was acted on promptly, a further sum of fifteen thousand dollars lying to his credit in a local bank was now in safe keeping.

Really, considering that he had been so near death that morning, he had a good deal to be thankful for if he never saw Cartagena or the Los Andes ranch again.

As for the marriage, what of it? A knot so easily tied could be untied with equal readiness. He hadn't the least doubt but that an American court of law would declare the ceremony illegal.

At any rate, he could jump that fence when he reached it. At present, in sporting phrase, he was going strong with a lot in hand.

He kept well out of sight when a government launch came off, and a port official boarded the vessel.

He never knew what a narrow escape he had when the chief steward who acted as purser, was asked if any new addition had been made to the passenger list. The ship's officer was not a good Spanish scholar. He thought the question applied to the cargo, and answered "no."

Then, after a wait that seemed interminable, the snorting and growling of a steam winch and the unwilling rasp of the anchor chain chanted a symphonic chorus in Maseden's ears. Those harsh sounds sang of freedom and life, of golden years on a most excellent earth instead of an eternity in the grave. He came on deck to watch the Castle of San Juan dwindle and vanish in the deep, blue glamour of a perfect tropical night.

He was standing on the open part of the main deck, close to the fore hold, when he heard English voices from the promenade deck high above his head.

A man's somewhat querulous accents reached him first.

"Well, at this time two days ago, I little thought I'd be on a steamer going south to-night," said the speaker.

There was no answer, though it was evident that the petulant philosopher was not addressing the silent air.

"I suppose you girls are still mooning about that fellow getting away from the Castle?" grumbled the same voice. "I tell you he has no earthly chance of winning clear. Steinbaum will see to that. His record is none too good, and a question in the American Senate would just about finish him, even in San Juan. So Mr. Philip Alexander Maseden might just as well have been shot yesterday morning as to-day or to-morrow. They're hot on his track now, Steinbaum told me--"

"Eh? Yes, I know he did *me* a good turn, but, damn it all, that was merely because he was going to die, not because he was a first-rate life for an insurance office. It was no business of mine that he and Suarez couldn't agree.... Oh, let's go to our cabins! Tears always put my nerves on a raw edge! Anyone would think you had lost a real husband on your wedding day!"

There was a movement of shadowy forms. Maseden thought he could distinguish a woman's white hand rest for an instant on the ship's rail. Was that the hand he thought he would remember until the Day of Judgment? He could not say.

The one fact that lifted itself out of the welter of incoherent fancies whirling in his mind was an almost incontrovertible one. If his ears had not deceived him, he and his unknown but lawful wife were fellow-passengers on board the *Southern Cross*!

CHAPTER IV

"FIND THE LADY"

A slight mist hung over the sea--sure outcome of the tremendous range of the thermometer between noon and midnight in a tropical clime. The sky was cloudless, and the stars clustered in myriads.

Though the Southern Hemisphere falls far short of the glory of the north in constellations of the first magnitude, the extraordinary clearness of the upper air near the equator enhances the stellar display. It would almost seem that nature knows she may veil her ample splendors in the north, but must make the most of her scantier charms in the south.

Maseden, swinging on his heel in sheer bewilderment, suddenly found himself face to face with the Southern Cross, hanging low above the horizon. Had an impossible meteor flamed forth from the familiar cluster of stars and shot in awe-inspiring flight across the whole arc of the heavens northward to the line, it would not have surprised him more than the discovery that his "wife" was on board the ship.

That was a stupendous fact before which the whirl of adventure of the long day now drawing to a close subsided into calm remoteness.

"Madeleine," the woman he had married, was his fellow-passenger! He would surely see her many times during the voyage to Buenos Ayres! He would hear her voice, which he could not fail to recognize.

She, on her part, would probably identify him at the first glance. How would she handle an extraordinary situation? Would she claim him as her husband, repudiate him scornfully, or utterly ignore him? He could not even guess.

There was no telling what a woman would do who had elected to marry a man whom she had never met, whose very name, in all likelihood, she had never heard, merely because he happened to be a prisoner condemned to speedy death.

Yet she could not be a particularly cold-blooded person. She had wept for him, had whispered her heartfelt grief; had promised to pray for and think of him always. Even the man with the high-pitched voice of a hypochondriac--presumably, from the manner of his address, her father--had hinted that her suffering had already passed the bounds set for one who, to serve her own ends, had gone through that amazing ceremony.

Maseden did not actually marshal his thoughts thus clearly. If compelled to bend his wits to the task, he might have spoken or written in such wise. But an active brain has its own haphazard methods of weighing a new and distracting problem; it will ask and answer a dozen startling questions simultaneously.

In the midst of Maseden's strange and formless imaginings the ship's course was changed a couple of points to the southward, and the Southern Cross was shut out of sight by the forecandle head. Then, and not until then, did the coincidence of the vessel's name with that of the constellation occur to his bemused wits.

He laughed cheerfully.

"By gad!" he said, "all the signs of the zodiac must have clustered about my horoscope on this 15th of January. When I get ashore I must find an astrologer and ask him to expound."

The sound of his own voice brought a belated warning to Maseden of the folly he had committed in speaking aloud.

There was no other occupant of the fore deck at the moment. A look-out man in the bows could not possibly have overheard, because of the whistling of the breeze created by the ship's momentum and the plash of the curved waves set up by the cut-water, and it was highly improbable that words uttered in a conversational tone would have reached the bridge.

But behind him rose the three decks of the superstructure, and there might be eavesdroppers on the promenade deck or in one of the two dark gangways running aft.

He glanced over his shoulder to right and left. Apparently he had escaped this time. No matter what developments took place in the near future, he was by no means anxious as yet to reveal his nationality. Each hour brought home, more and more forcibly, the misfortune of the chance which left him no alternative but the shooting of Suarez that morning.

The act was absolutely essential to his own safety, but it put him clearly out of court. At any rate, the authorities of no South American state would listen to a recital of his earlier wrongs. If, as was highly probable, a sensational account of the attempted assassination of the new president had been tacked on to the telegrams announcing the *coup d'etat* in San Juan, and he, Maseden, were painted as a desperado of mark, it might even be feared that the settled and

respectable Argentine Republic would arrest him and endeavor to send him back to San Juan for trial.

Of course, the United States Consul in Buenos Ayres would have something to say about it, but there was a very real danger of consular efforts being overruled. No matter how distasteful the role, Philip Alexander Maseden must continue to masquerade as Ramon Aliones, *vaquero*, until he could leave the ship and assume another alias.

It was soon borne in on him how narrow was the margin which still separated him from disaster. He had gone to his berth, an unsavory hutch next to a larger cabin tenanted by deck-hands, when the door was thrust wide (he had left it half open while undressing, there being no electric switch within) and a lamp flashed in his eyes.

A short, stockily-built man, whom Maseden rightly took for the captain, stood there, accompanied by another man, seemingly a Spanish steward.

"Now, then," came the gruff question, "what's this I hear about your speaking English to yourself? Who are you? What's your name?"

Luckily, Maseden was so surprised that he did not answer. The swarthy steward, a thin, lantern-jawed person, grinned. Maseden saw that the man was wearing canvas shoes with india-rubber soles, and guessed the truth instantly.

His nerve had been tested many times that day; nor did it fail him now. Gazing blankly at the captain, he said, in Spanish, that he did not understand.

"Tell him, Alfonso, that you heard him speaking English a few minutes since.... Hi, you! Stop that! No smoking in your berth."

Maseden was rolling a cigarette in true Spanish style. The captain was obviously suspicious, so the situation called for a touch of stage artistry.

Alfonso translated, pricking his ears for Maseden's reply. But he hailed from the east coast, whereas Maseden used the *patois* of San Juan.

"You made a natural mistake, *senor*," said the American easily. "I was talking to the stars, a habit of mine when alone on the *pampas*, and their names would sound somewhat like the words of a barbarous tongue."

"And a foolish habit, too!" commented the captain when he heard the explanation. "Do you know any of 'em?" and he glanced up at the strip of sky visible from where he stood.

The smiling *vaquero* stepped out on to the open deck. Oh, yes, all the chief stars were old friends of his. He pointed to the "Sea-serpent," the "Crow," and the "Great Dog," giving the Spanish equivalents.

The steward, of course, densely ignorant in such things, and already half convinced that he had blundered, was only anxious now to avoid being rated by the captain for having gone to him with a cock-and-bull story. Somehow, Maseden sensed this fact, and made smooth the path.

"They are strange names," he said with a laugh, "but we of the plains often have to find the way on land as a sailor on the sea."

"Has he any papers?" demanded the captain, apparently satisfied that the passenger was really acquainted with the chief star-groups.

Maseden produced that thrice-fortunate duplicate of the receipt for cattle brought from the San Luis ranch to Cartagena by Ramon Aliones that very day. The captain examined it, and turned wrathfully on the steward.

"Be off to the devil!" he growled. "Find some other job than bothering me with your fool's tales!"

When Alfonso had vanished, he added, seemingly as an afterthought:

"If I was a *vaquero* with a dirty face, I wouldn't worry about clean fingernails or wear silk underclothing, and I'd do my star-gazing in dumb show!"

With that he, too, strode away. Undoubtedly, the captain of the *Southern Cross* was no fool.

Five minutes later the silk vest and pants which Maseden had not troubled to change while donning the gay attire of old Lopez's nephew, went into the Pacific through the small port-hole which redeemed the cabin's otherwise stuffy atmosphere. Happily the bunk, though crude, was clean, and long enough to hold a tall man.

Maseden fancied he would lie awake for hours. In reality, he was dead tired, and slept the sleep of sheer exhaustion

until wakened by a loud-voiced intimation that all crimson-hued Dagoes must rouse themselves if they didn't want to be stirred up by a hose-pipe.

Now, if there was one thing more than another that Maseden liked when on board ship, it was a cold salt-water bath. But he dared neither take a bath nor wash his face. Personal cleanliness is not a marked characteristic of South American cowboys. That he should display close-cropped hair instead of an abundance of oiled and curly tresses was a fact singular enough in itself, without inviting attention by the use of soap and water.

Perforce, he remained filthy. The captain's hint was very much to the point.

The *Southern Cross* was not a regular passenger boat. Primarily a trader, carrying nitrate or grain to home ports, and coal thence to various points on the southern or western seaboard of South America, she was equipped with a few cabins, about a dozen all told, on the upper deck.

The so-called second-class accommodation was several degrees worse than the steerage on a crack Atlantic liner. That is to say, the human freight ranked a long way after cargo. The food was plentiful, though rough. Even for saloon passengers there was neither stewardess nor doctor.

As a matter of course, a passenger list would be an absurdity. The chief steward acted as purser, and knew the names of all on board after five minutes' study of his ledger. Passengers and ship's officers soon became acquainted. Within twenty-four hours Maseden had ascertained that a Mr. James Gray, with his two daughters, occupied staterooms; but, for the life of him, he could not learn the ladies' Christian names.

He cudged his brains to try and remember whether or not his "wife" had signed the register as Madeleine Gray; but the effort failed completely. He knew why, for the best of reasons; yet the knowledge did not render failure less tantalizing.

It is one thing to be dazzled by the prospect of escape from the seeming certainty of death within a few minutes, but quite another to be on the same ship as the lady you have married two days earlier, yet neither know her name nor be positive as to her identity.

This, however, was literally Maseden's predicament when chance favored him with a long, steady look at the Misses Gray. He could not be mistaken, because there were no other ladies on board.

Thus when a very pretty girl, wearing a muslin dress and hat of Leghorn straw, appeared at the forward rail of the promenade deck and gazed wistfully out over the sea, Maseden's heart fluttered more violently than he would have thought possible as the effect of a casual glance at any woman.

So, then, this fair, slim creature, whose unheeding eyes had dwelt on him for a fleeting second ere they sought the horizon, was his wife! It was an extraordinary notion; fantastic, yet not wholly unpleasing. It would be rather a joke, if opportunity offered, to flirt with her. He had never flirted with any girl, and hardly knew how to begin; but much reading had taught him that the lady herself might prove an admirable coach if so minded.

Of course, there was room for error in one respect. He might have married the sister, who, thus far, nearly midday, had not been visible during daylight. He calculated the pros and cons of the situation. If his "wife" was feeling the strain of that unnerving experience in the great hall of the Castle of San Juan, she might now be resting in her stateroom. But why should the sister, on whose shoulders, one would suppose, sat no such heavy load of care, come on deck alone and scan the blue Pacific with that dreamy air?

Yes, by Jove, this really must be his wife! Somehow, poetic justice demanded that she, and not her sister, should meet him thus unconsciously.

In covert fashion he began to study her. The deck on which she stood was fully twenty feet above him, and she was still further separated from him by some thirty feet of the fore hatch, but he noted that her eyes were of the Parma violet tint so frequently met with in the heroines of fiction, yet all too seldom seen in real life. Being a mere man, he was not aware that blue eyes in shadow assume that exact tint. At any rate, as eyes, they were more than satisfactory.

Her nose was well modeled, with broad, flexible nostrils, unfailing sign of good health and an equable disposition. Her lips were prettily curved, and the oval face, framed in a cluster of brown hair, was poised on a perfectly molded neck. She owned shapely arms; he had already had occasion to admire her hands; a small, neatly-shod foot was visible under the lowest rail as the girl leaned on her elbows in an attitude of unstudied grace.

Altogether, Mr. Maseden liked the looks of Mrs. Maseden!

He was beginning to revel in sentiment when the edifice of seemingly substantial fact so swiftly constructed by a fertile

imagination was dissipated into space by hearing a voice--*the* voice, he was sure--coming from some unseen part of the upper deck.

"Ah! There you are, Nina!" it said. "I've been looking for you everywhere! How long have you been here?"

Nina! So this fairy was only the *sister*. Maseden smiled grimly behind a cloud of cigarette smoke because of the absurd shock which the words administered. He was sharply aware of a sense of disappointment, a feeling so far-fetched as to be almost ludicrous.

What in the world did it matter to which of these two he was married? In all probability he would never exchange a word with either, and his first serious business on reaching a civilized country would be to get rid of the incubus with which a set of phenomenal circumstances alone had saddled him.

At last, however, he would really see his wife, and thus end one phase of a curious entanglement. Nina had half turned. Evidently she realized that Madeleine meant to join her. Maseden leaned back against the external paneling of his cubby-hole and looked aloft now with curiosity at once quickened and undisguised.

But he was fated to suffer many minor shocks that day. Madeleine appeared, and presented such an exact replica of Nina that, at first sight, and in the strong shadows cast by the canvas screen which alone rendered that portion of the deck habitable while the sun was up, it was practically impossible for a stranger to differentiate between them.

Maseden discovered later that Madeleine was twenty-two and Nina nearly twenty-four; but the marked resemblance between the pair, accentuated by their trick of dressing alike, led people to take them for twins. Moreover, each so admirably duplicated the other in voice and mannerisms that only near relatives or intimate friends could be certain which was speaking if the owner of the voice remained invisible.

For a little while, too, Maseden's mind was reduced to chaos by hearing Nina address her sister as "Madge." He was vouchsafed the merest glimpse of Madge's face, because, after a quick, heedless look at him and at a half-caste sailor readjusting the hatches covering the fore hold, she turned her back to the rail and said something that Maseden could not overhear.

A man joined the two girls, whereupon Nina also faced aft. The newcomer, standing well away under the screen, could not be seen at all, and Maseden thought it must be Mr. Gray, the querulous person whose outspoken utterances had first warned Maseden that his wife was on board.

But he erred again. Some comment passed by Nina raised a laugh, and Maseden recognized the voice of Mr. Sturgess, whose baggage he had carried overnight.

"I guess *not!*" he was saying, with a humorous stress on each word. "As a summer resort, San Juan disagreed with my complaint, Miss Gray."

"Have you been ill, then?" came the natural query.

"No, but I might have been had I remained there too long," was the answer. "A change of president in one of these small republics is like a bad railroad smash--you never know who'll get hurt. I've a notion that Mr. Gray must have felt sort of relieved when he brought you two young ladies safe and sound aboard this ship."

"We didn't see anything specially alarming," said Nina. "Madge went out twice during the day with Mr. Steinbaum, a trader, and the streets were very quiet, she thought."

Madge! Was "Madge" a family diminutive for Madeleine? Maseden neither knew nor cared. Nina's harmless chatter had told him the truth. Madge most certainly did find the streets quiet, if the story brought by Lopez from Cartagena was correct; namely, that she had been carried out of the Castle in a dead faint.

And now the heartless creature was actually laughing!

"One cannot take a South American revolution quite seriously--it always has something comical about it," she cried, and it was astounding how closely the one sister's voice resembled the other's. "I understand that some poor people were shot the night before last, but I saw a man who keeps a restaurant opposite Mr. Steinbaum's house produce a device with flags and a scroll. On the scroll was painted 'Long Live Valdez.' He drew some fresh letters over the first part of the name, dabbed on plenty of black and white paint, and the new legend ran 'Long Live Suarez.' The whole thing was done, and the flags were out, in less than five minutes."

Sturgess evidently asked for and obtained permission to smoke. He came to the rail. Both girls faced forward again, and Maseden was free to compare them.

Madge, or Madeleine, as he preferred to style her, seemed to be a trifle paler than Nina. Otherwise, her likeness to her sister was almost uncanny, if that ill-omened word might be applied to two remarkably pretty girls. Neither of the girls wore gloves, but Maseden looked in vain for the heavy gold wedding-ring which Steinbaum's thoroughness had supplied when wanted.

At that moment an officer appeared on the main deck. The fore hold had to be opened, it seemed. A quartermaster, summoned from the forecabin, hoisted a block and tackle to a derrick. The noise effectually drowned the talk of the trio on the upper deck until the tackle was rigged, and a couple of hatches were removed. The half-caste sailor was about to descend into the hold just as Sturgess's somewhat staccato accents reached Maseden clearly again.

"Say, did you ladies hear of the American who was to be shot early yesterday morning? A most thrilling yarn was spun by a friend of mine who knows Cartagena from A to Z. He said--"

Maseden was on the alert to detect the slightest variation of expression on Madeleine's face. She bent forward, her hands tightly clutching the rail, and darted a piteous under look at her sister. Thus it happened that Maseden alone was gazing upward, and he saw, out of the tail of his eye, the heavy block detaching itself from the derrick and falling straight on top of the sailor, who had a leg over the coaming of the hatch and a foot on the first rung of the iron ladder leading down into the hold.

With a quickness born of many a tussle with a bucking broncho, Maseden leaped, caught the rope held by the quartermaster, and jerked it violently. The block missed the half-caste by a few inches, and clanged in the hold far beneath.

The tenth part of a second decided whether the sailor should be dashed headlong into the depths or left wholly unscathed. As it was, he and every onlooker realized that the rakish-looking *vaquero* had saved his life.

In the impulsive way of his race, the man darted forward, threw his arms around Maseden's neck, and kissed him. To his very great surprise, his rescuer thrust him off, and said angrily:

"Don't be such a damn fool!"

An exclamation, almost a slight scream, came from the upper deck. Maseden knew in an instant that this time he had blundered beyond repair. Madeleine had heard his voice, and had recognized him. Moreover, the officer, the quartermaster, even the grateful Spaniard, were eyeing him with unmixed amazement.

The fat *was* in the fire this time! In another moment would come denunciation and arrest, and then--back to the firing squad! What should he do?



CHAPTER V

ROMANCE RECEIVES A COLD DOUCHE

But none of these thoughts showed in Maseden's face. He laughed easily and explained in voluble Spanish that he swore in English occasionally, having picked up the correct formula from an American senior with whom he once took a hunting trip into the interior.

The sailor, hearing this flow of a language he understood, and not able to measure the idiomatic fluency of Maseden's English, accepted the story without demur, but the fourth officer and quartermaster, both Americans, were evidently puzzled.

He soon got rid of the too-effusive half-caste, and retired to his berth. Thank goodness, since the one person on board mainly concerned was perforce aware of his identity, he was free to wash his face and take a bath! To oblige a lady he would have remained unwashed all the way to Buenos Ayres; now, every other consideration might go hang.

Finding a steward, he gave further cause for bewilderment by asking to be allowed to use a bath-room.

Greatly to Maseden's relief, his lapse into the vernacular seemed to evoke little or no comment subsequently. The captain heard of it, but was far too irritated by the faulty behavior of a ring-bolt (examination showed a bad flaw in the metal) to pay any special heed. As for the half-caste sailor, his gratitude to Maseden took the form of describing him admiringly as "the *vaquero* who could swear like an *Americano*," an equivocal compliment which actually fostered the belief that Maseden was what he represented himself to be--a vagabond cowboy migrating from one coast of the great South American continent to the other.

His peculiar habits, therefore, shown in such trivial details as a desire for personal cleanliness and a certain fastidiousness at table, were attributed to the same exotic tutelage. Of course, when he spoke any intelligent Spaniard could have detected faults in phrase or pronunciation, but he had a ready resource in the *patois* of San Juan, and no man on board was competent to assess him accurately by both standards.

He settled down quickly to the exigencies of life at sea. Five days after leaving Cartagena he was an expert in the matter of keeping his feet when the vessel was rolling or pitching, or performing a corkscrew movement which combined the worst features of each.

When the *Southern Cross* entered more southerly latitudes her passengers were given ample opportunity to test their skill in this respect. The weather grew colder each day, and with the drop in the thermometer came gray skies and rough seas.

There are two tracks for ocean-going steamers bound down the west coast. The open Pacific offers no hindrance to safe navigation, except an occasional heavy gale. The inner course, through Smyth's Channel, is sheltered but tortuous, and the commander of the *Southern Cross* elected to save time by heading direct for the Straits of Tierra del Fuego. The ship was speedy and well-found. A stiff nor'wester tended rather to help her along, and she should reach Buenos Ayres within fifteen days.

Maseden contrived to buy a heavy poncho, or cloak, from one of the crew. Wrapped in this useful garment, he patrolled the small space of deck at his disposal, and kept an unflinching eye for the reappearance at the fore'ard rail of one or other of the Misses Gray; yet day after day slipped by and they remained obstinately hidden.

Once or twice, when the weather permitted, he climbed to the fore deck, whence he could scan a large part of the promenade deck on both the port and starboard sides. On the port side, however, a wind-screen intervened.

Twice he thought he saw Madeleine Gray leaning on the port rail, talking to Sturgess--and wearing the very dress in which she was married! Either by accident or design she vanished almost instantly on each occasion.

It was nonsensical, of course, but he began to harbor a sentiment of annoyance with Sturgess, who, by some queer contriving of fortune, seemed to be drawn rather to the company of Madeleine than of sister Nina. Any real feeling of jealousy would have been absurd, almost ludicrous, under the circumstances.

For all that, Maseden couldn't understand why the fellow apparently devoted himself to the company of one sister to the neglect, or intentional exclusion, of the other; while the lady's behavior, assuming that she knew of the presence of her "husband" within a few yards, was, to say the least, reprehensible if not provocative.

By this time, Maseden was fully convinced that his wife had recognized him. Oddly enough, the somewhat bizarre

costume he wore would help in betraying him to her eyes. She had seen him only when arrayed in even more startling guise. Her memory of him, therefore, would depend wholly on his features and physique, and the incongruity of an unmistakably American voice coming from a *vaquero* could not fail to be enhanced by the gala attire affected by that erstwhile gay spark, old Lopez's nephew.

Moreover, Maseden had bribed the fore-castle steward to find out from one of the saloon attendants what had happened to the two ladies on the promenade deck when the pulley fell. One of them, the man said, was so startled that she nearly fainted, and the American senior had carried her to a chair.

Obviously, on an American vessel, with American officers, engineers, and quartermasters, for one whose only tongue was Spanish it was difficult to extract information. The Spanish-speaking members of the crew knew little or nothing of the passengers, while Maseden's part of the ship was as completely shut off from the saloon as are the dwellings of the poor from the palaces of the rich.

Many times was he tempted to change his quarters, and thus tacitly admit his identity; but cold prudence as often forbade any such folly. Even if the full extent of his adventures in Cartagena were unknown on board, it was a quite certain thing that the story must have reached Buenos Ayres long ago.

Bad as was the odor of the republic in the outer world, it still possessed the rights of a sovereign state, and the last thing Maseden desired was an enforced return to the Castle of San Juan, there to stand his trial anew for conspiracy, plus an undoubted attempt to murder the president! That would be a stiff price to pay merely in order to sate his curiosity as to the motive underlying a woman's strange whim.

On the sixth night of the voyage the opportunity for which he was looking was offered as unexpectedly as it had been persistently withheld earlier.

After a very unpleasant day of wind and rain the weather improved markedly. True, the sky had not cleared, and the darkness which fell swiftly over a leaden sea was of a quality almost palpable.

Had he troubled to recall the sealore gleaned from many books of travel, Maseden would have known that such a change was by no means indicative of smoother seas and days of sunshine in the near future. The ship was merely crossing the center of a cyclonic area. Ere morning she would probably meet a fiercer gale than that through which she had just passed.

Such minor considerations as to the state of the elements carried little weight, however, when contrasted with the immediate and solid fact that Maseden, giving an upward eye to the promenade deck about nine o'clock, discerned a solitary female figure leaning on the rail.

Since there were no other women on board, this must be either Madeleine or Nina. As it happened, the fore-castle was deserted, in the sense that its usual occupants were either asleep or busied with the duties of the hour. Above the girl's head paced the officer of the watch. Up in the bows were two men on the look-out. Otherwise, the fore part of the ship was untenanted save for Maseden himself and the slim, cloaked form which seemed to be peering aimlessly into the impenetrable wall of darkness ahead.

Apparently the wind had died down. There were no sounds save the normal ones--the onward rush of the ship, the swish of an occasional swell cleft by the cut-water, the steady thud of the screw, and the equally regular creaking of planks and panels swollen by heavy rain after undergoing tropical heat.

It was a night rich with suggestion of mystery and romance. Some new ichor stirred in Maseden's veins, firing his spirit to emprise. Come what might, he resolved to have speech with the lady, be she wife in name or merely sister-in-law!

But how contrive it? If he hailed her from the main deck, the officer on the bridge would overhear, and straightway play a domineering hand in the game. If he went aft, through a narrow gangway leading past the engine-room and various officers' cabins, he could reach a sliding door giving access to the saloon companion, but his presence there would undoubtedly be noticed, evoking a stern order to betake himself to his own quarters.

The third method was the direct one. A series of iron rungs led vertically up the face of the superstructure, and, as sailors occasionally passed that way, the girl would not necessarily be alarmed by seeing a man coming up.

The officer on duty might detect him, of course; but even he was liable to mistake him for one of the ship's company.

It has been seen already that Maseden was of the rare order of mankind which, having once made up its mind, acts

unhesitatingly. No sooner had he elected for the iron ladder than he had crossed the deck and was mounting rapidly. It chanced that the officer did not see him.

In a few seconds he was standing on the promenade deck. Then he had an attack of stage-fright. Many an actor has strode valiantly from wings to footlights only to find his tongue glued to the roof of his mouth. This was Maseden's "star turn," and not a word could he utter!

By a singular coincidence, the lady was equally nervous. She gave scant attention to the commonplace occurrence that a member of the crew should walk aft from the dim interior of the forecabin and hurry up the ladder, but the situation altered dramatically when a faint gleam from a window of the smoking-room fell on the tarnished silver braid and gilt buttons of Maseden's jacket of black cloth and velvet.

The light, such as it was, fell directly on the girl's face as she turned towards the intruder. Her eyes, blue sapphires by day, were now strangely dark. Maseden saw that her expression was one of panic if not of actual terror. He was unpleasantly reminded of a bird fascinated by a snake; the displeasing simile stirred his wits and unlocked his tongue.

"I'm sorry if I have frightened you," he said quietly, "but the chance of securing a few words of explanation seemed too good to be lost. You owe me something of the kind, don't you?"

"Why?" came the truly feminine reply.

"Because, unless I am greatly mistaken, you are the lady whom I had the honor of marrying in the Castle of San Juan at Cartagena. You may be known as Miss Madge Gray on board this ship, but your name in the register was Madeleine."

"My name is Nina, not Madge."

Maseden was taken aback for a few seconds, yet the fact could not be gainsaid that the speaker, whether Madge or Nina, did not repudiate the general accuracy of his statement. Moreover, he was almost sure of his ground now. His "wife" was probably flirting with Sturgess. Nina, as usual, was left to her own devices, since the forecabin steward had reported that Senor Gray was ill and confined to his cabin.

"At any rate, you do not deny that either your sister or yourself is legally entitled to pose as Mrs. Philip Alexander Maseden?" he said.

"I am not aware that either of us can fairly be described as posing in that distinguished capacity."

The retort was glib enough. It amused the man.

"Perhaps I put the bald truth rather awkwardly," he said. "Let me, then, ask a plain question. Did I marry you, or your sister, last Tuesday morning?"

"You certainly err if you think that I shall discuss the affairs of my family with a complete stranger," was the unhesitating answer.

"Yet you, or your sister, did not scruple to marry one."

"Are *you* Mr. Maseden?"

"I am. Haven't I said so? I implied it, at any rate."

"Then why are you in disguise, posing--it is your own word--as a Spanish cowboy?"

"Because I'm trying to save my miserable life. Don't think me ungrateful, madam. I owe my escape to the phenomenal circumstances brought about by the desire of a charming young lady to become Mrs. Maseden, if only for a brief half hour. I am not claiming any--privileges, shall I say?--on that account. But I can hardly credit that, having gone through the ordeal of such a ceremony, you would refuse to tell me your motive, so I reluctantly revert to my first opinion, namely, that your sister is my wife."

"Reluctantly! Why reluctantly?"

There was more than a touch of bewilderment in the cry. Maseden interpreted it as a fencer's trick to gain time.

"I don't mind being absolutely candid," he laughed. "You see, time hangs heavy on my hands here. I have nothing to do except watch for a glimpse of an unknown wife. Queer, isn't it? Anyhow, my fate doesn't seem to worry sister Madge, who finds consolation elsewhere; so, of the two, if I must be wed to one of you, I imagine I would prefer you."

"I think you are intolerably rude, Mr. Maseden. Madge was right when she said--"

She checked herself with a little gasp of dismay. Maseden laughed again.

"Please don't spare me," he cried. "What did Madge say?"

"I decline to discuss the matter any further."

"But why should we quarrel over a minor point? You have tacitly admitted that your sister married me. Give me some notion of her motive. That is all I ask. It may help."

"How help?"

"When I take unto myself a wife I expect to be allowed some freedom of choice in the matter. I certainly refuse to have her picked for me by a rascal like Steinbaum. If I win clear of Buenos Ayres and reach New York I shall take the speediest steps to undo the matrimonial knot tied in Cartagena. There may be legal complications, which will be attended, I suppose, by a certain amount of publicity. It will help some, as Mr. Sturgess would say, if I know just why the lady wanted to wed in the first instance. Surely there is reason behind that simple request. Your sister begged to be allowed to marry me because I was condemned to death. At least, such was Steinbaum's story. Was *that* true, to begin with?"

No answer. Maseden felt that he had cornered her.

"There must have been some such ground for an extraordinary action," he went on. "To the best of my knowledge she had never seen me. I question if she even knew my name. I--"

A door opened, and a stream of light fell on the deck some feet away. Sturgess's voice reached them clearly.

"Guess she's tucked up cozy in a deck chair," he was saying. "It's no time to retire to roost yet, anyhow."

"Please go now," whispered Nina tremulously. "You mustn't be seen talking to me. I--I'll discuss things with Madge, and if possible, come here about the same hour to-morrow, or next day. I--I'll do my best."

Without another word, Maseden swung himself over the rail. When below the level of the deck he clung to the ladder and listened, not meaning to act ungenerously, but because of the other man's rapid approach.

"Ah, there you are, Miss Nina!" cried Sturgess. "Sister Madge is bored stiff by my company, but was polite enough to pretend that she was anxious about you."

"I've been star-gazing," said the girl, hastening towards him.

"So've I," grinned Sturgess. "You two girls have the finest eyes I've ever--"

His voice trailed away into silence. Maseden dropped to the deck.

"Hang it all!" he muttered, strangely disconsolate. "When Fate took me by the scruff of the neck and married me to one of two sisters, neither of whom I had ever seen, she might have been kind enough, the jade, to tie me to the right one!"

Yet, even to his thinking, Madge and Nina were like as a couple of pins! Being an eminently sensible sort of fellow, he realized in the next breath that Madge might be quite as nice a girl as Nina.

Then the thought struck him that she was purposely making things easier for him by cultivating a friendship with Sturgess. In any case, Sturgess was obviously destined to act as a pawn in the game. Even he, Maseden, had not scrupled to use that gentleman at sight when anxious to board the *Southern Cross* without attracting the attention of the news-mongering boatmen of Cartagena.

That night he lay awake for hours. For one thing, the ship was running into bad weather again, and complained nosily of the buffeting her stout frame was receiving. For another, his own course was beset with difficulties. He failed completely to understand the attitude of sister Nina.

If Madeleine--or Madge, as he had better learned to distinguish her--had sought marriage with a man about to die as a means to escape from some unbearable duress, was her plight accentuated rather than bettered by the fact that her husband still lived? If so, the announcement that he meant to obtain a legal dissolution of the bond at the earliest possible moment would relieve the tension.

But what if her need demanded that she should remain wed, a wife in name only? A development of that sort

foreshadowed complexities of a rare order. Maseden knew himself as one capable of Quixotic action--even the scheming Steinbaum had paid him *that* tribute--but it was asking too much that he should go through life burdened with a wife who treated him as a benevolent stranger.

Common sense urged that they should meet and discuss a most trying and equivocal situation as frankly and fully as might be. Why, then, had Nina Gray been so disturbed, so anxious to keep the married pair apart? Both girls knew he was alive. What purpose could it serve that the fact should be ignored?

He puzzled his brain to recall incidents he had heard of Steinbaum's history, but investigation along that line drew a blank. Was Suarez mixed up in the embroglio? It was unlikely. Though the man had spent some years in the United States and in Europe, he had not left San Juan since he, Maseden, came there, and, before that period, both Madge and Nina Gray must have been girls in short frocks and long tresses.

Perhaps the father's record would provide a clew. Somehow, though he had never set eyes on Mr. Gray save as a shadowy form on a dark night, Maseden sensed him as unsympathetic. He was forced to form a judgment on the flimsiest of material, having none other; but Gray's voice, his way of speaking to his daughters, had grated.

First impressions are treacherous guides; nevertheless the philosopher whom they cannot mislead does not exist.

The following day was the longest in Maseden's experience. Monotony, in itself, is wearying; when, to a dull routine of meals and occasional talk with men of an inferior type is added the positive discomfort of confinement in the most exposed and cramped part of a ship during a stiff gale, monotony becomes akin to torture.

At last, however, night fell. There was no improvement in the weather, which, if anything, grew worse; but a change in the ship's course, or a shifting of the wind--no one to whom Maseden might speak could give him any reliable data on the point--brought the *Southern Cross* on a more even keel.

Here, at least, was some slight compensation for the leaden-footed hours of waiting. Nina Gray might be a good sailor, but it was hardly reasonable to expect that she would keep her tryst when the big steamer was trying alternately to stand on end or roll bodily over to port.

About nine o'clock Maseden made out a shrouded figure in the position where his "sister-in-law" had stood the previous night. He hastened from the shelter of the forecabin, and was promptly drenched from head to foot by a shower of spray. He was half-way up the ladder when a voice reached him.

"Please go back," it said. "I'll come to the gangway on the starboard side."

He regained the deck, made for the right-hand gangway, and soon had the satisfaction of seeing the girl walking swiftly along the dimly-lighted corridor.

He hardly knew how to greet her. To bid her "Good evening," or murmur some platitude about her goodness in keeping the appointment in such vile weather, would have sounded banal.

The lady, however, when they came face to face, settled all doubts on the question of etiquette by saying breathlessly:

"I have had a long talk with my sister, Mr. Maseden, and she bids me tell you that she cannot meet you herself. You were so generous, so kind to her, at a moment when your thoughts might well have been centered in your own terrible fate, that she cannot bear the ordeal of asking you the last favor of forgetting her.

"Of course, every facility will be given for the dissolution of the marriage. I have written here the address of a firm of lawyers in Philadelphia who will act with your legal representatives when the matter comes before the courts. For your own purposes, I understand, you wish to remain unknown while on board this ship. We have arranged to travel to New York by the first American liner sailing from Buenos Ayres after our arrival. Perhaps you will be good enough to choose another vessel, or, if your affairs are urgent, *we* would wait for a later one. Can you let me know your wishes now in that matter?"

Maseden was so astonished that he literally caught the girl by the shoulder and turned her partly round so that the light of a distant lamp fell on her face. The buffeting of the gale, aided, no doubt, by a feeling of excitement, had lent her a fine color, but, if her utterance was a trifle broken at first, it had soon become calm and measured, nor did she seem to resent his cavalier treatment.

"Are you joking?" he said, smiling in sheer perplexity.

"I fail to find any humor in my words," came the instant reply.

"Quite so. They might have been framed by a lawyer. Isn't there a ghost of a joke in that mere fact?"

"It appeared to my sister, and I fully agree with her, that we are suggesting the best way, the only way, out of an embarrassing dilemma."

"Yes," agreed Maseden, drawing a long breath. "I agree to all the terms; I insist only on priority of sailing from Buenos Ayres. I don't see why I should risk my life just to save you a trifling inconvenience."

"Then here is the address I spoke of," and she proffered an envelope.

"Good. We'll leave the rest to the law, Miss Nina."

"Thank you. Good-by."

She would have passed him, but he was on the after side of the gangway, and his outstretched hand restrained her.

"One moment, please," he said. "I want you to tell your sister that she has thoroughly--disillusioned me."

"I'll do that," she assured him, and he could not help but regard her airy self-possession as the most surprising factor in a remarkable situation.

"And you, too," he went on. "Something has happened to you since last night. Somehow you are--harder. Forgive me if I choose unpleasant adjectives."

She hesitated before replying. Perhaps she felt the quiet scorn underlying the words.

"Where my unhappy family is concerned, the forgiveness must come wholly from you," she said at last. "May I go now, Mr. Maseden? Once more, thank you for all that you have done and will do. Remember, when this miserable affair reaches the newspapers, it is not your reputation that will suffer, but the woman's!"

She left him gazing blankly after her. There was a tense *vibrato* in the tone of the girl's voice that touched some responsive chord in the man's breast.

Then he became aware that he was soaked to the skin, and the wind was piercingly cold.

He murmured a phrase strongly reminiscent of the *Americano* who took hunting trips into the interior of Central America, and hurried to his cabin, where he stripped and rubbed his limbs to a glow before turning in.



CHAPTER VI

AN UNFORESEEN DISASTER

During the night the storm developed into that elemental chaos which the landsman exaggerates into a hurricane and the sailor logs as a strong northwesterly gale. Passage along the open decks of the *Southern Cross* became a hazardous undertaking, an experiment just practicable for a strong man clad in oilskins and seaboots, but positively dangerous for one unable to interpret the vagaries of a ship plunging through a heavy sea. A broken limb or ugly bruise was the certain penalty of an incautious movement, if, indeed, one was not swept overboard.

For a passenger--a non-combatant, so to speak--the only certain way to insure physical safety was to lie prone in a bunk, with a hand ever ready to seize the nearest rail when an unusually violent lurch tilted the vessel to an angle of forty-five degrees and simultaneously drove her nose into a veritable mountain of water.

Maseden contrived to sleep fitfully until a thin gray light, trickling through a tiny port when momentarily free of wave-wash, told him that another day had dawned. The din was incessant. Inanimate things may be inarticulate to human ears, but they speak a language of their own on such occasions--an inchoate tongue made up of banging and clattering, of stunning vibrations, of wind-shrieks, of the groaning of steel framework, riveted plates, and seasoned timber.

The *Southern Cross* was tackling her work with stubborn energy, but she complained of its severity in every fibre. Ships, like men, prefer easy conditions, and growl in their own peculiar manner when compelled to wage a fierce and continuous fight for mere existence.

Of course a sailor never permits himself to think of his own craft in such wise. "Dirty weather" is simply an unpleasant episode in the routine of a voyage. He regards it much as the average city man views wind and rain--displeasing additions to life's minor worries, but not to be considered as affecting the daily task.

In a modern, well-found steamship such negative faith is fully justified, and the ship's company of the *Southern Cross* went about their several duties as methodically as though the vessel were roped securely alongside a pier in the North River.

The center of the fore-castle held a roomy compartment in which meals were served for the crew, and Maseden took refuge there as soon as he was dressed. He obtained an early cup of coffee, and derived some comfort from the fact, communicated by the half-caste sailor he had saved from the falling pulley, that about the same time next day they would sight the Evangelistas light, and soon thereafter be in the land-locked water of the Straits of Magellan.

He realized, of course, that sight or sound of either Madge Gray or her sister was hardly to be expected during the next twenty-four hours. In fact, he might not see them again before Buenos Ayres was reached.

On the whole, it would be better so, he decided. A thrilling and most dramatic incident in a life not otherwise noteworthy for its vicissitudes would close when he was safe on board a homeward-bound mail steamer. After that would come some small experience of a court of law.

For the rest, if he contrived to cheat the newspapers of the full details, he would actually risk his repute as a veracious citizen if he told the plain truth about one day's history in the Republic of San Juan.

Once, in his teens, when in London during a never-to-be-forgotten European tour, a friend of his father's pointed out a small, alert man, dressed in gray tweeds, who was hailing a cab in Pall Mall, and said:

"Look, Alec! That is Evans of the Guides. I met him five years ago in Lucknow, and even at that date he had killed his sixty-first tiger on foot and alone. He never shoots stripes any other way. He says it isn't quite sporting to tackle the brute from the comparative safety of a howdah or a *machan*--a platform rigged in a tree, you know."

Philip Alexander Maseden, aged sixteen, neither knew nor cared what a *machan* was. His faculties were absorbed in the difficult task of reconciling a dapper little man in a gray suit, skipping nimbly into a cab in Pall Mall, with a redoubtable Nimrod who had bagged sixty-one tigers after tracking them into their jungles.

And that was the record of five years earlier. Perhaps in the meantime the bold *shikari* had added dozens to the total. A mighty hunter, Evans, but hard to reconcile with his environment.

Seated in the wet, creaking cabin, and watching through a window which opened aft the turmoil of seas leaping venomously at and over the stout bulk of the *Southern Cross*, Maseden thought of Evans of the Guides, and his

cohort of tiger-ghosts. Yet not one tiger among the lot had brought Evans so near death as he, Maseden, was when Steinbaum entered his cell on that fateful morning, and, in the closest shave Evans was ever favored with, a violent end had not been averted by stranger means.

How would the story of "Madeleine," Suarez, and Captain Gomez's boots sound if told in a cosy corner of a Fifth Avenue club?

By reason of his position in the fore part of the vessel, Maseden could survey the bridge, chart-house and some part of the promenade deck. The head of the officer on watch was visible above the canvas screen which those who go down to the sea in ships have christened the "devil-dodger." The officer's sou'wester was tied on firmly, and the placid expression of the strong, weather-stained face was clearly discernible. For the most part, he looked straight ahead, with an occasional glance back, or over the side into the spume and froth churned up by the ship's passage. Once in a while he would draw away from the screen and compare the course shown by the compass with that steered by the quartermaster at the wheel.

For lack of something better to occupy his mind, Maseden followed each movement of the man on the bridge. Thus, singularly enough, next to the officer himself, and possibly a look-out in the bows, he was the first person on board to become aware of a peril which suddenly beset the *Southern Cross*.

What that peril was he could not guess, but he saw that the officer was shouting instructions to the quartermaster, and in the same instant the clang of a bell showed that the engine-room telegraph was in use.

Almost immediately the ship's speed slackened, and as she yielded to the pressure of wind and wave the clamor of her struggle sank to comparative silence.

A few seconds later the captain appeared on the bridge. He, like the officer, gave particular heed to something which lay straight ahead. Evidently he approved of the action taken by his subordinate, because, as well as Maseden could judge, he stood beside the telegraph, with a hand on the lever, but made no further alteration in the ship's speed.

Naturally Maseden wondered what had happened and watched closely for developments. In better weather he would have gone outside, but it was positively dangerous now to stand close to the ship's rail, or, indeed, remain on any part of the open deck, while the shadow of an attempt on his part to climb the fore-castle ladder would have evoked a gruff order to return.

Within a minute or less, however, he made out that the *Southern Cross* was passing through a quantity of wreckage, mostly rough-hewn timber. Here and there a spar would unexpectedly thrust its tapering point high above the tawny vortex of the waves; at odd times a portion of a bulkhead and fragments of white-painted panels would be revealed for an instant. Some unfortunate sailing ship had been torn to shreds by the gale, and the steamer was just passing through that section of the sea-plain still cumbered by her fragments, though the tragedy itself had probably occurred many a mile away from that particular point on the map.

By this time the stopping of the engines had aroused every member of the crew not on watch. Some of the men, bleary-eyed with sleep, gathered in the cabin, and their comments were illuminating.

"Wind-jammer gone with all hands," said one man, after a critical glance at the flotsam on both sides of the ship.

"What for have we slowed up?" inquired another. "The old man ain't thinkin' of lowerin' a boat, is he?"

"Lower a boat, saphead, in a sea like this!" scoffed the first speaker.

"Wouldn't he try to rescue any poor sailor-men who may be clingin' to the wreck?" came the retort.

"As though any sort of blisterin' wreck could live in this weather! Try again, Jimmy. We're dodgin' planks an' ropes; that's our special stunt just now. One o' them hefty chunks o' lumber would knock a hole in us below the water-line before you could say 'knife'. An' how about a sail an' cordage wrappin' themselves lovin'ly around the screw? Where 'ud we be then?... There you are. What did I tell you?"

A heavy thud, altogether different from the blow delivered by a wave, shook the *Southern Cross* from stem to stern. The captain looked over the port side, and followed the movement of some unseen object until it was swept well clear of the ship. The engines, which had been stopped completely, were rung on to "Slow ahead" again. They remained at that speed for half a minute, not longer. Then they were stopped once more, and the officer of the watch quitted the bridge hurriedly.

"What the devil's the matter *now*?" growled the more experienced critic anxiously. "That punch we got can't of started a plate, or all hands would 'a' bin piped on deck!"

Singularly enough, he either forgot or was afraid to voice his own prediction as to a possible alternative. The big foremast which had struck the ship's quarter was stout enough, most unluckily, to support a thin wire rope, and this unseen assailant had fouled the propeller. In all likelihood, had the captain given the order "Full speed ahead," the evil thing might have been thrown clear before mischief was done.

As it was, the very care with which the *Southern Cross* was navigated led to her undoing. With each slow turn of the screw the snake-like rope which was destined to choke the life out of a gallant ship had coiled itself into a death grip.

Soon some of the strands were forced between propeller and shaft-casing. The solid steel cylinder of the shaft became fixed as in a vise. The engines were powerless. To apply their force was only to increase the resistance. They could not be driven either ahead or astern.

The *Southern Cross* promptly fell away to the southeast under the stress of wind and tide. After her, forming a sort of sea-anchor, lolloped the derelict foremast which, by its buoyancy, was the first cause of all the mischief.

Mostly it was towed astern. Sometimes a giant wave would snatch it up and drive it like a battering ram against the ship's counter.

These blows were generally harmless, the rounded butt of the spar glancing off from the acute angle presented by the molded stern-plates. Once or twice, however, the rudder was struck squarely, so the chief officer, aided by some of the men, quickly put an end to the capacity of this novel battering-ram for inflating further damage by lassoing and hauling aboard the whole mass of wreckage--mast, yards and tattered sails alike.

Then a gruesome discovery was made. Tied to the mast was the corpse of a man, but so bruised and battered as to be wholly unrecognizable. The poor body, nearly naked, and maimed and torn almost out of human semblance, was stitched in a strip of wet canvas, weighted with a few furnace bars, and committed to the deep again without a moment's loss of time.

But its brief presence had not been helpful. Singularly enough, sailors are not only fatalists, which they may well be, but superstitious. No man voiced his sentiments; nevertheless, each felt in his heart the ship was doomed.

Collectively, they would try to save the ship. As individuals, the paramount question now was--how and when might they endeavor to save their own lives?

Of course there was neither any sign of panic nor shirking of orders. The ship was stanch and eminently seaworthy. She was actually far more comfortable while drifting thus helplessly before the gale than when battling through it.

Yet every sailor on board, from the captain down to the scullery-man, knew that some forty miles ahead lay a shore so forbidding and inhospitable that the United States government charts--than which there are none so detailed and up-to-date--give navigators the significant warning to keep well out to sea, as the coast-line has not been surveyed in detail.

Yet the case was not immediately desperate. Forty miles of sea-room was better than none. If the gale abated, and an anchor was dropped, it was probable that the engineers' cold chisels would soon cut away the wire octopus.

Moreover, there was a chance that some other steamer might pick them up and earn a magnificent salvage by a tow to Punta Arenas.

So after breakfast the uncanny harbinger of disaster provided by the body of the drowned sailor was, if not forgotten, at least generally ignored. Pipes were lighted. Men not otherwise occupied gathered in groups, while every eye strove to pierce the gray haze of the spindrift whipped off the waves by each furious gust, each hoping to be the first to discover the friendly smoke-pall of a passing ship.

Certain ominous preparations were made, however. Boats were cleared of their wrappings and stocked with water and provisions. Life-belts were examined, and their straps adjusted.

As the day wore, and noon was reached, the chance of encountering another ship became increasingly remote. Sea and wind showed no signs of falling. Indeed, a slight rise in the barometer was not an encouraging token. "First rise after low foretells stronger blow" is as true to-day as when Admiral Fitzroy wrote his weather-lore doggerel, and the principles of meteorology hold good equally north and south of the equator.

For a time the captain tried to steady the ship with the canvas fore-and-aft sails which big steamships use occasionally in fine weather to help the rudder. This device certainly got the *Southern Cross* under control again, and the crew were vastly astonished when bid furl the sails after half an hour.

Surprise ceased when some of them got an opportunity to squint into a compass. The wind had veered from northwest to a point south of west.

Only a miracle could save the ship now. It seemed as though the very forces of nature had conspired to bring about her undoing.

From that moment a gloom fell on the little community. Men muttered brief words, or chatted in whispers. A few paid furtive visits to their bunks, and rummaged in kit-bags for some treasured curio or personal belonging which could be stowed away in a pocket. It was not a question now as to whether the *Southern Cross* would survive, but when and where she would strike, and what sort of fighting chance would be given of reaching a bleak shore alive.

Every one knew that it would be the wildest folly to lower a boat in such a heavy sea. The sole remaining hope was that the ship would escape the outer fringe of reefs, and drive into some rock-bound creek where the boats might live.

By means of a properly constructed sea-anchor the captain kept the vessel's head toward the east. Thus, when land was sighted, if any semblance of a channel offered, it might be possible to steer in that direction.

Men were told off to be in readiness to hoist the sails again at a moment's notice. The anchors were cleared, both fore and aft. Nothing else could be done but watch and wait, while the great ship rolled into yawning gulfs or slid down huge curves of yellow-gray water, rolled and slid ever onward to sure destruction.

During those weary hours, so slow in passing, so swift in succession when sped, Maseden had not once set eyes on his wife or her sister. He had seen Sturgess talking to the captain and first officer, but neither of the ladies appeared on deck.

Still it was an easy thing to imagine just what was going on. The two women were the only persons on board left in ignorance of the certain fate awaiting the *Southern Cross*. They were told the half truth that the engines were disabled, but that the vessel was in no immediate danger.

It was better so. Of what avail to frighten them needlessly? The ship would have been absolutely safe if the gale blew from the east instead of the west. Even now she might survive. Her chances were of the slenderest nature, but there would be ample time to get the women into an upper deck saloon or the chart-room when the position became desperate. Why embitter the few hours of life yet remaining by knowledge of the dreadful fate which threatened when the end came?

About two o'clock an undulating blur on the eastern horizon told of land. To the best of the captain's judgment the *Southern Cross* was off Hanover Island when the accident happened, and her relative longitude had altered but very slightly during the forty-mile drift. It was now or never if anything was to be done to save her.

The forbidding and mountainous coast-line straight ahead was broken up by all manner of deep-water channels, each giving access, by devious ways, to the sheltered Smyth's Channel; but so barricaded by sunken reefs and steep islets as to present almost insuperable obstacles to the free passage of a large vessel.

Small whalers and guano-boats would not dare any of these straits in fine weather. For the *Southern Cross* to make the attempt, even provided she ran the gantlet of the barrier reef, was indeed the forlornest of forlorn hopes.

The chief engineer had already assured the captain many times that any further pressure by the engines would inflict irreparable damage, so, risking everything on the throw of the dice and wishful to know the worst, at any rate, before daylight vanished, he ordered the sails to be hoisted again.

All hands were brought on deck, life-belts were adjusted, and boats' crews stood by. At that moment Maseden caught a glimpse of the two girls. They, with other passengers, were summoned by the ship's officers and placed in the smoke-room, which, by reason of its situation beneath the bridge, provided a convenient gathering ground in case the boats were lowered.

He saw them only for a moment--two cloaked figures, wearing cloth caps tied tightly to their heads with motor-veils. He could not distinguish Madge from Nina.

It was a strange and most bizarre notion that when the gates of eternity were opening a second time before his eyes the woman who was his lawful wife should now be sharing his peril, yet be separated from him far more effectually than in the Castle of San Juan.

The incongruity of their position did not trouble him greatly, however. Soon he ceased thinking about it. He realized that he, as an individual, could do nothing but obey orders and abide by the decree of Providence.

He was not frightened. Some hours earlier, knowing the physical features of the western coast of South America, he had decided that the odds were a thousand to one against the escape of the ship and her seventy-four occupants. He hoped that when the end came it might not be a long drawn-out agony--that was all. For the rest, he looked forward with a certain spice of curiosity to the fight which captain and crew would make against the giant forces of nature.

An awesome panorama of mighty cliffs, inaccessible islands and isolated rocks over which the seas dashed with extraordinary fury, was opening up with ever-increasing clearness. A mist of driven froth and spindrift hung low over the surface of the water, but the great hills of the interior were distinctly visible.

Irregular white patches near their summits marked the presence of huge glaciers. Lower down the valleys were choked with black masses of firs. Countless generations of trees had grown, and fallen, and rotted, ultimately forming a new, if unstable, basis for more recent growths.

An occasional red scar down a hillside revealed the latest landslide. A cascade would leap out from the topmost part of a forest and bury itself again in the depths.

These outstanding features were all on a huge scale. It was a weird, monstrous land, a place utterly unfitted for human habitation, a part of creation quite out of keeping with the rest of the world. Surveying it impartially, one might wonder whether it had traveled far in advance of the general scheme of things or lagged millions of years behind.

But its aspect was sinister and forbidding in the extreme, and never have its depressing characteristics been etched in darker shadows than when viewed that January day from the decks of the ill-fated *Southern Cross*.



CHAPTER VII

THE WRECK

Up to the last the ship's path was dogged by misfortune. She approached Hanover Island at a point where the sea was comparatively open; hence, the tremendous waves rolling in from the Pacific were not only unchecked by island breakwaters, but their volume and force were actually increased by the gradual upward trend of the rock floor.

Still, undaunted by conditions which suggested the plight of a doomed craft being hurried to the lip of a cataract, keen eyes searched the frowning coast-line for one of the many estuaries which pierced the land, some merely the mouths of short-lived rivers, others again carrying the ocean currents to the very base of the Andes.

At last an opening did seem to present itself. The great rock walls, springing sheer from sea level to a height of a thousand feet or more, fell apart, and, so far as might be judged, a wide and deep channel flowed inland.

It was at this crisis, when life or death for all on board might depend on the veriest trifle, that the captain had to decide whether or not to let go both anchors and endeavor to ride out the gale.

He was an experienced and cool-headed sailor. He knew quite well that the odds were heavy against an anchor holding in such ground, or, if it held, against any cable standing the strain of a six-thousand-ton ship in that terrific sea. But, as Maseden learned subsequently, he sought advice.

The first and second officers were consulted in turn, and each confirmed their chief's opinion that the only practicable course was to run into the passage which still offered a comparatively clear way ahead.

So the *Southern Cross* sped on.

The second officer came forward with some of the crew to superintend the dropping of the anchor. The fourth officer took charge of the aft anchor. All other members of the crew stood by the boats.

Maseden, feeling oddly remote and unclassed among men of his own race, followed the second officer to the fore-castle deck. There, at least, he could stare his fill at the inferno of rock and broken water which the vessel was approaching, though even his landsman's eyes saw that she was in a waterway of considerable width, while each mile now traversed must tend to diminish the seas and bring a secure anchorage within the bounds of possibility.

No one paid heed to him. Among these stolid sailor-men he was a "Dago," a somewhat dandified specimen of the swaggering *vaqueros* they had met at times in the drinking dens of South American ports. He was minded to have speech with the second officer, and proclaim once and for all that he was of the same kith and kin; but the impulse was stayed by a glance at the set, resolute face, intent only on obeying a signal from the captain. It was no time for confidences. He questioned even if the sailor would have answered.

A touch on a lever would set a winch spinning as the anchor leaped to its task. The man charged with carrying out that duty without hitch or delay could spare thought for nothing else.

One of the deck-hands, stationed near the chocks, chanced to be the very Spaniard whose life had been endangered by the falling block on the day after the ship left Cartagena. The ship's carpenter was ill, and the Spaniard was carpenter's mate.

Maseden caught his eye, and the man smiled wanly.

"You did me a good turn the other day, senior," he said. "Let me repay you now."

"But how?" came the surprised inquiry.

"Underneath my bunk, the lowest one on the left in number seven berth, you will find my kit-bag. Beneath some clothes is a bottle of good old brandy. Get it, and drink it quickly."

"Why?"

"You will put a pint of honest liquor to good use, and in ten minutes you won't care what happens."

"I have no desire to die drunk," said Maseden quietly.

The Spaniard shrugged his shoulders.

"You'll never have a better excuse for swallowing excellent cognac," he grinned.

"Shut up, you two!" growled the officer.

He had not understood a word of their talk. He simply voiced the eminently American notion that anything said in the Spanish language could not be of the least importance just then.

Oddly enough, Maseden was angered by being thus outcasted, as it were. He was tempted to retort, but happily checked the words on his lips. Nerves were apt to be on a raw edge in such conditions, he remembered. Even the stern-faced ship's officer, awaiting a command which would settle the fate of the *Southern Cross* once and for all, might well resent the magpie chattering of a couple of Spaniards.

Maseden turned for an instant to look at the bridge. The captain stood there, apparently the most unmoved person on board. The sails, tugging fiercely at their rings and bolts, still kept the ship under control, notwithstanding the ten-knot tidal current which carried her onward irresistibly. The foresail was bellied out to port, so the captain remained on the starboard side of the bridge, whence he had an uninterrupted view ahead.

Suddenly two cloaked figures emerged from the obscurity of the smoking-room and hurried to the transverse rail which guarded the fore part of the promenade deck. With them came some men, among whom Maseden recognized Sturgess; while another man, who caught the arm of one of the girls in a helpless sort of way, was probably Mr. Gray.

Evidently there was no concealing the ship's peril from the passengers now. Everyone wore a life-belt, and was clothed to resist the cold. A plausible explanation of this general flocking out on to the deck was that they had discerned the cleft in the rocky heights through a blurred window, and refused to remain any longer in the sheltered uncertainty of the smoking-room.

At this period there was little or no difficulty in keeping one's feet. The great hull of the *Southern Cross* swung easily on an even keel with the onrush of the sea-river. The ship was not fighting now, but yielding--a complacent leviathan held captive by a most puissant and ruthless enemy.

During the few seconds Maseden stared at the veiled women. One of those two--which one he could not tell--was his wife. It was the maddest, most fantastic thing he had ever heard of. In a spirit of sheer devilry he waved a greeting. One of the girls raised a hand to her face--perhaps to her lips.

What did it matter? In all human probability that was their eternal farewell. He waved again, and turned resolutely to scan the frowning headlands now rapidly closing in on both sides of the vessel's path.

About that time a new and disturbing sound reached his ears. Hitherto there had been nothing but the unceasing chant of the gale, the thud and swish of the seas, the steady plaint of the ship, and an occasional crash like a volley of musketry when the crest was torn off some giant roller and flung against poop or superstructure. But now there came a crashing, booming noise, irregular, yet almost continuous, and ever growing louder and more insistent; a noise almost exactly similar to distant gun-fire and the snarling explosions of heavy projectiles.

It was the noise of the bitterest and longest war ever waged. Those old enemies, sea and land, were engaged in deadly combat, and, as ever, the sea was winning.

Even while the *Southern Cross* swung past an overhanging fortress of rock, a mighty bastion crumbled into ruin. It was singular to watch a cloud of dust mingle with the spindrift--to note how the next breaker climbed higher in assault over the vantage ground provided by the successful sap.

A disconcerting feature of the ship's hurried transit into this uncharted territory was the clearness with which all things were visible above a height of some twelve feet from the surface of the sea; whereas, below that level, the clouds of spray and flying scud formed an almost impenetrable wall.

Taking his eyes from the everchanging panorama, Maseden looked over the side. The foam-flecked water was black but fairly transparent. In its depths he was astounded by the sight of writhing, sinister shapes like the arms of innumerable devil-fish.

At first he experienced a shock of surprise so close akin to horror that he felt the chill of it, as though one of these fearsome tentacles were already twined around his shrinking body. Then he realized that he had been startled by some gigantic species of seaweed. The ship was crossing a submarine forest. Down there in the depths on this January day in the southern hemisphere some mysterious form of plant life was enjoying its leafy June.

But science had no joys for him in that hour. Better the outlook on crag and clearing sky than a furtive glimpse of the limbs and foliage of that monstrous growth.

All at once a cry from the look-out in the bows sent a quiver through every hearer.

"Rock ahead!"

After a pause, measured by seconds, but seeming like as many minutes, the same voice shouted:

"Channel opens to starboard!"

The ship answered the helm. She swept past a jagged little islet so closely that a sailor could have cast a coil of rope ashore.

Forthwith another sound mingled with the crash of the breakers. The rock had been bored right through by the waves, and the gale set up a note in the tunnel such as no organ-builder ever dreamed of.

That mighty chord pursued the *Southern Cross* for nearly half a mile. It was a melancholy and depressing wail. Maseden, whose faculties were supernaturally alert, noticed that the South American sailor's face had turned a sickly green. The man was paralyzed with fright. His right hand fumbled in a weak attempt to cross himself.

Out of the tail of his eye the second officer caught the gesture.

"Pull yourself together, you swab!" he said biting. "What the hell good will you be if you give way like that?"

The Spaniard grasped the sense of command in the words rather than their meaning. He was no coward. He even contrived to grin. It was a tonic to be cursed by an American, even though the pierced rock howled like a lost soul!

Still the *Southern Cross* drove on. The tidal stream was, if anything, swifter than ever, but the size of the waves had diminished sensibly. The walls of the straits had closed in to within a half-mile span. There could not be the slightest doubt that the vessel was actually passing through one of the waterways which connect the Pacific with Smyth's Channel.

Maseden, after scanning the interior highlands for the hundredth time, glanced again at the second officer. The grimness of the clean-cut, stern face had somewhat relaxed. Quite unconsciously the sailor's expression showed that hope had replaced calm-visaged despair. Given an unhindered run of another mile, the ship could at least drop anchor with some prospect of success.

The strength of the tide would diminish in less than an hour, and it might be possible to maneuver in the slack water for a comparatively safe berth. Next day, if the weather moderated as promised by the barometer, the steam pinnacle could spy out the land in front.

Smyth's Channel was not so far away--perhaps fifty miles. Once there, the *Southern Cross* could repair damage and proceed under her own steam to Punta Arenas.

A gleam of yellow light irradiated the surface mist, which had grown markedly denser. The clouds were parting, and the sun was vouchsafing some thin rays from the northwest.

The mere sight was cheering. The blood ran warmer in the veins. It was as though the ship's company, after days and nights of cold and starvation, had been miraculously supplied with food and hot liquids.

Then the golden radiance died away, and simultaneously came the cry:

"Reef ahead!"

There was no need for further warning by the men in the bows. The *Southern Cross* had hardly traveled her own length before every person in the fore part of the ship, together with the occupants of bridge and promenade deck, became aware that a seemingly impassable barrier lay right across the channel. At the same time the line of cliffs fell away to the southward.

Beyond the reef, then, lay a wide stretch of land-locked water; its unexpected existence explained the frantic haste of the tidal current. It was cruel luck that nature should have thrown one of her defensive works across that bottle-neck entrance. A few cables' lengths away was safety; here, unavoidable--sullen and rigid as death himself--were the rock fangs.

At the supreme moment the second officer never turned his head. His eyes were riveted on the motionless figure standing on the starboard side of the bridge.

The captain raised his hand; the sails flapped loudly in the wind; both anchors splashed overboard with hoarse rattling of chains. The after anchor failed, but the forward one held at a depth of ten fathoms.

The second officer was quick to note the sudden strain, and eased it--once, twice, three times. But it was now or never.

The ship was swinging in the stream, and her stern-post would just clear the fringe of the reef if the anchor made good its grip.

The *Southern Cross* had gone round, with a heavy lurch to port, caused by the tremendous pressure of wind and wave, and was almost stationary when the cable parted. The thick chain flew back with all the impetus of six thousand tons in motion behind it.

Missing Maseden by a hair's breadth, it struck the foretop, and the spar snapped like a carrot. It fell forward, and the identical block which had nearly brought about the death of the South American sailor now caught his rescuer on the side of the head.

In the same instant a heavy stay dragged Maseden bodily over the fore-rail and he pitched headlong to the deck, where, however, the actual fall was broken by the stout canvas of the sail.

A woman screamed, but he could not hear, being knocked insensible.

"All hands amidships!" shouted the captain, and there was a race for the ladders. One man, however, the Spaniard, stooped over the young American's body. His eyes were streaming with tears.

"Good-by, friend!" he sobbed. "Maybe this is a better way than that opened by my bottle of brandy!"

He was sure that the *vaquero* who swore like an *Americano* had been killed, because blood was flowing freely from a scalp wound; but he lifted Maseden's inert form, and, without any valid reason behind the action, placed him in his bunk, as the cabin door stood open.

Then he ran after the others.

Poor fellow! He little dreamed that he was repaying a thousand-fold the few extra days of life the good-looking *vaquero* had given him.

Almost immediately the ship struck. There was a fearsome crash of rending plates and torn ribs, the great vessel reeled over, struck again and bumped clear of the outer reef.

Now, too late, the after anchor lodged in a sunken crevice; the cable did not yield, because the vessel was sucked into a sort of backwash and driven, bow on, close to an apparently unscalable cliff.

She settled rapidly. As it happened a submerged rock smashed her keel-plate beneath the engine-room, and the engines, together with the stout framework to which the superstructure was bolted amidships, became anchored there, offering a new obstacle to the onward race of the seas pouring over the reef.

Every boat was either smashed instantaneously or wrenched bodily from its davits. Two-thirds of the hull fell away almost at once, the fore-castle tilting towards the cliff, and the poop being swept into deep water.

With the after part went at least half the ship's company, their last cries of despair being smothered by the continuous roar of the wind and the thunder of the waves. The bridge, with the rooms immediately below, remained fairly upright, but the smoking-room, and officers' quarters close to it, were swept by water breast high.

Some one--who it was will never be known--had ordered the passengers to run into the smoking-room when the forward cable parted. Now, with the magnificent courage invariably shown by American sailors even when the gates of death gape wide before their eyes, the first and second officers contrived to hoist the two girls to the chart-room behind the bridge.

Sturgess, behaving with great gallantry, helped the women first, and then their father, who was floating in the room, to reach the only available gangway. Others followed, but the difficulty of rescue--if such a sorrowful transition might be called a rescue--was enhanced by the noise and sudden darkness.

Ever the central citadel of the *Southern Cross* was sinking lower. Ever the leaping waves and their clouds of spray tended more and more to shut out the light.

Seven people were plucked from immediate death in this fashion. All told, officers, crew and passengers, the survivors of seventy-four souls numbered twelve.

There was a thirteenth, because Maseden was lying high and dry in his bunk. But of him they took no count.

They gathered in the chart-room. Those who still retained their senses tried to revive the more fortunate ones to whom was vouchsafed a merciful oblivion of their common plight. Even in the temporary haven of the chart-room the conditions quickly savored of utter misery. The windows were blown away. The doors were jammed open by the

warping of the deck. Wind, waves and sheets of spray seemed to vie with demoniac energy as to which could be most cruel and deadly. The ceaseless warping and working of what was left of the ship presaged complete collapse at any moment, and the din of the reef was stupefying.

Still, the captain did not abate one jot of his cool demeanor. He eyed the sea, the rocks, the remains of his ship and the beetling crags from which he was cut off by sixty feet of raging water.

Then he deliberately turned his back on it all. Going to a locker, he produced a screwdriver and began methodically drawing the screws of the door-hinges.

The chief officer thought that the other man's brain had yielded to the stress.

"What are you doing, sir?" he said, placing a hand gently on his friend's shoulder.

"We haven't a ten-million to one chance of remaining here till the gale gives out," was the calm answer, "but we may as well rig up some sort of protection from the weather. There are four lockers and four doors. Let's block up those broken windows as well as we can."

A curiously admiring light shone in the chief officer's eyes. He said nothing, but helped. Soon a corner was completely walled. They decided it was better to have one section thoroughly shielded than the whole only partially.

They made a quick job of it. The girls, Mr. Gray, and two men recovering consciousness were allotted to the angle.

Then the captain opened one of the three bottles of claret stored in a locker, and portioned out the contents among the survivors.

There was no need to measure the share of a heavily-built Spaniard who was reputed to be a wealthy rancher from the Argentine. His spine was broken when the ship lurched over the reef. He was found dead when they tried to move him to the sheltered corner.

And now a pall of darkness spread swiftly over the face of the waters. The tide fell, but the ship sank with it. She no longer rocked and shook under the blows of the waves. It seemed as though she knew herself crippled beyond all hope of succor, and only awaited another tide to meet annihilation.

Wind and sea were more furious than ever. In all likelihood, the gale would blow itself out next day. But long before dawn the rising tide would have made short work of what was left of the *Southern Cross*.

Never was a small company of Christian people in a more hopeless position. Every boat was gone. They had no food. They were wet to the skin, and pierced with bitter cold. Even the hardy captain's teeth chattered as he took a pipe from his pocket, rolled some tobacco between the palms of his hands, and said smilingly to those near him:

"This is one of the occasions when a water-tight pipe-lighter is a real treasure. Who'd like a smoke? You must find your own pipes. I can supply some 'baccy and a light!"



CHAPTER VIII

ONE CHANCE IN A MILLION

Maseden was badly hurt and quite stunned. Of that there could be no manner of doubt. He was blissfully unaware of the destruction of the ship, and did not regain his senses until long after the captain and some few of the men gathered in the dismantled chart-room had indulged in what was to prove their last pipeful of tobacco.

Even when a species of ordered perception was restored he was wholly unable during an hour or more to collect his wits sufficiently to understand just what had happened.

Certain phenomena were vaguely disturbing; that was all. He knew, for instance, that the *Southern Cross* was wrecked, because the deck was tilted permanently at an alarming angle. As the downward slope was forward, however, and his bunk lay across it and on the forward side of the door the physical outcome was by no means unpleasant, since his body was wedged comfortably between the mattress and the bulkhead.

He was dry and warm. The weather-proof garments of the pampas were admirably adapted to resist exposure, while the pitch of the deck, aided by the conformation of the bows, diminished the striking power of the waves and carried the spray and broken water clean over the remains of the forecabin.

Maseden's position resembled that of a man ensconced in a dry niche of a cave behind a waterfall. So long as he did not move and the cavern held intact he was safe and comfortable. Happily, a long time elapsed between the first glimmer of consciousness and the moment when the knowledge was borne in on him that he was actually beset by immediate and most deadly peril.

He imagined that the ship had been cast ashore after he met with some rather serious accident, that some kind Samaritan had tucked him into his own berth, and that, in due course, some one would look in on him with a cheery inquiry as to how he was faring. His answer would have been that his head ached abominably, that his mouth and throat were on fire, and that a long drink of cold water was the one thing needed to send him to sleep and speedy recovery.

He did not realize that when he dropped face downward into the folds of the sail he had swallowed a quantity of salt water lodged there instantly by the pelting seas. It was not until he moved, and yielded to a fit of vomiting, which relieved the pain in his head and cleared his faculties, that the dreadful truth began to dawn in his mind.

Once, however, the process of clear reasoning set in, it developed rapidly. He noticed, in the first instance, that the angle of the deck was becoming steeper. It was strange, he thought, that although the light was failing, no one came near. His ears, too, told him that seas were still hammering furiously on every side.

Finally, a marked movement of the forecabin as it slipped over a smooth rock race, owing to the increase of dead weight brought about by the falling tide, induced a species of alarmed curiosity which proved a most potent tonic. At one moment feeling hardly able to move, the next he was scrambling out of the bunk and climbing crab-like through the doorway.

Then he saw that the forecabin deck had been torn away in line with the forward bulkhead of the fore hold. With some difficulty, being still physically weak and shaken, he raised head and shoulders above this jagged edge and peered over.

Then he understood. The ship was in pieces on the reef. Two bits of her still remained; the forecabin, a stubborn wedge nearly always the last part of a steel-built vessel to collapse, and the bridge, with its backing of the chart house. All else had gone--the funnels had fallen an hour earlier.

Even the steel plates and stout wood work of the superstructure had melted away from the six strong ribs to which the sunken engines were bolted, leaving the bridge and chart house in air.

Already, too, one of the six pillars which had proved the salvation of that forlorn aerie had yielded to the strain and snapped. In the half-light it was difficult to discern just what support was given to the squat rectangle of the chart house; Maseden had to look long and steadily through the flying scud before he gathered the exact facts.

The upper deck of the forecabin shut off any glimpse of the cliffs. All he could see was the reef, much more visible now, but still partially submerged by every sea; beyond it, a howling wilderness of broken water, and in the midst of this depressing picture, the ghost-like chart-house and bridge.

But he recalled vividly enough the sight of an awesome precipice close at hand before something had hit him and robbed him of senses. If the ship, or what was left of her, was lodged on the reef towards which she was being driven at the time of his mishap, the shore could not be far distant.

Within a foot of where he lay on the deck, clinging to it as a man might save himself from falling off the steeply-pitched roof of a house, was the big bole of the foremast, on which the rings of the sails formed a sort of ladder. He pulled himself up, stretched his body along the mast in the opposite direction, and made out the uneven summit of the cliff above the straight line of the upper deck.

He was exposed to the weather here, but the waves were not breaking across the forecastle now, and the spray and biting wind tended rather to dissipate the feeling of lassitude which had proved quite overpowering while he remained in the bunk. He raised himself cautiously another foot or so, and the rugged wall of the precipice loomed so close that at first he fancied the wreck was touching it.

The broken topmast, however, swaying in the wind, and still held to its more solid support by a couple of wire stays, pointed drunkenly at the cliff, and the pulley dangling from it was occasionally dashed by the gale against an overhanging ledge.

Even while Maseden was arriving at a pretty accurate estimate of the way in which he had been injured--because he now recalled the parting of the anchor cable--the forecastle moved again, the wet and frowning wall became even more visible, and although an awesome gap intervened, the swaying, pointed spar seemed to offer a fantastic glimpse of a means of escape.

As yet, the truck, or top of the mast, was fully sixteen feet distant from the face of the cliff. But it had been twenty feet or more distant a moment ago, and that last movement of the hull had lessened the width of the chasm.

What if the spar jammed? Could a man obtain foothold on that slimy rock surface?

He thought it possible. A deep crevice seemed to promise some vague prospect of upward progress to one who could climb, and to whom any risk was preferable to the certain fate which must attend remaining on the wreck during the coming tide.

But, notwithstanding his partial recovery, he still felt very feeble and quite unequal to more exertion. As nothing in the way of an attempt to save his life was possible until the broken topmast was lodged firmly against the cliff, he wondered whether he would find some sort of food in the forecastle.

It was improbable, of course. Meals were brought from the cook's galley amidships, and utensils only were stored in the lockers of the dingy saloon in which he and many of the sailors used to eat.

Still, spurred by the necessity of doing something to take his mind off the fearsome alternative should the forecastle topple over sideways, or even remain in its present position, he turned his back on the cliff. With never a glance at the bridge, he regained the sloping deck, lowered himself to the doorway of his own cabin, and peered into the gloom in the effort to determine how best and where to begin his search.

At first his heart sank, because the saloon was awash. Then he remembered the Spanish sailor's queer offer of a bottle of brandy, stored in a kit-bag in number seven berth, "the lowest bunk on the left."

Number seven! Had he not seen the man at odd times entering or leaving the second cabin on the port side? At any rate, there was no harm in trying.

Crawling farther into the darkness, he walked on what was normally the cross bulkhead of the saloon, groped to a doorway, found a kit-bag in the stated position, opened it, and came upon a bottle of brandy!

He drank a little. Luckily it was not the raw spirit beloved of such men as its late owner, but sound, mellow liquor, which the Spaniard had probably bought as a medicine.

Be that as it may, the brandy exercised the magical effect which good cognac always produces in those wise enough not to vitiate the blood with alcohol when in robust health. For the first time since he was struck down, Maseden felt himself capable of putting forth physical effort involving sustained muscular exertion.

He returned to his own cabin, secured the poncho, or cloak, and wrapped the bottle in it. Rummaging round in the dark, he laid hands on a strap, with which he buckled the folded poncho tightly to his shoulders. Then reviewing the prospects which awaited an unfortunate castaway on that inhospitable coast, he endeavored to get at his own trunk.

Therein, however, he failed. The iron frame of the bunk had buckled, and the trunk was held as in a vise.

Realizing that he had very little time before the light in the interior of the forecandle would vanish altogether, he hurried back to the Spaniard's berth and hauled out the kit-bag. He had an uncomfortable feeling that he was robbing the dead, but if it were practicable to land any sort of stores the effort should be made.

He had not a moment to spare for further search. The forecandle slipped again, and he experienced no little difficulty in regaining his perch on the solid stump of the foremast, on which, so nearly had it approached the horizontal, he could sit quite easily.

The dangling spar, he estimated, was now about eight feet from the cliff. Would it catch the rock wall while any glimmer of light remained, or would some new movement of the wreck divert its progress? He could only hope for the best and be ready to seize the opportunity when, if ever, it presented itself.

To his thinking, the gale was moderating; but he dared not indulge in the smallest hope that the forecandle would live through the next tide. The heavy swell of the Pacific after a westerly storm would create a worse sea on the reef than that already experienced. Probably the breakers would be more destructive immediately after than during the gale.

It was at that moment, when in a plight seldom equaled and never surpassed by any man destined to survive a disastrous shipwreck, that Maseden's thoughts reverted to his fellow passengers. There was no need to watch the spar, since he could not fail to become aware of any further movement of the forecandle, so he lashed the kit-bag to a sail ring, again turned his back on the cliff, and gave close attention to the chart-house.

Despite the increasing darkness it was a good deal more visible now than when he had looked that way earlier. No dense clouds of spray or spindrift intervened; hence he noticed for the first time the improvised shutters which had replaced the glass front of the structure on the seaward side.

He was wondering whether or not it was possible that some one might still be living on the only other part of the ship still intact, when he became aware of a figure silhouetted against the sky above the canvas screen of the bridge.

It was, in fact, the captain, who crept out of the chart-house every now and then to examine the state of the iron uprights and the condition of the reef. The gallant old sailor had abandoned, or never formed, any notion of escape, because nothing could live for an instant on the reef itself, and he could not possibly detect the chance of salvation offered by the broken mast. But the nature of the man demanded that he should keep watch and ward over those committed to his care. In all likelihood he experienced a vague sense of relief in being able to discharge even the melancholy duty of noting the gradual breaking-up of the supports.

Three had gone, two on the port side and one on the starboard. When the third stanchion yielded on the port side, bridge and chart-room would fall with a crash and there would be an end. He said nothing of this to the unhappy company within.

"The weather is improving," he told them cheerfully, as Maseden heard later. "I can't honestly give you any prospect of escape, but--while there's life there's hope!"

And all the time he was listening for the ominous crack which would be the precursor of that final sinking into the depths! The marvel was that the middle of the ship had held together so long, but by no miracle known to man could what was left of her survive the next tide.

Yet why should he add to misery already abyssmal? Death would be a blessed relief; waiting for certain death was the worst of tortures.

No one answered. The survivors--of the twelve four were dead now--were perishing with cold and dumbly resigned to their wretched fate. Had it not been for the protection afforded by the improvised screen, none would have been alive even then.

The wind still swirled and eddied into every nook and cranny. Though huddled together, the little group of men and women were conscious of no warmth. It was with the greatest difficulty that those not clad in oilskins kept any garments on their bodies.

So merciless is the havoc of the sea that its victims are stripped naked even while clinging to the battered hulk of a ship, though this last device of a seemingly demoniac savagery is easily accounted for. No product of loom or spinning machine can withstand the disintegrating effects of breaking waves helped by a fierce gale. The seams and fastenings of ordinary garments cannot resist the combined assault. In such circumstances, a woman's flimsy attire will be torn off her in a few minutes, while the strongest of boots have been known to collapse after some hours of this kind of exposure.

Luckily a number of oilskins were kept in the chart-room of the *Southern Cross*; these were quickly served out to the

shivering girls, whose clothing had practically melted away as though made of thin paper.

Soon after the captain had tried to hearten them with that scrap of proverbial philosophy, one of the girls, Nina, screamed in an elfin note that dominated even the roaring of the reef for an instant. Her father had collapsed. It was useless to pretend that he might only have fainted. They who fell now were doomed. In Mr. Gray's case, he was dead ere he sank down.

The chief officer put a consoling hand on the girl's shoulder. He was a Bostonian, and had daughters of his own. In that hour of tribulation his speech reverted to the homely accents of New England.

"It comes hard to see your father drop like that," he said. "But it's better so. He's just spared a bit of the trouble we may have to face."

"It is not that," wailed the girl brokenly. "I'm thinking of my mother. She will never know. Oh, if I could only make her understand, I would not care!"

A strange answer, the sailor deemed it, most probably. At that instant he caught the captain's eye. Both men had the same thought. The dead should be thrown overboard and thus lessen the weight supported by the one stanchion on the port side.

But of what avail were such precautions? They might as well all go together, the quick and the dead. Why should any of them wish to live on until the sea rose again in the small hours of the morning?

The girls were crying in each other's arms. Two of the men lifted Gray's body and placed it with four others. Five gone out of twelve!

The captain, speaking in the most matter-of-fact way, suggested that they should open and drink the last bottle of claret before the light failed.

"It's a poor substitute for a meal," he said, "but it's the only thing we can lay hands on."

The chief officer nodded his head towards the grief-stricken sisters.

"Maybe we can wait a bit longer," he said. "You couldn't persuade them to touch it just now.... What's that, sir? Did you hear anything?"

"No. What could we possibly hear?"

"It sounded like a voice, some one hailing."

"I think I know whose voice it is," said the captain. He himself had almost yielded to the delusion. It was distressing to find the same eery symptom of speedy breakdown in his old friend, the chief officer.

Both men listened, nevertheless, and were convinced. In silence they went out into the open, walking stealthily. Each knew that any undue movement might send the remains of the ship headlong to the reef. They strained their eyes in the only possible direction from which a voice might have come--the scrap of forecastle, sixty feet nearer the headland, or, incredible as it seemed, the headland itself. They could see nothing. Maseden's body was not only in line with the receding angle of the foremast, but that piece of the wreck was merged in the gloom of the towering rock.

Maseden saw them, however, and shouted again, striving his uttermost now that he had attracted attention.

With each effort at speech his voice was becoming stronger. Though it was useless to think of conveying an intelligible message through the uproar of wind and water, he fancied he could get into communication with the inmates of the chart-room, provided they were on the alert. In effect, he had a knife, and was surrounded by an abundance of tangled cordage, and it would be a strange thing if after so many years of active life on a South American ranch he could not cast a weighted lasso as far as the bridge.

He began fashioning the necessary coil at once, working with feverish haste, because his refuge was on the move again, and ever towards the land. A trial cast fell short, as he had not allowed enough lee-way for the wind. He was gathering up the rope preparatory to another effort when a great voice boomed at him from the shadows:

"You have no chance here. You are as well off where you are. If you hear me, hail three times!"

The captain was using a megaphone.

Maseden yelled "Hi!" three times, thinking the short, sharp syllable would carry best. Then, with splendid judgment, he threw the lasso in a lateral parabola that landed its end across the rail of the bridge, where it was promptly made fast by

the first officer.

Again came that mighty voice:

"Is there any hope of escape on your side? If so, hail three times."

He replied. After a short delay he heard the order:

"Haul in!"

Attached to the noose of his rope was another rope, and a second thinner one, rigged as a "whip," or communicating cord. Tied at the junction was the megaphone. The intent of the senders was plain. He was to bawl directions, and they would obey.

He fancied that by this time the topmast must be near the rock, if not quite touching it, but he had decided already that he would either save those hapless people in the chart-room or die in the attempt.

Perhaps his "wife" was there yet. Unless those American sailors had broken the first law of their order of chivalry, the women committed to their care had been safeguarded.

Well, he owed her a life. Now he might be able to repay the debt in full.

He had never before handled a speaking trumpet, so his initial essay was brief:

"Can you hear?"

He could just catch three faint sounds in answer.

"As soon as a sailor can cross by the rope, send one," he shouted, "I shall need help at this end. I have made fast the heavy rope. Shall I haul in the whip?"

There was a pause of a few seconds, but he counted on that. Then he felt three tugs on the thinner cord, and began to haul steadily. Soon, by the sagging of the main rope and the weight at the end of the whip, he realized that some one was making the transit.

Before long he discerned a figure coming towards him hand over hand along the rope. The man's feet were caught midway by the seas boiling over the reef, but Maseden knew that the gallant fellow's forward movement was never checked, and in a very little while the breathless chief officer was seated astride the mast beneath him.

"Who in the world are you?" demanded the newcomer; at any rate, he used words to that effect.

Maseden answered in kind, and explained his project; whereupon the chief officer seized the megaphone and bellowed the necessary instructions. On a given signal the two men hauled on the whip.

This time a figure lashed to a life-buoy, which, in turn, was tied to a pulley traveling on the guide-rope, came to them out of the darkness. It was a woman, hardly in her senses, yet able to obey when told to sit astride the mast and hold fast to a ring.

"We can hardly find room for five more people here," shouted the chief officer. "Are you game to shin along the mast and see if that loose spar is practicable yet?"

"Yes," said Maseden.

He vanished in the darkness. He was absent fully five minutes, a period which, to the waiting chief officer, who alone knew what was actually happening, must have seemed like as many hours. Then Maseden returned. By this time there were two more astride the foremast, four in all. He tied the nearest one to his back with a rope.

"Can you steady yourself by placing your hands on my shoulders, but not around my neck?" he said.

For answer two slim hands caught his shoulders. He began working his way forward into the gloom.

CHAPTER IX

THE LOTTERY

Maseden's prolonged absence on the first occasion was readily accounted for by what he had done. When he reached the end of the foremast--at the junction of spars known to the sailor as the couplings--he found that the topmast was, in fact, thrust tightly against the rock wall.

Thus far, his most sanguine calculations had been justified to the letter.

It was impossible to determine how the other end of that precarious bridge was secured. He saw at once, however, that a great strain was being placed already on the stays which attached it, by chance and loosely at first, but now with ever-increasing rigidity, to the lower mast. He thought that a vigorous kick would ease the pressure by partly freeing one of the wire ropes which had become entangled in the splintered wood.

Of course, he was only choosing the lesser of two evils. If the spar snapped a second time, the last hope of rescue was absolutely destroyed. On the other hand, by reducing the thrust on the retaining spar, the forecastle might slip.

He kicked, and the stay was released! To the best of his belief the wreck did not move.

Fastening the seaward end of the topmast in a rough and ready fashion, in such wise that it was held in position, yet allowed some play if subjected to irresistible weight, he tested it with one hand. It remained taut. Then, murmuring something which had the semblance of a prayer, he committed himself to the crossing.

The wind carried his body out at an astonishing angle, but he held on. Of course, he had not far to travel, because a steamer's topmast is of no great length, but, if he lives to become a centenarian, Maseden will never forget the extraordinary thrill of thankfulness and jubilation which ran through every fibre when his right foot rested on a projecting knob of rock.

A ghostly light coming from the white maelstrom beneath enabled him to make sure that the crevice in which the spar had stuck extended some distance into the face of the cliff. He scrambled ashore, and found that a narrow ledge ran inward about the height of his breast. It was practicable as far as a hand could reach; so, well knowing how precious was every second, he commenced the return journey.

He simply did not allow himself to think. The slightest hesitation might have been fatal. He could form no sort of estimate of his own nervous strength. He knew that any man's willpower may carry him to a certain point and then desert him. He realized that he was leaving a sort of safety for a no mean chance of speedy death; but there is safety that is dishonor, and death that is everlastingly honorable.

Without any semblance of hesitation, this gallant young American swung forth to the desolation and chaos he had just quitted.

Nor did his spirit quail when he had deposited a helpless woman on the ledge. But his hands fumbled in untying the rope which had bound her to him, and he became conscious of an affrighting lassitude which brought with it a grimmer menace than the howling furies of the reef.

He tried to persuade himself that the poncho strapped to his back had made the burden of another body almost unbearable. Hurriedly unfastening it, he said to his collapsed companion--or, rather shouted, because the din created by the breakers was almost stupefying:

"Are you able to hold this?"

Probably she replied, but her utterance was swept away by the wind ere the words had crossed her lips. She took the folded cloak in her hands, and the action sufficed.

Then Maseden left her. During this second crossing to the forecastle he knew beyond range of doubt that he had reached the limit of physical endurance. He had eaten nothing during many hours, he had been knocked insensible and had lost a good deal of blood. It was not in human nature that any man, howsoever fit and active he might be, could survive these heavy drains on his energies and yet put forth the sustained effort now called for.

It tasked his grit to the uttermost to go on this time. He knew in his heart that a third double passage was not to be thought of.

So, during the brief respite while a wholly insensible woman was being tied to him, he contrived to shout to the nearest

man on the spar:

"I'm all in! You fellows must follow as best you can. It's not so bad for a man crossing alone. Turn your back to the wind."

He had adopted that method while carrying the girl already on the rock, and the force of the gale had seemed to exert less drag on his arms.

It needed a real life-and-death struggle to gain the ledge this time. During a minute or longer he could not even endeavor to undo the rope. He merely lurched forward on to the tiny platform and sank in a heap with the inert body of a girl bound to his back. Then he felt dizzily that someone was gaining a foothold on the rock behind. With a mighty effort he bundled his own body and the girl's out of the way.

He fancied he heard a shout and a scream, but was beyond knowing or caring what had happened. Had he slipped down into the raging vortex beneath and been whirled to almost instant death he would have felt a sense of relief that the long drawn-out and unequal fight was ended.

He revived under the stress of a new horror. He found himself gazing blankly into a dim obscurity in which there was neither broken topmast nor unheaved forecastle. The tons of metal piled on a slippery rock had vanished completely, and the hapless few who had survived the slow agony of those hours of waiting in the chart-room were hurled to death at the very moment when fate tantalized them with the prospect of rescue!

Someone bawled huskily in his ear:

"They've gone! My God! What rotten luck! I could almost have touched the man crossing behind me!... Can we get these girls out of this?... Which way did you come?"

It was the young American passenger, Sturgess. He imagined that the man who had brought hope and life to the doomed survivors of the *Southern Cross* had reached the vessel from the land and could now pilot the three who alone were saved to some place where food and repose would be attainable.

"I'm tied to someone," Maseden contrived to say. "Try and unfasten the rope, and shove me up on to the ledge.... I'm all in, but I'll soon be better.... Mind you hold fast yourself!"

Sturgess, though only a degree less exhausted, did as he was asked. Sprawling weakly over the prostrate body of the second of the two girls, Maseden felt in the darkness for the other one.

He discovered that she had collapsed sideways in a faint, but, by some marvel, the folded cloak had not rolled down the side of the precipice. His hands were feeble and numb, but he contrived to unfasten the strap. The bottle of brandy was uninjured, and, so unnerved was he by knowing that the spirit probably meant all the difference between life and death for four people--at any rate till dawn--that he actually dropped it.

Again Providence intervened. It fell on the thick poncho, and did not break.

Filled with savage resolve to conquer this weakness, he grasped the bottle more firmly, drew the cork with his teeth, and, resisting the impulse to swallow the contents in great gulps, sipped some of the liquor slowly.

He did not offer any to the others at that moment. His mind was clearing now, and he saw that the one vital thing needed was that he should recover control of his mental and bodily powers. A few minutes more or less of collapse mattered not so much to his companions as that he should lead or carry them to a less exposed position. Then the brandy would be really effective. At present, to hand it around in the darkness, while wind and spindrift were whipping them with scorpions, was merely courting the disaster which he himself had so narrowly averted.

The other man had gained the ledge. He could not see Maseden, because each inch of space increased an obscurity already akin to that of a tomb, but he leaned forward and caught his arm.

"Say!" he yelled. "Isn't there some way out? We'll die quick if we stop here!"

"You must wait a little," said Maseden. "I, like yourself, was on board the ship. I'm going to stand up now and prospect a bit by feeling my way. Take care that neither of the women falls off. They *are* women, aren't they?"

"Yes. D'ye think we'd send men ashore first?"

"I was not certain that both girls were still living."

What a time and place for a discussion on the etiquette of life-saving at sea! It was typical of their race and type.

Placing the bottle in a breast pocket Maseden rose cautiously to his feet. Gripping the rock with his hands, he stepped over the unconscious form of the first girl he brought ashore. Evidently she had collapsed when the forecandle was swept away before her eyes.

The ledge led straight into the crevice he had entered during daylight, and though very uneven, trended generally upward. He had to depend, of course, wholly on the sense of touch, since the darkness here was that of a deep mine.

Some thirty feet inland he was halted abruptly. The ledge seemed to widen out and then end against an overhanging rock. But the place was dry, and the wind hardly penetrated, while the deafening thunder of the reef had died down to a harsh growl. By comparison with the sea face this secluded nook was a niche in Paradise. At any rate, here it was possible to await daylight without necessarily dying from exposure.

He hurried back, having memorized each inequality of floor and wall on the journey of exploration.

"Are you able to carry one of those girls?" he shouted to Sturgess when he was once more in the midst of the external uproar.

"How far?"

"Not more than fifteen short strides. Take her in your left arm, and feel the rock face on the right. Keep close in. I'm not certain about the width of this ledge. It rises a little, but is fairly straight."

"Go right ahead!"

Soon the two men were in the haven of shelter at the further end. Each was clasping an inanimate woman, but happily, speech no longer demanded a straining of vocal chords.

"Is this the limit of the accommodation?" inquired Sturgess, obeying his guide's restraining hand.

"Yes."

"Do we sit right down and hope that the sun will rise sometime?"

"Not yet.... Here! Grope this way. I am giving you a bottle of brandy. Drink some, not much, because we must hoard it. Then we'll try and get a few drops between these girls' teeth. After that we must rub their hands and ankles till the friction hurts. It may revive them. I don't know. It is the only plan I can think of. When they recover, if ever, we'll seat them side by side with their backs to the rock, you and I will squeeze close, one on each side, and I have a poncho which will cover the lot. By that means we may obtain some degree of warmth in common."

"Old man, you said a page full!"

There was silence for a few seconds. Then Sturgess said gratefully:

"Gee! That's some tonic! Now, how about those girls?"

"Give me the bottle. This lady was conscious when I brought her ashore. She may recover quickly."

The almost tangible blackness in which the little group of people was wrapped greatly enhanced the difficulties attending restorative measures. Maseden discovered that the abundant hair of the girl he was hugging so closely to his heart had become loose, and was in a wet tangle about her throat and mouth.

The clinging strands were troublesome, but, by prizing her lips open between a finger and thumb, he contrived to make her swallow a few drops of the brandy. In fact, while he was yet doubting the efficacy of the dose, some slight convulsive movements showed that consciousness was returning.

He laid her carefully down, and told the American to do likewise with the sister. Sturgess seemed to be curiously slow to obey, and Maseden admonished him sharply, thinking the other might be dazed.

"Now, rub hard!" he said. "First her left hand--then her left ankle."

Both set to work with a will. Maseden could not understand why the unhappy girl should be nearly naked. The stockings had fallen about her shoes. For the rest, her chief garment was an oilskin coat.

He, be it remembered, had been spared the hard usage of the waves, and his clothing was better adapted to existing conditions. He was shocked to find how cold she was, how icy and lifeless her flesh. He urged Sturgess not to spare her.

Their rough and ready massage soon proved effective. The girl gasped something incoherent, and strove to withdraw

her limbs from a distinctly strenuous handling.

"*She's* nearly all right, now," announced Maseden briskly. "Sharp's the word with the other one."

The second patient offered a longer task. By the time she gave any sign of life her sister was frantically asking what had become of her, and was only quieted by Maseden saying sternly:

"You will help most by not bothering us. We are doing our best for your sister. She is here, and may recover. That is all I can tell you."

"We? Who are we?" came the broken cry.

"Mr. Sturgess, yourself, your sister and I. My name is Maseden."

He caught a strangled gasp of astonishment, but Sturgess broke in breathlessly, for the exertion was warming him:

"Great Scott! You've got my name pat, Mr. Maseden. D'ye mean--to tell--me--you were--on board--that poor old ship?"

"Rub! And don't talk!... She moved a little then."

His judgment was well founded. Within a few minutes he heard the second girl address her sister as Nina.

So this one was Madge, his wife! He had literally brought her back from the very gates of death. He could not even see her. What a curious coincidence that when she saved his life, and he saved hers, she was equally hidden from him; then by a veil, now by the pall of the darkest night he had ever experienced!

The girls began exchanging broken confidences. Madge, who had fainted while being towed across the fearsome chasm between bridge and forecastle, did not know of the loss of the captain and chief and second officers, with a passenger, until told by Nina. She wept bitterly, and Maseden could not help noticing that Sturgess tried to console her in a very lover-like manner.

He actually smiled at the tragic humor of it all, especially when Nina seemed to sense his thought, and valiantly interfered by bidding Madge not to add to their misery by useless grief. He refrained purposely from giving them any more brandy until some time had elapsed. Now that their faculties were restored, he knew, from his own experiences, that their tongues and palates were on fire with the salt-laden atmosphere they had perforce inhaled during so many hours.

But each minute of quiet in this sheltered nook, and in breathable air, would do much to alleviate their suffering, and he trusted to the brandy to put them to sleep.

In effect, that was what actually happened. When each of the four had swallowed a small quantity of the spirit Maseden and Sturgess nestled in beside the two girls and tucked the poncho over knees and feet. The bodies of the men served as excellent shields. In the physical and mental reaction which set in with the consciousness of assured safety--because that was what both girls thought, and neither man cared to weaken their faith--they were sound asleep within half an hour of the time they left the wreck.

Sturgess, too, was worn out, and slept fitfully, but it was long before Maseden's overtaxed nerves would yield. He could not help speculating as to what wretched hap the coming day might bring. There was a gnawing dread in his mind that they might be lodged in a fissure of an unscalable cliff. If that were so, what a fearsome prospect lay before them! The mere notion was unendurable, and he resolutely refused to dwell on it.

Then he mused on the queer chance which, even in this small company, divorced him from his wife. He had rescued Nina first. By the accident of situation he was nearest the rock which closed the ledge, and she next. It was her body, not his wife's, to which he was close pressed, and in which his more vigorous frame had already induced a certain comfortable warmth.

Her head had fallen on his shoulder. An unconscious movement revealed that some roughness in the rock wall was hurtful, so he put his left arm around her neck and pillowed her gently.

Try as he might, he found himself still brooding on the chances of the coming day. Fortune favoring, they might find a way to the summit of the cliff. Would they be much better off? Water they would surely obtain--but what of food?

Somehow, in such woful plight, a man's mind turns instinctively to a pipe. He actually had a cherished briar between his teeth and a tobacco pouch in his hand, when his heart sank at the remembrance that he had struck the last match in the only box of matches in his pocket after breakfast that morning. He recollected tossing the empty box into the sea. Subsequently, in lighting a cigar, he had borrowed a match.

Searching his pockets without disturbing the exhausted girl by his side, he made sure of the unhappy truth. He had no match. Even if they reached the interior of the island they could not possibly start a fire.

He knew at once that Sturgess, who had been soaked in salt water for many hours, was in a worse predicament than himself, because his own clothing was dry inside, whereas the other was wet to the skin, and any matches he might have carried must be in a pulp.

Tucked away in a money belt, Maseden carried ten thousand dollars in American bills, yet one small box of matches would be of far greater practical value in that hour than all the money. Slight wonder, then, if his stout heart failed him at last and the darkness closed in on his soul as on his eyes.

The sleeping girl, conscious only of warmth and protection, snuggled her head a little nearer.

"Mother, darling," she murmured, "we had to do it! We had no choice. It was for your dear sake!"

That was all--some troubled confidence of a dream--but it sufficed to set Maseden musing on the strange vortex into which fate had sucked him from the peace and seclusion of Los Andes ranch.

His mind wandered. He saw again the magnificent groves of mahogany trees and coyol palms, with their golden flowers fully three feet in height, and the *chicka* sap oozing from the bark. He sauntered through the well-cultivated plantations of bananas, yams, arrow-root, guavas, and all the fruit and cereals which that favored region of Central America produces in such abundance that men grow lazy and are content to plot and thief rather than toil. He particularly recalled a number of "chocolate" trees, the marvelous growth which yields a more delicately flavored beverage than the cocoa-tree.

The original owner of the ranch prided himself on these trees--botanically, the *Herrania purpurea*--because they were not indigenous to San Juan, but had been brought from Guatemala. Los Andes ranch was indeed a veritable Garden of Eden.

While roaming through it in spirit Maseden dropped off to sleep.

And that was a kindly act on the part of a Providence which marks even the fall of a sparrow from a house-top. A full day lay before this man and those others committed to his care. Even a couple of hours' fitful repose served as a splendid restorative. Without some such respite he could never have faced and carried through the almost Sisyphean task which awaited him at daylight.

He awoke with a shiver. He was chilled to the bone. Not knowing what he was doing, he had drawn the poncho closely over Nina Gray, leaving his own limbs almost uncovered. Startled lest the others might be stiff in death, since his clothes were dry, while theirs, such as they possessed, were wet, he touched the girl's cheek. It was quite warm and soft.

The oilskins she and her sister wore and the huddling together of the four under the heavy poncho had generated a moist heat which probably helped to preserve the two delicate women from some type of deadly pneumonia.

At first it did not strike Maseden as strange that he should be able to see her face. As the initial feeling of panic passed, and he glanced around, he understood what had happened. The sky was clear, and the moon, late risen, was spreading a mild radiance over rocks and sea.

By raising himself a little, so as not to disturb the sleeper still trustfully tucked under his arm, he peered sidewise down on the reef. The tide was high, and great rollers were smashing over the barrier which had broken the *Southern Cross*.

So far as he could tell, not a vestige of the ship remained. Bridge and chart-house had vanished. He fancied that some part of the framework accounted for a particularly vexed boiling of the surges on a spot where the engines and stokehold had lodged. But that was only guesswork.

The morning tide had done its work with thoroughness. The *Southern Cross* had become a memory.

Then he surveyed the ledge and the cleft. Apparently, at this point, he was some twenty feet above high-water mark. To the left was the sea. To the right, the rock overhung the ledge in such wise that the place was almost a cave. This fact, combined with the elevation of the opposite wall, explained the shelter the castaways had been vouchsafed from the bitter gale now blowing itself out. But it was affrighting to realize that the very physical feature which provided a refuge might also immure them in a living tomb.

He shuddered, and moved involuntarily, and the girl awoke with a start.

She lifted her head, and gazed at him with uncomprehending eyes.

"Where am I?" she said, rather in wonderment than alarm.

"Somewhere on the coast of Chile," he said.

She extricated a hand from the folds of the poncho and swept the errant hair from her face. Turning partly, she looked at her sister and Sturgess.

"I remember now," she said slowly. Then she discovered that Maseden's arm was supporting her shoulders.

"Have you held me like that all night?" she inquired.

"All night' is a figure of speech. It is not yet daybreak. This is moonlight."

"The moon! Does the moon still shine? But your arm must be weary."

Maseden was just beginning to realize that he owned a left arm. Circulation was being restored, and he knew it.

"Now that you mention it," he said quietly, "I believe it is."

She spoke again, but he was in such agony that he broke out in a perspiration, a most fortunate circumstance, since he was perished with cold. The spasm did not last long, however, and he found his voice again.

"Are you Miss Nina Gray?" he asked, and, in the same breath, was conscious of the absurd formality of the question in the conditions.

She did not answer.

"We may as well become acquainted," he went on, smiling at the queer turn their first words had taken.

"Now I remember everything," she said, burying her face in her hands.

"I can't have you crying," he muttered with a certain roughness. "Tears won't help. We're in a pretty bad fix, and must meet developments calmly."

"I'm not crying," she said, dropping her hands, and looking at him as though to offer proof.

"Then you can at least tell me your name, though I'm almost sure that you are Nina. Even here, your sister, who is also my wife, keeps away from me."

"That is unjust. You saved both of us, but I kept my senses, and she did not. You asked me if I was Nina Gray. I am not. My name is Nina Forbes."

Maseden was stung into a revolt as fantastic as it was sudden.

"Good Lord!" he cried. "Are you married?"

"Please let me explain. Mr. Gray was not my father, but my stepfather. My mother married again. I--wanted to tell you. But does it really matter? Why are we discussing such trivial things? Are we four the only survivors of the wreck?"

"I suppose so."

"Mr. Gray died--while we were in the chart-room. He was an invalid--a neurotic. He could not withstand hardship of any sort. But the captain and chief officer were behind me on that mast.... Ah! I had forgotten that. I fainted, didn't I?"

"Yes."

Madge stirred uneasily. Their voices had aroused her.

"Don't be unkind to Madge," said the girl hurriedly. "Neither of us could help what happened in San Juan. We thought we were acting for the best. Our lives are still in jeopardy, I imagine. Won't you be good and forget that unfortunate marriage?"

"I won't talk of it, if that is what you mean. But I can hardly regard it as unfortunate. It undoubtedly saved my life."

Madge awoke with a cry.

"Nina!" she screamed. "Oh, Nina, is that you? Are we really alive?"

CHAPTER X

THE VIGIL

Sturgess awoke, too. Soon they were talking freely, and Maseden not only learned the heart-breaking story of the dozen refugees pent in the chart-house, but was told how he himself came by the blow on the head which took away his senses.

Madge Gray, or Forbes, as he must now call her, was moved to thank Providence for the intervention of the Spanish sailor.

"If that man hadn't picked you up, Mr. Maseden," she said, "you would have been washed overboard a few seconds later. Then nothing could have saved any of us."

She seemed to be completely unaware of the sensation she created by addressing her rescuer by name. Maseden felt Nina's nervous little start, but Sturgess put his astonishment into words.

"Maseden!" he cried. "You know our friend, then?"

"I--I heard his name before--on the ship," came the faltered answer.

"Well, you heard more than *I* did.... Are you the mysterious English-speaking *vaquero* who lived in the forecandle?" and the questioner bent a puzzled face sideways to try and discern the other man's features.

"Yes," said Maseden promptly. "There need be no mystery about it now. I got into trouble in Cartagena, shot the president-elect, and escaped in the disguise of a Spanish cowboy."

"Gee!" exclaimed Sturgess.

For some reason best known to himself he displayed no further curiosity in the matter, though he might well have wondered how Madge Forbes had come to identify that picturesque-looking person, Ramon Aliones, with the American whose exploits had set all Cartagena agog the day before the *Southern Cross* sailed.

There was an uncomfortable pause, which Maseden broke by a laugh.

"So you see, Mr. Sturgess, I owed you a good turn, though you never guessed it. By your kindness in letting me carry your bag and share your boat I got away from my pursuers without attracting attention."

"Gee!" said Sturgess again.

His comment probably denoted bewilderment. It may also have shown that the speaker had just ascertained something which supplied food for thought. In the half light Maseden allowed himself to smile, because the conceit instantly leaped into his mind that his fellow-countryman might have been told of that amazing marriage, and was now engaged in fitting together certain pieces of the puzzle.

If, for instance, Sturgess suspected that Madge Forbes was the lady who figured in that extraordinary episode, he must realize that in paying her such marked attention during the voyage he had placed himself, if not her, in a somewhat equivocal position.

"I had reason to believe that the captain recognized me," went on Maseden. "Probably that is how Miss Forbes came to hear my name."

"Miss Forbes!"

There was no mistaking the new note of surprise, even of annoyance, in Sturgess's voice. He was gathering information at a rapid rate, and evidently found some difficulty in assimilating it.

"Yes," broke in Nina Forbes. "That is my sister's name, and my own. Mr. Gray was our stepfather. We passed as his daughters while traveling. The arrangement prevented all sorts of misunderstandings. In any event, it concerned none but ourselves. I only mentioned the fact casually to Mr. Maseden a few minutes ago."

Some men might have caught a rebuke in the girl's words. Not so Sturgess.

"I'm tickled to death at hearing it, anyhow," he said cheerfully. "The one thing I couldn't understand was how you two girls could be that poor chap's daughters.... Well, now we're all properly introduced, let's talk as though we really knew one another. Has any one the beginning of a notion as to the time?"

Then Maseden remembered that he was wearing a watch which he had wound that morning. He produced it, and was able to discern the hands.

"A quarter past two," he announced.

A silence fell on them. Somehow the intimate and homely fact that one of the little company possessed a watch which had not stopped served rather to enhance than allay the sense of peril and abandonment which their brief talk had dispelled for the moment. A soldier who took part in that glorious but terrible retreat from Mons confessed afterwards that his spirit quailed once, and that was when he read the route names on a London suburban omnibus lying disabled and abandoned by the roadside.

The Marble Arch, Edgware Road, Maida Vale and Cricklewood--what had these familiar localities to do with the crash of shell-fire and the spattering of bullets on the *pave*? Similarly, the forlorn castaways on Hanover Island felt that a watch was an absurdly civilized thing among the loud-voiced savageries of wind and wave.

The moonlight died away, too, with a suddenness that was almost unnerving. True, the moon had only vanished behind a cloud-bank. But her face was veiled effectually, and the growing darkness soon showed that she would not be visible again that night.

They tried to sleep, but the effort failed. Lack of food was a more serious matter now than mere physical exhaustion. All four were young and vigorous enough to withstand fatigue, and to wake up refreshed after the brief repose they had already enjoyed.

But they were stiff and cramped, and their blood was beginning to yield to a deadly chill. Though they huddled together as closely as possible, there was no resisting the steady encroachment of the bitter cold.

At last Maseden counseled that they all stand up, and, despite the urgent need of conserving their energies, obtain some measure of warmth by stretching their limbs and breathing deeply.

He even suggested that they should sing, but the effort to start a popular chorus was such a lamentable failure that they laughed dismally.

Then he tried story telling. He judged, and quite rightly, that the majority of his hearers would be deeply interested in a recital of his own recent adventures.

Greatly daring, he left out no detail, and, in a darkness which was almost tangible because of its density, he was well aware how alert was every ear to catch the true version of an extraordinary marriage.

No one interrupted. They just listened intently. Once, when he asked if he was wearying them by a too exact description of events at the ranch after his escape, Nina Forbes said quietly:

"Please tell us everything, Mr. Maseden. I have never heard anything half so interesting. You have caused me to forget where I am, and I can give you no higher praise."

At last he made an end, dwelling purposely on the light note of his troubles with the Spanish sailor who claimed a vested right in him after the incident of the falling block.

Sturgess put a direct question or two.

"You don't seem to have any sort of a notion as to who the lady was?" he began.

"I only know that her Christian name was Madeleine," answered Maseden readily. "She was about to sign the register when the idea of getting out of the Castle dawned on me, and, from that instant, I thought of nothing else. I hadn't much time, you know. The plan had to be concocted and carried out almost in the same breath. And there was no room for failure. The least slip, either in time or method, and I was a dead man."

"Madeleine!" mused Sturgess aloud. "She was English, or American, I suppose?"

"American, I imagine. Undoubtedly one or the other."

"And that fat Steinbaum was the marriage broker! I know Steinbaum--a thug, if ever there was one.... What are you going to do about it, Mr. Maseden?"

"Do about what?"

"Well, if you win clear from this present rather doubtful proposition--and we're backing you in that for all we're worth, ain't we, girls?--you're tied up to a wife whom you don't know, and I guess the one place in which you're likely to find

her is off the map for you for keeps."

"I'm not versed in the law," laughed Maseden, "but it will be a queer thing if I should be compelled to regard myself as married to a lady whom I have seen, certainly, but do not want."

"How do you know you don't want her?"

"I know nothing whatsoever about her."

"That's just it. That's where you may be hipped. She may be a peach, the finest ever. Suppose, for the sake of argument, one of these two, Miss Madge or Miss Nina--"

"The lady's name happened to be Madeleine," put in Madge instantly. "If the ceremony was meant to be valid she would undoubtedly sign her right name."

"Just so. You missed my point."

Maseden thought it advisable to come to the rescue. He had conveyed to the one vitally interested listener that her secret was safe for the time, and this should suffice.

"I am inclined to think that I shall be proof against my nominal wife's charms, no matter how great they may be," he said emphatically. "There is a romantic side to the affair, I admit, but I cannot blind myself to the fact that it possesses a prosaic one as well. Association with a skunk like Steinbaum is hardly the best of credentials, in the first place. Secondly, one asks what motive any woman could have in wishing to marry a man condemned to die. I'm not flattering myself that my personal qualifications carried much weight.

"Admittedly, the lady wanted to wed because I was about to disappear. I give her the credit of believing that she would never have gone through with the farce if she had the least reason to think that I would not be dead within the next half hour. But the fact remains that she was callous and calculating--whether to serve her own ends or some other person's is immaterial.... No, Mr. Sturgess; when, if ever, I choose a wife, it is long odds against her name being Madeleine."

Nina Forbes laughed, though her teeth chattered with the cold.

"The calm way in which men speak of 'choosing' a wife always amuses me," she said. "If any man told me he had 'chosen' me I should feel inclined to box his ears."

"It isn't the best of words," put in Sturgess promptly, "but it conveys a real compliment. A fellow meets a girl, *the* girl, and some electrical arrangement jangles at the back of his head. 'This is *it*,' says a voice. 'Go to it, good and hard,' and he goes. That's the only sort of choice he's given. The girl can always turn him down, you know. Still, she can't help feeling flattered. She says to herself, 'That poor fellow, Charles K. Sturgess, is only a mutt, but he did think me the best ever, so he had good taste.' What do you think, Miss Madge?"

Then he and the others discovered that Madge was crying. The frivolous chatter intended to hide a dread reality had failed in its object. They were shivering with cold again, and ever more conscious of gnawing hunger. The prospect of escape was more than doubtful. Fate seemed to be playing a pitiless game with every soul on board the *Southern Cross*, having swept some to instant death, while retaining others for destruction by idle whim. The renewed darkness, the continuous uproar of the reef, had broken the girl's nerve.

Maseden fancied that he had placed too great a strain on her by detailing with such precision the sequence of events during those crowded hours at Cartagena.

"I think," he said gravely, "that we ought to lie down again, and await patiently the coming of daylight. The sun rises, no matter what else may happen, and dawn cannot be long delayed now."

They obeyed him. They looked to him for guidance, but they were glad he did not call for any effort. Even the light-hearted, apparently irresponsible Sturgess, who, if he had to die, would depart this life with a jest on his lips, was stilled by the sheer hopelessness of their condition.

After one of those hours which seem to belong to eternity rather than to time, a quality of grayness made itself felt in the overwhelming gloom. Soon the serrated edge of the opposite wall of rock became a fixed and rigid thing against a background of cloud. In this new world of horror and suffering the break of day, to all appearances, came from the west!

This phenomenon was easily explained. Near by, on the east, rose the tremendous peaks of the Andes, so the plain of the sea on the western horizon caught the first shafts of light long before they filtered into the fiords and gorges of the coast-line tucked in at the base of those great hills.

Not that it mattered a jot to those desolate ones where the sun rose that day. They would have given little heed had the earth rolled over on a new axis, and dawn come from the South Pole!

As soon as daylight was sufficiently advanced to render the rock fissures clearly visible, Maseden roused his tiny flock from the stupor of sheer exhaustion. He was a man born to lead, and the necessity to spur on and exhort others proved his own salvation. He was stiff and sore, and his head still ached abominably, but he rose to his feet with an energetic shout that quickened the blood in his hearers' veins.

"Now, folk," he said, "the first order of the day is breakfast, and then strike camp!"

Breakfast! They thought he was crazy. But he took the bottle of brandy from a crevice in which he had lodged it securely overnight, and Sturgess uttered a cackling laugh.

"I'm doing pretty well for a life-long teetotaler," he wheezed. "When a fellow like me falls off the water-wagon, he generally drops with a dull thud, but *I* must have set up a record. After lunching and dining yesterday on claret, I supped on brandy last night and am about to breakfast on the same.... Girls, help yourself and pass the decanter!"

Maseden held up the bottle to the light. It had never contained more than a pint, and nearly half had gone. A small coin served as a measure to divide the contents into five portions.

"Each of us drinks a *peseta*-worth," he said. "There must be neither half measures nor extra ones. The last *peseta*-worth remains in the bottle. Is that agreed?"

"I want very little, please," said Nina Forbes. "Just enough to moisten my lips and tongue--"

"You're going to do as you're bid," was the gruff answer. "I advise you to sip your portion, by all means, but you *must* take it. As a penalty for disobedience, you'll start."

She made no further protest, but swallowed her dose meekly. Sister Madge followed. Sturgess was minded to argue, but met Maseden's dour glance, and took his share. The first mouthful of the spirit acted on him like an elixir of life. He drank down to the allotted mark, and handed the bottle to Maseden.

"Now, girls," he chortled, "this is the guy who really needs watching. If he doesn't play fair let's heave him into the sea."

So three pairs of eyes saw to it that their rescuer had his full allowance. Then the bottle was put away, and the castaways took stock of their surroundings.

At first sight the position was grotesquely disheartening. Beneath, to the left, was the sea. Behind them rose an overhanging wall of rock, which swung round to the right and cut off the ledge. The cleft itself was some twelve feet wide, and the opposite wall rose fully ten feet. In a word, no chamois or mountain goat could have made the transit.

They all surveyed the situation from every point of view afforded by the fifteen feet of ledge. There was no reason to express opinions. Escape, in any direction, looked frankly impossible.

Then Maseden examined the cleft beneath.

"We cannot go up," he said quietly. "In that case, as we certainly don't mean to stay here, I'm going down."

It was feasible, with care, to climb down to sea level, but the huge rollers breaking over the reef sent a heavy backwash against the cliff. The swirl of water rose and fell three feet at a time, with enough force to throw the strongest man off his balance.

"Do you mean that you intend jumping into the sea, Mr. Maseden?" said Madge Forbes.

She was quite calm now. She put that vital question as coolly as though it implied nothing more than a swimmer's pastime. Their eyes clashed, and, for the first time, the man saw that Madge possessed no small share of Nina's self-control. Her earlier collapse was of the body, not of the soul.

"It doesn't mean that I shall willingly commit suicide," he answered. "If it comes to that, I suggest that we all go together. I'm merely taking a prospecting trip. There's no way out above. I must see what offers below."

Without another word he sat on the lip of the rock on which they stood, and lowered himself to a tiny ledge which gave foothold. They watched him making his way down. It was no easy climb, but he did not hurry. Twice he advanced, and climbed a little higher to a point whence descent was more practicable. At last he vanished.

Sturgess, craning his neck over the seaward side of their narrow perch, could not see him, while the growl of the reef

shut out all minor sounds.

Maseden was not long absent, but the three people whom he had left confessed afterwards that of all the nerve-racking experiences they had undergone since the ship struck, that silent waiting was the worst.

At last he reappeared. Nina, farthest up the cleft, was the first to see him, and she cried shrilly:

"Oh, thank God! He's got a rope!"

A rope! Of what avail was a rope? Yet three hearts thrilled with great expectation. Why should Maseden bring a rope? It meant something, some plan, some definite means towards the one great object. They had an abounding faith in him.

The rope was slung around his shoulders in a noose, and he seemed to be tugging at some heavy weight which yielded but slowly to the strain. When he was still below the level of the ledge he undid the noose and passed it to Sturgess.

"Hold tight!" he shouted. "I've picked up the broken foremast. I'm going down to clear it off the rocks. When I yell, haul away steadily."

They asked no questions. Maseden simply must be right. They listened eagerly for the signal, and put all their strength to the task when it came.

Soon the truck of the foremast appeared. Then the full length of the spar could be seen, with Maseden guiding it. He had tied the rope at a point about one-third of the length from the truck. When it was poised so that lifting alone was required he shouted to them to stop, and rejoined them, breathless, but bright-eyed.

"There's no means of escape by the sea," he explained, "so we must try the cliff. This is our bridge. I think it will span the gully. Anyhow, it is worth trying."

Then they understood, and measuring glances were cast from spar to opposing crest. It would be a close thing, but, as Maseden said, it was certainly worth trying.

In a minute, or less, the broken mast was standing up-ended on the ledge. Then, with its base jammed into a crevice, it was lowered by the rope across the chasm. It just touched the top of the rock wall.

They actually cheered, but the women's hearts missed a couple of beats when Maseden began to climb again. He worked his way upward without haste, found a toe-grip on the rock, raised himself carefully, and again disappeared from sight.

This time he was not so long away. He looked down on them with a confident smile.

"There's a chance," he said. "A ghost of a chance. Now I'm coming back!"

CHAPTER XI

PROGRESS

When he stood beside them once more on the ledge he told them what he had seen.

"It's a fortress of rock up there, and nothing else," he said. "We may have to climb at least a couple of hundred feet. Have any of you ever done any Alpine work?"

No; they knew nothing of the perils or delights of mountaineering.

"I'm in the same boat," he confessed, "but I've read a lot about it, and I've noticed one thing in our favor--the pitch of the strata is downward towards the land, and that kind of rock face gives the best and safest foothold. Moreover, this cleft, or fault, seems to continue a long way up.

"Now, we haven't a minute to spare. Each hour will find us weaker. The weather, too, is clear, and the rock fairly dry, but wind and rain, or fog, would prove our worst enemies. There is plenty of cordage down below. I'll gather all within reach. It may prove useful."

He seemed to have no more to say, and was stooping to begin the descent when Sturgess grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Wait a second, commodore!" he cried. "You've got your job cut out, and I'll obey orders and keep a close tongue, you bet; but when it comes to collecting rope lengths, that is *my* particular stunt, as I sell hemp, among other things. You just rest up a while."

Maseden nodded, and made way for a willing deputy. It was only fit and proper that he, too, should conserve his energies.

"Round the corner to the left," he said, "you'll find a sloping rock. Some wreckage is lodged in an eddy alongside it. Secure the cordage, and any other odds and ends you think useful. Shin up here with a few rope lengths at once. I want them straight away. Have you a strong knife?"

Yes, Sturgess luckily did possess a serviceable knife. By the time he had handed over a number of rope strands Maseden, helped by the girls, had hauled back the mast, to which he began attaching short loops, or stirrups, about two feet apart. He did not expect that either Madge Forbes or her sister would be able to climb the mast, and it was almost a sheer impossibility that he and Sturgess should carry them time and again. So the mast, after serving twice as a bridge, was now to become a ladder.

Sturgess returned with a curiously mixed spoil--a good deal of rope, a sou'wester, a long, thin line--probably the whip used to establish the connection between bridge and forecastle while parts of the *Southern Cross* still held together--and the ship's flag, the ensign which was flying at the poop when the ship struck.

Water was dripping off him. Evidently he had either been caught by a sea or had slipped off a rock.

"Accident?" inquired Maseden.

"Not quite. I had to risk something to get these," and he produced from his pockets a dozen large oysters.

No party of *gourmets* ever sat down to a feast with greater zest than those four hungry people. Probably, in view of the labors and hardships they were yet fated to undergo, the oysters saved their lives. There is no knowing. Human endurance can be stretched to surprising limits, but, seeing that they were destined to taste no other food during twelve long hours of arduous exertion, the value of Sturgess's find can hardly be overrated.

The oysters were of a really excellent species, though under the circumstances they were sure to be palatable, no matter what their actual qualities.

"I suppose I need hardly ask if there are any more to be had?" inquired Maseden, when the meal was dispatched.

"No, sir," grinned Sturgess.

He left it at that, but the others realized that he had probably risked his life more than once in the effort to secure even that modest supply.

The meal, slight though it was, not only gave them a new strength--it brought hope. If only they could win a way to the

interior, and reach the land-locked waters of the bay which opened up behind the frowning barrier they must yet scale, in all likelihood they would at least obtain a plentiful store of shell-fish.

Nina Forbes uttered a quaint little laugh as she threw the last empty shell on to the rocks beneath.

"Now," she said, "I am quite ready for the soup and a joint."

"Oh, don't be horrid!" cried Madge. "You've gone and made me feel ravenous again."

"He, or she, who would eat must first labor," said Maseden. "Thanks to friend Sturgess, we've enjoyed a first-rate snack. I've never sampled manna, but I'll back the proteids in three fat oysters against those in a pound of manna any day. Now, let's get to business. If I'm not mistaken we're going to tackle a stiff proposition."

He knotted some stout cord around his own waist and that of each of the others, and slung the longest available coil over his shoulders. Then the mast was fixed in its place across the ravine, and he climbed to the opposite crest by straddling the pole, putting his feet in the loops, and pulling himself up by both hands.

Throwing back the rope, he told Sturgess to see that it was fastened securely to one of the girls on the belt already in position. He purposely refrained from specifying which one. By chance, Madge Forbes stood nearest, and it was she who came.

The crossing was awkward rather than dangerous, and rendered far more difficult by the fact that the unwilling acrobat was compelled to expose her naked limbs. But after the first shock common sense came to her aid, and she straightway abandoned any useless effort to observe the conventions.

Still, she blushed furiously, and was trembling when Maseden caught her hands and helped her to land.

"Thank Heaven we've kept our boots," he said, unfastening the rope. "Just look at the ground we have to cover, and think what it would mean if our feet were bare."

The comment was merely one of those matter-of-fact bits of philosophy which are most effective in the major crises of life. It was so true that a display of leg or ankle mattered little afterwards. Nevertheless, a similar ordeal caused Nina to blush, too, but she laughed when Madge cried ruefully:

"What in the world has happened to my ankles? They are scrubbed and bruised dreadfully."

"That was last night's treatment, my dear," said her sister. "I escaped more lightly than you."

"But what do you mean? I felt some soreness, but imagined I knocked myself in coming from the wreck."

"You were in a dead faint, so Mr. Maseden and Mr. Sturgess massaged you unmercifully."

Madge surveyed damages again.

"I must have been very bad if I stood that," she said.

"You'll be worse before we see the other side of this cliff," murmured Nina, casting a critical eye over the precipitous ground in front.

It is not to be wondered at if the girls' hearts quailed at the sight. They were standing on a sloping terrace, of no great depth, which ended abruptly at the foot of a towering cliff. A little to the right ran the line of the cleft, but so forbidding was its appearance, and so apparently unscalable its broken ledges, that the same thought occurred to each--what if they had but left a narrow, sheltered prison for a wider and more exposed one?

Maseden, however, allowed no time for reflection. He and Sturgess had already dragged the foremast after them, and were shouldering it in the direction of the first hump of rock which seemed to offer a way into the cleft. Any other route was absolutely impossible.

After one last glance at the reef which had slain a gallant ship and so many lives, they quitted the ledge which had proved their salvation. It was then five o'clock in the morning. At four o'clock that afternoon they flung themselves, utterly spent, on a carpet of thick moss which coated the landward slope of the most westerly point of Hanover Island.

Their hands and knees were torn and bleeding, their fingernails broken, their bones aching and their eyes bloodshot. But they had triumphed, though many a time it had seemed that if Providence meant to be kind, an avalanche of loose stones or a slip on treacherous shale would have hurled them to speedy death on the rocks beneath.

On five separate occasions they had found themselves strung out on a narrow ledge which merged to nothingness in

the sheer wall of a precipice. Five times had they to go back and essay a different path, often beginning again fifty or even a hundred feet below the point they had reached. They were obliged to drag or carry the heavy topmast every inch of the way, because, without its aid, either as a bridge or a ladder, they could never have surmounted a tithe of the obstacles encountered.

In those eleven awful hours they had climbed not two, but five hundred feet, a distance which, on the level, a good runner would traverse in about twenty seconds, whereas it took them an average of a minute to climb one foot.

The marvel was that the women could have done it at all, even with the help which both men gave unstintedly. During the last weary hours no one uttered an unnecessary word. Each of the four was determined to go on, not for his or her own sake, but for the sake of the others. They were roped together. If one fell, it meant disaster to all. So, with splendid grit, each resolved not to fall so long as hand would hold or foot lodge on the tiniest projection.

But, with final success, came utter collapse. Even Maseden, far stronger physically than Sturgess, fell like a log. True, he had borne far more than his share of the day's toil. No matter what his inmost thoughts, he had never, to outward seeming, lost heart. It was he who always found the new line, he who earliest decided to turn back and try again.

It was he, too, who called now for renewed exertion after some minutes of complete and blissful repose.

"Sorry to disturb your *siesta*," he cried, with a woful assumption of cheery confidence, "but we must reach the shore, if possible, before night falls. Oysters and Chablis await us there. *En avant, messieurs et 'dames!*"

Nina Forbes sat up and brushed the hair from her eyes.

"I don't think I can walk another yard. Won't you leave me here?" she demanded.

"No."

"Are we to carry that mast with us?"

"Why not? We may need it."

Her eyes followed Maseden's down the slope. Compared with the sullen, frowning realm of rock they had quitted, this eastern side of the island resembled a Paradise. The moss on which they were resting was thick and wiry. A hundred feet beneath were fir-trees, sparse and stunted at first, but soon growing luxuriantly, yet promising, to Maseden's weighing eye, a barrier nearly as formidable as the fearsome wall of rock they had just surmounted.

He knew that which was happily hidden from the others. In this wild land, seldom, if ever, trodden by the foot of man, the forests throve on the bones of their own dead progenitors. Aged trees fell and rotted where they lay, and the roots of newcomers found substance among the heaped-up logs. Gales and landslides helped to swell the mad jumble of decaying trunks, which formed an impassable layer hardly ever less than fifteen feet in depth and often going beyond thirty feet.

Of the two, Maseden believed he would sooner tackle another wall of rock rather than essay to cross that belt of fantastic growths.

But, down there was water--perhaps food--certainly shelter. He guessed that at an altitude where hardy Alpine mosses alone flourished the cold would be intense at night. Already there was a shrewd nip in the breeze. They must not dawdle another instant.

He made up his mind to head for a gap in the trees which seemed to mark a recent land-slip, and trust to fortune that the gradient might not be too steep. Better any open risk than the fall of perhaps the whole party into a pit of dead wood choked with foetid and noisome fungus growths. Once caught in such a trap, they might never emerge.

And now they met with their greatest among many pieces of luck that day. The opening Maseden had noticed was not the track of an avalanche, but a rough water-course, through which the torrential rain-storms of the coast tumbled headlong to the sea.

Notwithstanding the long-continued gale, the descent was so steep that only a vestige of a stream trickled down the main gully. Here and there lay a pool. Though the water was brackish, it was strongly pigmented with iron, and the roots of vigorous young trees seemed to find sustenance in it.

At any rate, they must drink or die, so they drank, though Maseden warned them to be moderate. They laved their wounds, which were intensely sore at first, owing to the encrustation of salt on their skins. But here, again, nature's surgery, if painful, was effective. Salt is a rough and ready antiseptic. None of them owned any real medical knowledge. In their hard case ignorance was surely bliss, because they must have had the narrowest of escapes from tetanus.

The descent, though trying, was not specially perilous. Three times did the mast bring them down small cataracts, and many times across extraordinarily ingenious log barriers, set up against the stress of falling water by nature's own engineering methods.

Once, indeed, a heavy boulder, poised in unexpected balance, toppled over just as they had reached the base of a waterfall. It would have crushed Nina Forbes to a pulp had not Maseden seen the stone move. As it was, he snatched her aside, and a ton of rock crashed harmlessly on to the very spot where she had been standing the fifth part of a second earlier.

Such an incident, happening in civilized surroundings, would have been regarded as phenomenal, something akin to an escape from a train wreck. Here it passed as a mere item in the day's trials. It did not even shake the girl's nerve.

"I suppose I ought to say 'thank you,' but I'm not quite sure you have done me a service," she murmured wearily.

Hitherto both she and her sister had been so brave, so uncomplaining, that Maseden took warning from the words. The two girls were at the extreme limit of their powers of endurance, mentally and physically. It was five o'clock in the evening. After a day and a night of passive misery they had been subjected to every sort of muscular strain during nearly twelve hours, and might collapse at any moment now.

"Courage!" he said, with a gentleness curiously in contrast with the rather gruff and hectoring manner he had adopted all day. "You haven't noticed how near the sea is. We shall be on shore in a few minutes."

The girl's lips parted in a wan smile.

"You are wonderful," was all she said, but the pathos underlying the tribute wrung his heart.

Somehow, anyhow, they slithered and dropped down the remaining steps of their Calvary. During the last few feet they were able to leave behind the friendly topmast, but the shadows were falling when they stood, forlornly triumphant, on the flat rocks which served as the beach of the estuary.

The two girls sank at once to a moss-covered boulder. They looked so deathly white beneath the tan of exposure and the crust of dirt and blood not altogether removed when they bathed their faces in the pool, that Maseden unstrapped the poncho which he carried slung to his shoulders and produced from its folds that thrice-precious bottle of brandy.

The patients weakly resisted his demand that they should share nearly the whole of the mouthful of spirit which remained; but he was firm, and they drank. Sturgess, who staggered and nearly fell when he tried to move after the brief halt, was given a few drops; Maseden himself had what was left. Then he filled the bottle with water, and each took a long drink.

There is this supreme virtue in water, that, while slaking thirst, it stays the worst pangs of hunger, and Maseden had enough strength in reserve to hurry off in search of oysters, or any sort of shell-fish, before daylight failed wholly. He was fortunate in finding a well-stocked bed almost at once.

He alone knew what agony he endured when his bruised and torn fingers were plunged into ice-cold salt water. But he persevered, and gathered such a quantity that in ten minutes he and his companions were enjoying a really satisfying meal.

While they ate, they examined their surroundings. It was half tide. A bleak, rocky foreshore provided at least an ideal breeding-ground for oysters. Behind them rose the solemn bank of pine-trees through which they had come. On the right, only half a mile away, stood the great shoulder of rock which shut out the Pacific on that northern side of the estuary. In front, two miles or more distant, lay a jumble of forests and wild hills, and a similar vista spread far to the left, because the estuary widened to a span of several miles.

It was, indeed, a wild, desolate, awe-inspiring land, a territory abandoned of mankind! In such regions old-time sailors found fearsome monsters, amphibious reptiles larger than ships, and gnomes of demoniac aspect.

Such visions were easy to conjure up. Nina Forbes saw one now in the dusk.

"Oh, what is that?" she cried, in genuine alarm, gazing seaward with terror-laden eyes.

It took some time to unmask the strange denizen of the deep which she had discovered. Three seals, lying in a row on a flat rock, looked remarkably like the accepted pictures of a sea-serpent, but the illusion was destroyed when one of the creatures dived, followed, in turn, by each of the others, in one, two, three order.

"We must rise before dawn to-morrow," said Maseden. "Seals are good to eat. You and I, Sturgess, can cut one off when the pack comes on shore."

"Seals may be good to eat, but they will also be hard to eat if we are unable to cook them," put in Madge.

"There were times to-day when I could have eaten seal cooked or uncooked," admitted Nina.

"Probably such times will recur to-morrow," said Maseden. "You will soon grow tired of oysters for every meal. Did you ever hear of the sailing ship which took a cargo of bottled porter from Dublin to Cape Town? After crossing the line she was caught in a gale, disabled, and carried hundreds of miles out of her course. She ran short of water, so, during three wretched weeks, officers and crew drank stout for breakfast, dinner and supper. When, at last, the vessel reached Table Bay, if porter was suggested as a beverage to any member of the ship's company there was instant trouble."

"Still," said Madge thoughtfully, "I don't think I shall like raw seal.... You are very clever, Mr. Maseden. You must find some means of making a fire."

Maseden glanced up at the darkening sky.

"At present the pressing problem is where are we to sleep," he said.

"Under the deodars," suggested Sturgess promptly.

"Yes, I suppose so. But we must make haste."

"If you ask me to put up any sort of hustle, I'll crack into small fragments," said Sturgess, rising to his feet slowly and stiffly.

But this young American--a typical New Yorker in every inch--was blessed with a valiant heart. He helped Maseden to break and cut small branches of the fragrant pines, and pile them beneath the largest tree they could find on a comparatively level piece of ground above high-water mark. The two girls were half carried to this soft couch, which invited sharp comparison with the wet, slimy rock of the previous night.

Despite their protests, they were wrapped in the now dry ship's flag and the poncho, while the men covered themselves with the oilskins, the coat which Sturgess had found on the reef coming in very useful for Maseden.

Then they slept. And how they slept! The mere fact that they had eaten a quantity of good food induced utter weariness and exhaustion.

During the night it rained heavily, and the tide pounded fiercely on the boulders only a few feet below their resting-place. But they hardly moved, and certainly paid no heed.

Maseden was awakened by a veritable cascade of water on his face; the tree, after the manner of its kind, though shooting the rain generally off its layers of branches, now in full summer foliage, provided occasional channels through which the torrent poured as from a spout, and he was stretched beneath one. He swore softly, saw that the others were undisturbed, moved his position slightly, and fell sound asleep again.

As for rising betimes to catch a seal, it was broad daylight when he shook off the almost overpowering desire to go on sleeping.

Nina and Madge were lying in each other's arms, breathing easily, and looking extraordinarily well. Beyond them, Sturgess lay like a log, his clean-cut, somewhat cynical features relaxed in a smile. It was a pity to rouse him, but Maseden saw by his watch that they had enjoyed nine hours of real repose, and, as the weather was fine again and there was a promise of sunshine, it behooved them to be up and doing.

So he shook his compatriot gently by the shoulder, and Sturgess was awake instantly.

"Gosh!" he said, gazing at a patch of blue sky overhead. "I was just ordering clams on ice in Louis Martin's. It must have been a memory of those oysters."

Maseden, by a gesture, warned him not to speak loudly, whereupon Sturgess sat up, saw the two girls, grinned, and stole quietly after his companion.

"Say," he confided, when at a safe distance, "they're the limit, aren't they?"

"They're all right, so far as girls go," agreed Maseden.

"Oh, come off your perch! Who ever loved that loved not at first sight? If we win through I'm going to marry Madge, or I'll know the reason why, and if you have half the gumption we credit you with you'll tack on to sister Nina as soon as you've shunted that sporty young person who grabbed you at the cannon's mouth in Cartagena."

"Will you oblige me by not talking such damn nonsense?" growled Maseden, blazing into sudden and incomprehensible wrath.

"Calm yourself, *hidalgo!*" came the quiet answer. "Sorry if I've butted in on your private affairs. Having fixed things for myself, I thought I'd do you a good turn, too. That's all."

"Don't you realize that you are hardly playing the game by even hinting at such possibilities in present conditions?"

Maseden regretted the words the instant they were uttered. Sturgess stopped as though he had been struck, and his somewhat sallow face flushed darkly.

"It will be a pretty mean business if you and I manage to quarrel, won't it?" he said thickly.

CHAPTER XII

A PEEP INTO THE FUTURE

"Oh, forget it!" cried Maseden, more angry now with himself than with the youngster whose candor had provoked this outburst. "I didn't intend to be offensive. My mind was running on the day's worries. We're in a deuce of a fix, and I can see no way out of it. If I annoyed you by a careless expression, I apologize."

"Rub it off the slate, friend. I only want to put in a first bid for Madge, so to speak."

"But, for all you know, she may be--engaged to some other man," Maseden could not help retorting.

"Nix on the other fellow. He's not on in this film. I'll have him beaten to a frazzle long before I see good old New York again."

Then Maseden did contrive to choke back the very obvious comment that Madge Forbes might even be married already. Sufficient for the day was the problem thereof. It was not matrimony that was bothering him, though the queer marriage tie contracted in San Juan seemed fated to make its fetters felt even in the wilderness. He was wondering what would happen if, as was highly probable, they were marooned on an island rarely if ever visited by man.

He laughed grimly.

"New York is away below the horizon this morning," he said. "Let's go and hunt more oysters!"

Still, for the life of him he could not altogether get rid of the spectre raised by Sturgess's almost banal candor. The New Yorker was unmistakably a good fellow. He had behaved like a man during twenty-four hours which tested one's moral fibre as pure metal is separated from dross in a furnace. Was it quite fair that he should be kept in ignorance of the astounding fact that Madge Forbes, and none other, was the heroine of that extraordinary ceremony in the Castle of San Juan?

Why not tell him? There was every reason to believe that he had indulged in no overt love-making as yet. Why not emulate his outspokenness, and thus spare him the certain shock of discovery?

Moreover, when the truth came out, would he not feel with justice that he had been very badly treated both by Maseden and the woman whom he professed to love?

Maseden squirmed under the thought. Such a discussion, at such a moment, savored of rank lunacy, but it was better to act crazily than dishonorably.

Then came a reflection that hurt like a cut from a jagged knife. Sturgess was an impressionable youngster. He might easily transfer his wooing from Madge to Nina.

Maseden could not help asking himself why a torturing question of that kind should come to plague him at a time when their lives were in dire jeopardy. They might, by chance, exist a week, a month--several months in that dreadful fastness of rock, forest and sea, but the briefest glance towards the interior showed how desperate was their case, and he knew only too well that the absence of proper food, of fire, of clothing, of everything that renders life tolerable and joyous, would soon bring mortal sickness in its train, even though they ran the gantlet of other perils like unto those of yesterday.

Why, he wondered, in addition to ending these present evils, should he be called on to solve a fine point in ethics?

He did not realize how clearly the torment in his soul was revealed in his face until Sturgess demanded cheerfully:

"What's worrying you now, boss? You ain't chewing on that little misunderstanding of a minute ago, are you?"

Maseden smiled dourly. Here was an opening, and he would take it, no matter what the personal cost.

"No. That is not my way," he said. "I was merely turning over in my mind a somewhat ticklish problem. Sometimes, when a man does not know how to act for the best, it is not a bad plan to run counter to one's own inclinations. Then, at any rate, there is no fear of selfishness warping one's judgment. In this instance--"

"Is the tide rising or falling?" interrupted Sturgess excitedly.

"Falling."

"Good.... What's that?"

They were walking in the direction of the oyster bed which Maseden had found overnight. The beach was strewn with boulders, the surface of each a mosaic of myriads of tiny mussels. The rock floor was not quite flat, but dipped slightly eastward, and the outcrop of every stratum, worn smooth by countless tides, offered a number of irregular paths by which it was possible to walk dry-shod a mile or more towards mid-channel.

Between these tracks, so to speak, the water lodged in pools, and here, too, as might be expected, the smaller rocks gathered, mostly in groups.

Among one such pile Sturgess's sharp eyes had detected some wreckage.

Now, any sort of flotsam or jetsam might be peculiarly useful to folk whose belongings had been reduced to a cloak, a ship's flag, a few oilskins, and, in the case of the women, little else. The sight of a cabin trunk, up-ended among a litter of woodwork and tangled iron, drove into the special Limbo provided for all vain and foolish things the personal difficulty which was perplexing Maseden.

He hurried on, and soon was aware of an oddly familiar aspect about the trunk, battered though it was, and discolored by long immersion in salt water.

"Well, if this isn't something like a miracle!" he cried when he could believe his senses. "Here is my own trunk! The last time I saw it, it was wedged between the fore-castle deck and the iron frame of a bunk."

"The court accepts the evidence," chortled Sturgess. "We find in close conjunction the remains of a bunk and a deck. If you produce a key, and unlock the aforesaid trunk, it will be declared yours without further inquiry."

"There is no key. It is only strapped."

"What's inside?"

"Some underclothing, socks and shirts.... By Jove! When dried, they will be invaluable to those two girls.... How in the world did they contrive to lose most of their clothing? You were all fully dressed when the ship struck, I suppose?"

"I guess your college class didn't include a course of heavy seas washing through a deck-house every half minute during a whole day. What sort of feminine rig would stand the tearing rush of tons of water hour after hour? Man alive, I had the devil's own job to keep any of my own clothes on, and would never have succeeded if I wasn't well buttoned up in an oilskin. As for the girls' skirts and things, they simply fell off 'em. At first they made frantic efforts to save a few rags, but they had to give up. I saw Madge's skirt washed overboard in strips. All the seams parted. I'm in pretty bad shape myself. Look here."

Sturgess opened his oilskin coat, and showed how the lining had fallen out of his coat and the back had parted from the front of his waistcoat.

"If it hadn't been for the oilskins we would all have been stripped stark naked," he went on. "Gee! It's marvelous what one can withstand in the shape of exposure when one is pushed to it good and hard. I should have said that those two girls would have died fourteen times on the wreck, let alone the hour before dawn yesterday."

Maseden, meanwhile, was pulling the trunk free from the twisted frame of the bunk, which, screwed to the deck, had carried a precious argosy nearly a mile from the reef; then, most luckily, it had caught in a clump of seaweed, and remained anchored during two ebbs.

"We needn't bother to open it here," he said. "I know exactly what is inside--rough stuff, bought to maintain my disguise as a *vaquero*, but all the better for present purposes."

He paused dramatically, and said something which might, perhaps, sound better in Spanish. When a man who has not been perturbed in the least degree by grave and imminent danger shows signs of real excitement, his emotion is apt to be contagious, and his companion's eyes sparkled.

"Holy gee! What is it?" he almost yelped. "Spit it out! Don't mind me!"

"This trunk contains a gun and cartridges!"

"Gosh! I thought it must be either a steam launch or an aeroplane! What is there to shoot, anyhow?"

"Don't you understand? Waterproof cartridges mean fire. We'll have a roaring fire within five minutes."

"Put it there!" shouted Sturgess, holding out his right hand. "There's millions of tons of iron-stone in that hill above the wood. Let's start a ship-yard!"

They were so elated that they forgot to gather any oysters, and even neglected to take away the iron and wires of the bunk, scraps of metal which might prove of inestimable worth in the days to come. Luckily, however, they had plenty of time, because the tide would fall during another couple of hours.

Maseden's hands almost trembled as he undid the straps. Now that fortune had proved so kind he feared lest the cartridges might be spoiled. But a bullet torn from a brass case was followed by grains of dry, black powder.

Soon he had manufactured a squib. Dead branches off the pines--always the best of fire-wood, and far preferable to dead wood lying on the ground--were heaped in a suitable place, and, in less than the specified five minutes, a good fire was crackling merrily.

There were logs in plenty. Had they chosen, the two men could have built a furnace fierce enough to roast an ox whole.

It was good to see the wonderment on the faces of Madge and Nina when they awoke to find an array of coarse flax and woolen garments steaming in front of the blaze, and a dozen big oysters, cooked in the shells, awaiting each of them. About that time, too, the sun appeared, and his first rays changed the temperature of the land-locked estuary from biting cold to an agreeable warmth.

So the four breakfasted, and, at the close of the meal, held a council of war. With a charred stick, Maseden drew on a rock a rough map of Hanover Island.

"I overheard from one of the crew of the *Southern Cross*," he said, "that the ship was supposed to be drifting towards Nelson Straits, which is the only opening into Smyth's Channel ever attempted hereabouts, even in fine weather, by small sealers and guano-boats. Now, it happens," he went on reflectively, "that this coast has always had a strange fascination for me."

"It was a treat to see you clinging to it lovingly for hours at a time yesterday," put in Sturgess.

"We want to hear what Mr. Maseden has to say," cried Madge sharply.

"Sorry. I shan't interrupt again. But, before the court resumes may I throw in a small suggestion? How about dropping these formal Misters and Misses? My front names are Charles Knight, usually shorted by my friends and admirers into C. K. What's yours, Maseden?"

"Philip Alexander, otherwise 'Alec.'"

"Got you. Now, girls, what do Nina and Madge stand for?"

He little guessed the explosive quality of that harmless question, but he did wonder why both Nina and Madge should blush furiously, and why their eyes should flash a species of appeal to Maseden.

Nina was the first to recover her composure.

"Nina and Madge should serve all ordinary purposes, C. K.," she said with a rather nervous laugh.

"They'll do fine," agreed Sturgess. But he did not forget his own surprise--and the cause of it.

Maseden, quite unprepared for this verbal bombshell, plunged into generalities somewhat hurriedly.

"Barring the polar regions, the southern part of Chile is the wildest and least known part of the world," he said. "It is extraordinary in the fact that every ship which sails to the west coast of both the Americas from Europe, and vice versa, either passes it in the Pacific or winds among its islands for hundreds of miles along Smyth's Channel; yet it remains, for the greater part, unexplored and almost uncharted. Darwin came here in the *Beagle*, and the sailor to-day depends on observations made during that voyage, taken nearly three-quarters of a century ago. Darwin's Journal, and other of his works containing references to South America, shortened many an evening for me on the ranch."

He paused a moment, before adding, in an explanatory way:

"My place, Los Andes, was a good twelve miles from Cartagena, and I had no English-speaking neighbors. I told you last night, if you remember, how I came to settle down there?"

Sturgess, though evidently burning to ask a question, merely nodded, grinning cheerfully when he caught Nina's eye.

"I only want you to understand why I claim some knowledge, such as it is, of this locality," continued Maseden. "At the southwest corner of Hanover Island is a ten-mile patch called Cambridge Island, and the two form the northern boundary of Nelson Straits. But in the channel between them are two smaller islands, and, unless I am greatly mistaken, there they are."

He pointed across the estuary, and indicated a break in the coast-line, beyond which other more distant hills were visible.

"It follows," he went on, "that when we sail up this channel to the left, we shall find ourselves in Nelson Straits, and, after covering fifty or sixty miles of fairly open water--open, that is, in the sense that there is plenty of it--we shall be in Smyth's Channel, and in the track of passing ships."

He paused, but did not try to ignore the plain demand legible on three intent faces.

"Yes; that is the only way," he said quietly. "We are here. We are alive. There is plenty of wood, and we have brains, hands, and fire. We must construct some sort of a raft, something in the style of the lumber-rafts built on big rivers, and take advantage of the tides. Our present position is quite inaccessible by land, and, I fear, equally unapproachable by water.

"And I'll tell you why I think so. Within quarter of a mile of us are some splendid oyster-beds. The coastal aborigines live mainly on shell-fish, and this store would have been visited by them times out of number if they could get at it. But I have seen no heaps of shells, such as must have remained if the savages came here.

"What has stopped them? Impassable forests, glaciers, and precipices on land, dangerous reefs and fierce tidal currents by sea. The geological feature which helped our climb yesterday must create reef after reef across the track of the channel.

"You see those pathways there?" and he stretched a hand towards the series of rock outcrops lining the shore like groins. "They have been almost leveled by the storms of centuries. But the *Southern Cross* was lost on one of them, and there must be scores of others between here and Smyth's Channel. There may be passages between many if not all, but it is self-evident that navigation is far too risky for the small coracles of the natives. We must go slowly and safely, if possible. If our raft will not cross a reef, we must abandon it, and build another on the far side. We may have to do that six times, a dozen times, even in sixty miles. There is no other means of escape. We may be weeks, months, in winning through, but that is our only practicable plan."

"Gee!" murmured Sturgess. "And I'm due in New York on February 10!"

The sheer absurdity of naming a date relaxed the tension. They all laughed, though not with the light-hearted mirth which four young people might reasonably display after dodging death continuously during twenty-four hours.

"By the way, what day is it?" inquired Nina Forbes wistfully.

"Sunday, January 23," said Sturgess. "I know, because it was my birthday yesterday. Somewhere about eleven o'clock a. m., I was twenty-seven. I didn't make a fuss about it. Just at that time, wise Alec here was holding on to a rock by his teeth and one toe, and telling us we had to go back carefully after a beastly difficult climb."

"Sunday!" repeated the girl.

Her thoughts traveled many a thousand miles to the quiet little New Jersey township where her mother was living during the absence of husband and daughters in South America. It was winter in the North, and there might be snow on the fields and ice on the streams, but snow and ice conforming to New Jersey notions of order and seamliness.

What a contrast between the white mantle marked out in rectangles by the country roads and ditches, with here and there a group of trees, a trim shrubbery, a red-roofed farm or dwelling house, and this chaos of rock, forest, cliff and ocean!

"Will the loss of the *Southern Cross* be reported?" she asked suddenly. The query was addressed to no one in particular, but Maseden answered.

"Her non-arrival will be noted at Punta Arenas," he said. "After a time the insurance people will post her as 'missing.' Then she will be assumed to be lost. Possibly some of the wreckage may be picked up. Or a boat. What became of all the boats?"

"Some of 'em were stove in, others washed clean off their davits," said Sturgess. "It was absolutely impossible to lower one. No one who did not witness it would have believed that a fine ship could break to pieces so quickly. Gee whiz! One minute I was standing near the fore-rail, looking at the narrowing entrance in full confidence that we should win through, and the next I was fighting for my life in the smoking-room, up to my waist in water."

"You are not quite doing yourself justice, C. K.," said Madge. "You were fighting for other people's lives as well. I have the clearest recollection of being hauled up the companion ladder to the bridge by you and one of the ship's officers.

Then you went back and helped Nina and Mr. Gray."

"That is what I was there for," was the prompt reply.

"This being Sunday, do we labor or rest, Alec?" inquired Nina.

It was the first time either girl had used Maseden's Christian name, and the sound on a woman's lips was like a caress. He reddened, and smiled. Nina's eyes met his, and dropped confusedly.

"We rest," he said. "We need rest. At least, I am free to confess that *I* do. You energetic people are inclined to forget that I began a really strenuous life by receiving a rap on the head that put me out of commission during several hours.... Now, Mr. Sturgess--sorry, C. K.--and I are going on a little tour along the coast. We shall be away an hour or more. I advise you two to rig yourselves as best you can in my superfluous garments. Make sure they are quite dry. It may seem rather absurd, but putting on damp clothing is an altogether different thing from allowing wet clothes to dry on your body. Keep a good fire. There is nothing to be afraid of. In this strange land there are neither animals nor reptiles."

"Nor birds," said Nina.

"Yes, plenty of birds, but the nesting season is long over, and many of the sea-birds have gone south. As we progress further inland we shall come across great colonies of puffins, ducks and swans. Curiously enough, there are plenty of humming-birds, which is about the last species one would expect off-hand to find in these wastes.... Come along, C. K. Let us try and circumvent the wily seal."

"Why not shoot one?" said Sturgess.

"Because I have only twenty-four cartridges, and each one may yet be worth its weight in diamonds. Remember, everybody!--we only use the rifle in the last extremity, either for food, or fire, or actual self-preservation. Once lighted, on no account must the fire be allowed to die out. Even when we build a raft, we can imitate the natives, and carry a fire with us. To save us men from temptation to-day, should we find a seal, we'll leave the gun with the ladies.

"A couple of cudgels, with ends sharpened and hardened in the fire, should serve our needs, and do the seal's business as well. If not, we must try again, and exist on oysters until we become more expert.... I'll put five cartridges in the magazine, and show you girls how it works. If you regard each shell as worth, say, five thousand dollars, you'll appreciate the net value of the whole twenty-four."

Within a few minutes Maseden and Sturgess set off. The tide was now at its lowest point, so they had no difficulty in walking in almost any direction. Their first act was to drag ashore the remains of the bunk. Given a quantity of malleable iron and a fire, it would not be an impossible task to construct some rough tools.

While placing this treasure-trove above high-water mark they saw the two girls examining the stock of underclothes which Providence had literally provided for their needs.

"Gosh!" said Sturgess, almost reverently. "It beats me to know how a couple of delicate women could endure the hardships we have gone through."

"But women are not delicate. I don't understand why men invariably harbor that delusion. In passive resistance women are more steadfast, even harder, than men. That is an essential, don't you see? The continuance of the race depends far more on the female than on the male. Civilization tries to upset the great principles of life, but fails, luckily. Savage tribes are aware of that elementary fact. Low down in the social scale the women do all the work, while the men loaf around, and only get busy when hunting or fighting."

"Tell you what, Alec," said Sturgess admiringly, "once fairly started, you talk like a book."

Such a remark could hardly fail to act as a gag on one of Maseden's temperament. By habit a silent man, he shrank from even the semblance of loquacity. Sturgess could extract no further information from him. He in his turn soon learned to guard his tongue when the Vermonter was in the talking vein, and unconsciously pouring out the stock of knowledge and philosophy garnered during those peaceful years on the ranch.

"We had better go this way," said Maseden, pointing towards the west. "Don't you think it advisable to search the coast seaward? There have been three tides since the ship struck, and anything likely to come ashore should have shown up by this time."

"Go right ahead, Alec. What you say goes."

Their search was fruitless. Indeed, the position in which the leather trunk was found proved that the set of the current on a rising tide was in the direction of the channel between the two small islands.

Maseden had little or no experience of the sea and its vagaries, or he would have noticed this highly significant fact, and thus saved himself and his companions much hardship and a good deal of needless risk.

Of course, he saw quickly that there was a remarkable absence of wreckage on the north side of the estuary, but he attributed it to the fury of the gale, which must have driven a great body of water far into the network of channels which stretched inland, with a resultant outpouring when the wind pressure was relaxed.

The only satisfactory outcome of a close visit to the bar was the complete vindication of their means of escape from the ledge. It would have been a sheer impossibility to round the point at or slightly above sea-level. The tides of untold ages had literally scooped a chasm out of the cliff, and perversely chosen to batter a passage through the rock rather than take the open path farther south.

They could not see the reef which had destroyed the *Southern Cross*. But they could hear it. Ever above the clatter of the rollers on the nearer rocks they caught the sullen roar of the outer fury.

"Let's clear out of this," said Sturgess suddenly. "That noise sends a chill right down my backbone."

Maseden turned at once. In any case, they could not have remained there much longer, because the tide was on the flow, and they had yet to discover how swiftly it covered the rock-paved foreshore.

They did not hurry, but kept a sharp look-out for seals, seeing several, but at a great distance. While they were yet nearly a quarter of a mile from the camping ground, from which came a pillar of smoke, showing that the fire was not being neglected, they were startled by a gun-shot.

It smote the air with a sound that was all the more insistent in that it was wholly unexpected. It drove into the sea, with a loud splash, a seal close at hand which had been hidden by a rock, and even brought a pair of circling bustards from some eyrie high up on the hills.

With never a word to one another, both men began to run.

CHAPTER XIII

THE SECOND SHIPWRECK

A series of reefs does not supply the best of surfaces for a sprint. Maseden slipped on a bed of seaweed and fell headlong, fortunately escaping injury. Sturgess, lighter, perhaps more adroit on his feet--it came out subsequently that he was an accomplished skater--stumbled several times, but contrived to keep going.

Thus he was the first to reach Madge Forbes, who hurried to meet them, followed by Nina, the latter walking more leisurely and carrying the rifle.

"What has happened?" gasped Sturgess. He saw that the girl was pale and frightened. She and her sister were continually looking backward, as though expecting to find they were being pursued.

"I think--it is all right--now," she said brokenly. "Nina shot at it--the most awful monster I have ever seen."

"Had it two legs, or four?"

Sturgess was incorrigible. Notwithstanding the start caused by the sound of the gun, he grinned. The girl turned to Nina.

"Please tell them, Nina, that we are not romancing," she cried indignantly.

Nina handed the rifle to Maseden.

"Put this thing right," she said coolly. "It won't work, but I'm sure I hit the beast with the first bullet."

Maseden pressed down the lever, and saw that a cartridge had jammed, as the extractor lever had not been jerked downward with sufficient force. He began adjusting matters with the blade of his knife.

"Were you attacked by an animal?" he inquired.

"We don't know exactly what it was," said Madge. "When you left us we decided to have a bath before putting on dry clothes. As our only towel was the ship's flag, we arranged that each should rub the other dry with her hands. We had just finished dressing, and Nina had gone to pile fresh logs on the fire, when I heard a splash in the water of the creek. I looked around and saw a fearful creature, bigger than a horse, which barked at me. I shrieked, and Nina ran with the rifle. The thing barked again--it was only a few feet away--so she fired. Then we both made off."

"You disturbed a seal, I expect."

"No. If those were seals we saw last night, this was no seal," said Nina decisively. "It had small, fiery eyes and long tusks. I think it had flappers, though, in place of feet, but it was enormous."

"Sounds like a walrus," put in Sturgess.

"There are no walruses in the South Pacific," said Maseden. "Anyhow, now that the magazine works all right, let's go and have a look."

Ample corroboration of the girl's story was soon forthcoming. The splashing of water behind the group of big rocks sheltering the pool in which they had taken their bath showed that something unusual was going on.

They all reached the spot in time to witness the last struggles of a gigantic sea-lion, one of the most fearsome-looking of the ocean's many strange denizens. The shot fired by Nina Forbes had struck it fairly in the throat, inflicting a wound which speedily proved mortal.

The animal was a full-grown male, fully ten feet in length, with a neck and shoulders of huge proportions. Its tusks and bristles gave it a most menacing aspect. The wonder was not that the bathers ran, but that Nina had the courage to face such a monster.

Maseden was delighted, and patted her on the shoulder.

"Well done!" he cried. "You've supplied the larder with fresh meat for days. We must even try our 'prentice hands at curing what we can't eat to-day or to-morrow."

The girl herself was not elated by her triumph. The water in which the sea-lion lay was deeply tinged with its blood, which had also bespattered the rocks.

"I have never before killed any living creature," she said in a rather miserable tone. "Why did the stupid thing attack us? We were doing it no harm."

Maseden laughed.

"Off you go, both of you!" he said. "C. K. and I have the job of our lives now. It will be no joke disjuncting this fellow with a couple of pocket-knives. But if the fact brings any consolation, I may tell you that a sea-lion when irritated can be a very ugly customer. Probably this one was sleeping in the sun under the lee of a rock, and you may have come unpleasantly near him without knowing it. When he awoke and saw you he was curious. Instead of slinking off, he roared at you, and might easily have killed the pair of you!"

"Can't we help?" inquired Nina, seeing that Maseden meant to lose no time.

"No."

"But we ought to," she persisted. "We must get used to such work."

"You can do something quite as serviceable by rigging a few lines on stout poles, where there is plenty of sun and air, and seeing that a big fire is kept up.... And, by the way, don't come this way till we call you. We shan't be--presentable."

The two disappeared without further question.

"This will be a messy undertaking," Maseden explained to his assistant. "The best thing we can do is strip, or our clothes will be in an awful state."

At the outset they abandoned any thought of actually dismembering the colossal carcass. They skinned it with difficulty, and then cut off the flesh in layers. After an hour's hard endeavor they had gathered a fine store of meat, while the pelt, after being well washed in salt water, was stretched on a flat rock to dry.

They were dressing again when a new trouble arose. From out of the void had gathered a flock of vultures. These fierce, evil-looking birds were so daring in their efforts to raid the pile of meat that two actually allowed themselves to be knocked over by the staves the men carried.

Sturgess remained on guard, therefore, while Maseden took the strips and hung them on the lines the girls had already prepared.

Madge volunteered to do the cooking. She had found two flat, thin stones, somewhat resembling hard slate, and she fancied that by placing some steaks between these and covering them with glowing charcoal the trick would be achieved. As a matter of fact, she succeeded wonderfully well. Even Nina, sniffing her portion, vowed that the shooting of a sea-lion had its compensations.

More vultures arrived. The sea-lion's bones were rapidly picked clean, but one of the men had to keep close watch all day over the curing operations.

An amusing argument arose as to the correct method of drying meat. Maseden held that he distinctly remembered reading that *biltong*, or South African antelope steak, was prepared by hanging the strips in the sun. The girls were positive that this would cause putrefaction, and that the meat should be placed in the shade.

As Maseden was not quite sure of his facts, he compromised as to a quarter of the supply, with the result that this smaller quantity was rendered uneatable.

The story of Alexander Selkirk has been told so often, and in so many forms, that it will not bear repeating here. During a whole fortnight these four young people devoted their wits and their muscles to the all-important task of feeding themselves and securing some means of escape into the interior. The men soon learned how to circumvent the wily seal, and thus store plenty of meat and skins, which latter, with sinews and a knife, were converted first into garments for the women and, as supplies increased, into a tent.

Maseden noticed that the high-water mark fell daily, so he reasoned that the *Southern Cross* struck during a high spring tide, and that the neap would occur in fourteen days. He laid his plans on that assumption, which was justified almost to a day.

Another gale blew up, but despite its discomfort it helped them materially, because the men loosened a barrier of logs which had formed high up the wooded cliff, and the rain freshet brought down far more timber than was needed for the

biggest raft they could hope to construct.

After some experiments they decided to make it a three-tier one, and flexible in the center. Hence it was fully thirty feet in length, the average length of a thick log being fifteen feet after its roots and thin section had been burnt off. For the same reason the raft was fifteen feet wide. It had a step in the forepart for their old friend, the broken topmast. They dispensed with a rudder, believing they could guide their ark with poles.

Observation showed that the tide flowed swiftly in mid-stream, and their well-matured project was to push out to a prearranged point at high-water, anchor while the tide fell, and travel as far as practicable on the next tide. They tried to avoid all risks that could be foreseen.

The raft was built in the waterway which Madge had termed the "creek"--the gulley cleared for itself by the torrent whose dry bed had offered them a road through the otherwise impenetrable forest. Every test of stability their inventiveness could devise proved that an area of thirty feet by fifteen of logs arranged in three rows would support four or five times the weight they were likely to place on it. By manipulating the poles Maseden and Sturgess found that they could control the movements of even such an unwieldy bulk, while if the wind suited they might rig a sail of skins.

They were able to build quickly and well because of three essentials. The timber was at hand, they had a fire, and in the pieces of rope and strips of iron and wire they had invaluable means of making the structure secure.

At last, on the fifteenth day after the wreck, Maseden poled out the raft during the slack tide at high-water, and fastened it to ropes already fixed and buoyed nearly a quarter of a mile from the shore. He would allow none of the others to accompany him, nor did he carry any of the few stores they possessed. He could not be absolutely certain that the cables would withstand the strain, and if the raft were swept seaward by the falling tide only one life was in jeopardy, while Sturgess might be able to help him from the shore.

His vigil was watched by anxious eyes, especially when he thought fit to ease the stress on the ropes by planting a long pole against a big rock which he knew rested a few feet astern and below the surface. The two hours of half-tide were the worst, but the anchors held. Three hours later the raft was aground and he came ashore.

It was then nearly dark, as their first voyage would naturally be taken in broad daylight. Nothing was said at the time, but he was told afterwards, that for no conceivable guerdon would any of the three again go through the agony of suspense they endured while the raft swung and lurched in the fierce current.

Meat, fresh and dried, a quantity of oysters, the leather trunk, and a charcoal fire cunningly packed in oyster shells kept in position by wire--this cooking brazier being the invention of Nina Forbes--formed the cargo. Most fortunately Maseden carried the poncho and the rifle slung across his back with rope, and the cartridges were in his pockets.

They slept on board. Soon after daybreak the raft was afloat, but was not allowed to move until there was a fair depth of water, owing to the very great probability of the whole structure being dashed to pieces against some awkwardly placed boulder. At last, however, Maseden thought the channel was practicable, and the ropes were cast loose, being sacrificed, of course, but that could not be helped.

They were off! The first of the sixty miles was already slipping away. They were so excited, so bent on the adventure ahead, that none of them thought of looking back until Providence Beach, which was the name they gave their refuge, was nearly out of sight.

Suddenly Madge Forbes remembered, and turned her eyes in that direction. She waved a hand and cried:

"Good-by, trees and rocks! You were kind to me and to all of us! I have not had two such happy weeks since I came to South America!"

Maseden heard, but paid no particular heed. For one thing, he had decided now not to re-open the question of the extraordinary relations between his wife and himself until, if ever, they reached civilization again. For another, he was busily conning the channel and noting the behavior of their clumsy but quite buoyant craft.

He estimated the pace of the current at fully six miles an hour. The raft was traveling about half that rate, which was quite fast enough for his liking, so, although there was a strong breeze from the west, he did not hoist the "sail." He stood on the port side and Sturgess on the starboard. The two girls were seated on a pile of fir branches behind the mast, which was stayed by ropes in such wise that all four had something to cling to if the raft struck a sunken rock and lurched suddenly.

The project was to drift as far inland as the day's tide would take them, pole ashore at the nearest suitable place, and repeat the overnight anchoring until they reached smooth water, when they might perhaps make longer voyages. If

they ran six miles that day they would have done admirably. Providing Maseden's calculations as to their precise locality were reasonably accurate, the next day would bring them into a much wider arm of the sea.

Here the conditions might vary, but they would adapt themselves to circumstances, always bearing in mind the exceeding wisdom of the Italian proverb: *Che va piano va sano*--"He goes safely who goes cautiously."

But there are other proverbs which are equally applicable to human affairs, and especially to the hazards awaiting rafts floating on unknown waters. For an hour they ran on gaily, with little or no trouble, because the men could see broken water a long way ahead and promptly piloted their argosy towards the open channel.

Then came the unexpected, or, to be exact, the crisis arose which Maseden had foreseen many days earlier, but forgotten as the raft grew strong and seaworthy under their hands.

About four miles from Providence Beach the gap between the two small islands which shut off Hanover Island from its southerly neighbor came into full view. Maseden anticipated a little difficulty at this point, but he was quite unprepared for that which really took place.

He had every reason to believe that the main stream would flow straight ahead until the second island was passed; he meant to land on Hanover Island again, just short of the easterly end of Island Number Two. Therefore he was annoyed, but not alarmed at first, at finding that the current carried the raft into the straits between the islets.

The others, of course, noticed the change of direction, and being well aware of his hopes and plans, asked him in chorus if this deviation mattered.

"I don't see that it does," he said. "In any case, we must follow the tide, and if this is the short cut so much the better."

He told them that which he actually believed. Still, at the back of his head lay an uneasiness hard to account for. The raft was traveling south now, not east, having swept round the bend in magnificent style. The precipitous heights were closing in, but the channel was fully a quarter of a mile in width. He would vastly have preferred skirting the wooded slopes of Hanover Island, because these smaller islets were absolutely barren in this hitherto invisible section, but, having no choice in the matter, silenced his doubts by recalling his first and quite correct theory that the real deep-water passage lay beyond, the *Southern Cross* having in fact struck several miles north of Nelson Straits.

Owing to the steady narrowing of the waterway the rate at which they traveled was increasing momentarily, though progress was delightfully smooth and easy. The simile did not occur to any of the four until complete disaster had befallen them, but the silent, resistless onrush of the current was ominously suggestive of the course of some great river during the last few miles before it hurls itself over a cataract.

Hanover Island soon vanished from sight altogether, and the towering cliffs on either hand seemed to merge into an unbroken barrier ahead. But the tidal race hurried on, so there must be an outlet, and this presented itself, after a sharp turn to eastward again, when they had covered a couple of miles on the new course.

They were only given the briefest warning of the peril into which they were being carried. The stream flung itself against a great mass of rock, which had been undermined until the upper edge of the precipice hung out fifty feet or more over the rushing waters beneath. A most uncanny maelstrom was thus created.

No sooner had the two men seen the danger than they labored with might and main to slew the raft away to the opposite shore.

They succeeded in avoiding the first jumble of black rocks which lay at the base of the cliff, but the whole character of the stream changed instantly. It became a furious turmoil of broken water. The raft was hurled hither and thither as though by some titanic force, and a few yards farther on was dashed against a second and even more terrifying reef.

The violence of the impact smashed the whole structure to pieces. Had not the logs been arranged in tiers crosswise they must have split up instantly, but the method in which they were put together held them for one precious moment while the men each clutched one of the girls and leaped for the nearest rock.

By rare good luck they kept their feet, and reached a great flat mass which, judged by appearances, had only recently fallen.

Further advance or retreat was alike impossible. On three sides roared the cheated torrent; behind and above, canopy-wise, towered the cliff. If the evidence of ominous fissures and lateral cracks were to be read aright, there was no telling the moment when they might be buried under another avalanche of thousands of tons of stone.

Every tide deepened the sap. They were imprisoned in one of nature's own quarries, where work was relentless and

unceasing.

Once again idle chance had decided that Maseden should save Nina and Sturgess Madge. Not that it mattered a jot. If ever four people were in hapless case, it was they. For a time even to Maseden, who had never lost faith in his star, it seemed that the best fortune that could now befall would be for the trembling rock overhead to crash down on them.

The din was terrific, and the water level was rising so rapidly that five minutes after they had gained their present position the boulders to which they had sprung from the sundering platform of logs were a foot deep in the swirling current. Each of the girls, wholly unconscious of her attitude, clung despairingly to the man at her side and watched the climbing surge with somber eyes.

They were too stunned to yield to fear, and the life of the past fortnight had so steeled their nerves and strengthened their bodies that fainting was no longer the readiest means of obtaining a merciful respite from present horrors. Rather did a bitter rage possess them, for it was a harsh and monstrous decree of fate which had not only robbed them of a hard-won means of escape, but immersed them in a veritable condemned cell.

Maseden, like the others, was watching the encroaching water-line in a benumbed way when he became aware that Nina was speaking. He looked into her drawn face and tried to smile, though a sort of mist clouded his eyes.

"What is it, girlie?" he said, putting his mouth close to her ear and addressing her as though she were a timid child.

"Is this the end?" she cried, imitating him.

"Not yet, anyhow," and he gave her a reassuring hug.

"Tell me--if you think--we have only a few more minutes," she said.

He read nothing into the request save a natural desire that she should be prepared for the worst and try to cross the Great Divide with a prayer on her lips. The pitiful words helped to dispel the cloud which had befogged his wits, and he began to weigh the pros and cons of the forlornest of forlorn hopes.

The water was lapping their feet. The rock arched outward over their heads. Between the spot where they stood and the actual wall of rock there was already a flowing stream.

He looked at his watch. The hour was seven o'clock, and he estimated the time of high-water at about half-past seven. Then, as when he was lying along the foremast of the *Southern Cross* amid the thunders of the reef, a tiny seed of hope sprang into life in his brain. If they could outlast the tide there was still a chance!

The very fact that this chaos of fallen cliff created a fearsome rapid in the tide-way showed that the passage must be fairly open during low water. If promptness in decision could enable a man to conquer a difficulty, Maseden was certainly not lacking in that attitude.

"Come!" he said. "Not for the first time, we must put our backs to the wall. We may find a good grip for our feet before the water mounts too high. The four of us must lace arms and cling together. I believe the tide will not rise above our knees. At any rate, we cannot be swept away easily. It is worth trying."

She nodded. Turning to her sister, she explained Maseden's scheme. Soon they were braced against the rock and facing valiantly their new ordeal.

In the Middle Ages, when a lust for inflicting torture infected some men like a cancerous growth, a favorite method of at once punishing and destroying an unfortunate enemy was to chain him in a dungeon to which a tidal river had access, and leave him there until the slow-rising flood drowned him.

They were in some such plight, self-chained to a rock, though not knowing when a sudden swirl of water might sweep them to speedy death.



CHAPTER XIV

THE TURN OF THE TIDE

The change, when it came, came swiftly. It was as though the All-Powerful bade the waters cease their snarling and stilled the fury of the reef. During nearly an hour the sea lapped the very thighs of the four castaways, but the roar of battle between rocks and current had died down and it was possible to hear the spoken word.

Sturgess was the first to break the spell cast on the whole party by the seeming imminence of death.

"If ever I set foot in New York again I'll be good and go to church Sundays," he said. "This is Sunday, February 6, an' I guess I've been as near Kingdom Come to-day as I'm likely to get on a round trip ticket."

For a little while no one passed any comment. Sunday! The mere name of the day had a bizarre sound. What had God-given Sunday and its peaceful associations to do with this grim and savage wilderness?

Suddenly Nina Forbes began to recite the Lord's Prayer. One by one the others joined in. The concluding petition had a peculiar appropriateness. If ever four Christian people might appeal to be delivered from evil, surely these four were in great need of heavenly succor.

"That's fine!" said Sturgess, almost cheerfully, when a hearty "Amen" had relieved their surcharged feelings. "Me for the pine pew and the right sort of preacher when next I stroll out of West Fifty-seventh Street into Broadway of a Sabbath morning. Anyhow, to-day being Sunday, and the hour rather early, which way do we head for the nearest church when the tide falls, commodore?"

Maseden had already weighed that very question, but the utter collapse of the voyage on which he had founded such high hopes had chastened his pride.

"I think we had better put it to the vote," he said. "I've led you into such a death-trap already that I don't feel equal to a decision."

He had been watching a big rock on the opposite shore. A little while ago it was awash; now it was submerged, yet the water was appreciably lower where they were standing.

The seeming contradiction was puzzling. He had yet to learn that the laws governing water in motion are extraordinarily complex--take to witness the varying levels of the whirlpool in the Niagara River and the almost phenomenal height of the central stream in the Niagara rapids.

"Guess we're satisfied with your control so far," said Sturgess. "What are you making a kick about? You prophesied just what would occur, and that's more than the average wizard can do."

"What do you mean?"

"Didn't you tell us we might strike a score of reefs between Providence Beach and Smyth's Channel, and that we should be lucky if we didn't have to build 'steen rafts?"

Maseden smiled. The rock he had marked as an index was reappearing, and the water had sunk another inch below his knees. The tide had unquestionably turned; the water banked up on the opposite shore was also yielding to the new force.

"I never anticipated another complete shipwreck," he said. "We have lost everything, ropes, skins, food--our chief supporter, the broken foremast--even our flag."

"But we still have the rifle and cartridges, and we're plus a fortnight's experience. If we don't start life again better fixed than when we climbed to the ledge in the dark from the forecastle of the *Southern Cross*, call me a Dutchman."

"I agree with C. K.," Nina chimed in. "Even here there must be some sort of a passage at low water. Which way shall we go--back or forward?"

"We gain nothing by going back," said Maseden slowly. "For one thing, we are on the wrong side of the channel. For another, I have been taking stock of the peculiar vagaries of the tide during the past fifteen minutes, and I imagine that there is a slight difference in the water level between this point and that which we left this morning. Still water attains a dead level, of course, but strong tides have rules of their own."

"Now, supposing the tide from the Pacific runs into Providence Beach a few minutes earlier than it reaches Nelson

Straits, that would account for the terrific rush in which we were caught. For the same cause, the falling tide should be far less strenuous here, but stronger there, and I do really believe that opposite our camp the ebb tide always developed a swifter current than the flood."

"I'm sure of it," agreed Sturgess. "They were both pretty hefty, but this morning's flood didn't begin to compare with last night's ebb. You ought to know. You went through it alone on board the raft."

"Then the answer is, 'Go forward,'" said Madge.

"I think so. Let us be guided by events. We have the best part of the day before us. Surely we can find some safer lodgment than this before night falls."

The others knew that Maseden's voice had lost its confident ring, but the fact that they had so narrowly dodged death barred all other considerations.

In his heart of hearts he was deadly afraid that they might indeed be compelled to return to Hanover Island. The sheer barrenness of the islet on which they were now stranded was its vital defect. Probably they would still find shell-fish, still knock an occasional seal on the head, but wood they must have, both for fire and raft building, and it seemed to him that there were no trees nearer than the slopes facing Providence Beach.

However, having come so far, they might at least have a look at the conditions on the south side, where lay yet another island; and there was also the unalterable fact that if they must escape by using the tides, their first day's experiences, though resulting in disaster, had brought them many miles in the right direction.

Perhaps they had met and conquered their greatest danger. They had paid a dear price for victory, but that was nothing new in war.

Of course there was a long and wearisome wait before they could do other than sit on the slowly emerging rocks. But it was something gained when they were free to climb out into the open and see the sky over their heads. The silent, nerve-racking menace of the canopied rock was quite as unbearable as the loud-mouthed threats of sea and reef.

Madge, slightly less self-contained than her sister, promptly voiced her relief.

"If I live to be older than I want to be I shall never forget one awful crack in the roof just above us," she said. "I couldn't keep my eyes off it. It seemed to be opening and shutting all the time with a horrible slowness."

"How old do you want to be?" demanded Sturgess, readily seizing the chance to divert her thoughts from a nightmare memory.

"Forty-five," she answered without any hesitation.

"Gee! That leaves me less than eighteen years to live!"

"I wasn't thinking of you, C. K."

"But your limit rouses one's curiosity. Why forty-five, any more than fifty or sixty? Granted good health, heaps of people enjoy life at sixty."

"At forty-five a woman begins to fade and men grow horrid," she announced calmly, as though stating an incontrovertible thesis.

"Please don't talk rubbish, either of you," interrupted Nina sharply. "Alec, can't we dodge along from rock to rock? It seems to be ever so much more open half a mile ahead."

"Let's try," said Maseden.

He wondered vaguely why Nina broke in on her sister's quaint theorizing. Any nonsense which took their minds off the troubles of the hour was a good thing in itself.

They scrambled and slithered through the passage, which resembled the moraine of a glacier, save that the rocks were on the same plane, and the central stream was clear and greenish instead of being nearly milk white. Once they were held up fully fifteen minutes because the channel ran close to an overhanging rock which really looked as though it might be brought down by the disturbance of a pebble.

Then Maseden was moved to make investigations, and discovered that the main waterway was extraordinarily deep. In other words, the sea had preferred to scoop out a ditch rather than flow through the ample space bordering Hanover Island. Even at low tide there was deep water here.

"We must go on, one at a time," he said, and led the way.

He found that Nina Forbes was close behind.

"Remain where you are!" he said gruffly. "I'll tell you when to follow and indicate the best track."

She frowned, and her eyes sparkled, but she obeyed. Sturgess, too, growled a protest.

"He ought to give me that kind of try-out," he said. "If there's trouble, and I go under, it won't matter so much. But you girls can't spare Alec. He's worth twenty of me when it comes to a show-down."

However, they all crossed the danger point safely, and each in turn noticed that which Maseden alone had been able to see at first--that a huge buttress had fallen quite recently, probably during the preceding tide, so the whole mass might crumble into ruin at any moment. As was their way, once a danger had passed they did not discuss it again. Sturgess, of course, had something to say, though it only bore inferentially on this latest risk.

"I always had a notion that the New York Fire Department was a pretty nervy proposition," he informed all and sundry during a halt on the only strip of open beach yet encountered in their new exploration, "but I guess I can show the chief a few fresh stunts first time I blow into headquarters on East Sixty-seventh Street."

Sturgess's airy references to New York were excellent tonics. He refused to regard that great city and its ordered life as dreamlike figments of the imagination. To him the flaring lights of Broadway ever glimmered above the horizon. Had he sighted the Statue of Liberty around the next bend *that* would mean reality; *this*, the dreary expanse of dead hills, water and black rock, would have been the dream.

Maseden, recovering his poise, had resumed his everyday air of well-grounded optimism. At any rate, he argued, the four of them were living and uninjured. They still owned those thrice-precious cartridges, the rifle and the poncho. They had many hours of daylight before them, and would surely find drinkable water and food before dark.

Happily the weather was fine, though clouds banking up in the west told of a possible gale, which might blow itself out in a few hours, or last as many days, or weeks. In that climate there was no knowing. The almanac declared that it was high summer, yet it would be no uncommon event if a snowstorm came from the southwest and mantled all the land a foot deep.

As for their clothes being wet, these young people thought little of such a trifle. Their skins were becoming, in the expressive Indian phrase, "all face."

So they trudged on, heading for the mouth of the defile. In the far distance they discerned the broken line of another mountainous island, the lower slopes black with forests.

"That's a good sign, folk," said Maseden, smiling cheerfully once more. "We're making for a timber belt. When you come to think of it, trees simply couldn't grow on these rocks, and the watershed seems to fall away on both sides of the gorge, which must have been cut by an earthquake."

His eyes had been searching constantly for signs of the raft's wreckage, but never so much as a splintered log could he see. Nina, not so preoccupied, was gazing farther afield.

Suddenly she stopped, and something in her manner arrested the others.

"I don't think I'm mistaken," she said, "but are not those two points the flanks of these islands?"

"There can be little doubt of that," agreed Maseden, following her glance towards the gap some three or four miles in front. It was difficult to estimate distance accurately in that region of vast solitudes.

"Then, if that is so," she went on in a puzzled tone, "where does the remainder of the land go to? The cliffs end not so very far away. Why don't we see other bits sticking out?"

The underlying sense of the question was clearer than its form. For some undetermined cause the passage between the islands evidently widened considerably before it closed in at the ultimate southern exit. Hopefulness is often a close blend of curiosity and expectation. They pressed on more rapidly, eager as children to see what lay around the corner.

They were soon enlightened, and most agreeably so. They entered a spacious amphitheatre--in its way, almost a place of beauty. Not only were the hillsides clothed with pines and other trees, but, rarest sight of all along that stark coast, strips of white sand bordered the foreshore.

The tidal water, now near the lowest ebb, was placid as a lake, and on its surface disported flocks of many varieties of wild fowl. Moreover, wreckage began to line the beach at high-water mark. They found the planks and spars of many

ships, some quite fresh, and evidently the remains of the *Southern Cross*; others weather-beaten, even crumbling with age.

Remains of the raft were discovered, and Nina shrieked with joy at sight of the ship's flag, hardly damaged, lying on its halliard alongside the broken topmast.

Madge claimed the most remarkable bit of flotsam--nothing less than the brandy bottle, unbroken, but nearly full of salt water, half buried in sand.

It was their only drinking utensil, and therefore prized very highly. How it had passed through the turmoil of the rapids was one of those mysteries which voyaging bottles alone can solve; and they, if sometimes eloquent of humanity's adventures, are invariably silent as to their own.

The skins of the sea-lion and seals had vanished. Indeed, a very close search of a three-mile semi-circular beach, conducted for reasons which shall presently appear, yielded no trace of them.

There was a dramatic fitness in thus reaching a land of plenty after enduring the horrors of the pass.

"It's like a fairy tale," cried Nina joyously. "This is the enchanted realm, guarded by dragons which must be slain ere the prince can enter."

"Gosh!" grinned Sturgess, "she's calling you a prince now, Alec. Say, Madge, can't you invent a name for me?"

"Yes, you're the Ugly Duckling which grew into a Swan."

"Huh! I'll think that over. Far be it from me, fair maid, to dispute your views as to my future plumage. Now, Alec, your turn. It's up to you to christen Nina."

"Cinderella, maid of all work," said Maseden promptly. "So, let's get busy, the lot of us. Girls, you'll probably find an oyster-bed on that reef over there. Sturgess and I will hunt for water, and bring you a bottleful. Then we must set to work and build a shack above high-water mark before night. We're going to stop here and launch a more navigable craft next time."

"Your highness has forgotten one thing," said Nina, with sudden gravity.

"What is that?"

"It is still Sunday."

With one accord they dropped to their knees and thanked Providence for the mercy which had been shown them. Such prayers are the spontaneous tribute of the overflowing heart. They are not to be uttered aloud or recorded in the written word.

The men had no difficulty in locating a stream, owing to the "creek," as Madge had phrased it, which marked the approach of each torrent to the sea. Here, too, were oysters in abundance. Whether or not the bivalves liked a certain admixture of fresh water and brine, their enthusiastic admirers did not know; but certainly the best-stocked beds were invariably situated near the mouth of a mountain stream.

With a plentiful supply of shaped planks, cordage, even rusty nails, they soon knocked together a low hut, not more than breast high, and closed at one end. The ship's flag curtained off the inner section, which was allotted to the two girls, while the men could sleep, on guard, as it were, in the outer part.

As night came on they started a fire and cooked two birds of the penguin type, which allowed themselves to be chased and captured. The flesh was tough and none too well flavored, but the feasters were not hard to please. When the repast was ended, and they sat on piles of soft sand looking out over the darkening expanse of waters, for the tide was high again, Maseden electrified Sturgess by saying:

"Do you smoke, C. K.?"

"Does a duck swim?" was the prompt reply.

Maseden produced from his coat pocket a pipe and tin of tobacco.

The other eyed them with downright amazement.

"Well, can you beat it?" he cried. "What else have you got in your pocket, old scout? A bottle of rye whisky and a box of chocolates for the girls, or what?"

"I've reached the end of my resources now," laughed Maseden. "I resolved to keep this small stock of tobacco till the time came when we might regard half our troubles as ended. I think we've reached that stage to-night. After this morning's escape I shall never again lose hope until the light goes out forever."

"Oh, please, don't put it that way," said Nina.

"I mean it as an optimist," he exclaimed. "If I have to swim in the open sea, or am buried under a landslide, I shall still believe, while my senses last, that Providence will see me through. Do you know why? You might supply many good reasons, but not *the* reason. Ten minutes after we climbed under that overhanging rock, it fell. I happened to look back, and saw it collapse. None of us heard the crash, because we were close to a rather noisy rapid at the moment. But I actually saw the thing happen."

"Why didn't you tell us at the time?" inquired Madge.

"I thought our nervous systems, collectively, had borne enough strain just then.... Here you are, C. K. I give you first turn with the pipe."

"Not on your life!" vowed Sturgess, flaming into volcanic energy. "If I never smoke again, I'll not touch that pipe until you've gone right through a packed bowl-full."

Maseden knew that his friend meant what he said, so filled and lighted the pipe immediately.

"It's a moot point," he commented philosophically, "whether you don't enjoy smoking more in anticipation than I in actuality. I haven't smoked now during sixteen days, and I believe I could give it up for sixteen years if need be."

"Good gracious!" tittered Madge. "Poor C. K. will have only two years of his beloved New York."

It was a subtle thrust. Sturgess himself was the first to see its point.

"Gosh!" he said. "S'pose we four had to live here straight on for sixteen years!"

Nina Forbes seemed to have a keener sense of the dangerous trend of such careless talk than her sister.

"I do wish you two wouldn't babble," she broke in sharply. "Alec is simply chock full of information. I can see it in his calculating eye. For instance--"

Maseden took the cue readily.

"For instance," he said. "This inland lagoon explains the rush of the tide this morning. The greater part of the water which runs through the pass never goes back. It floods this immense area, is held up by the tide from the south, but goes out that way, because, by some irregular tidal action, the ebb begins in that direction. Therefore, an ideal backwash is set up, which accounts for all the wreckage strewed on the beach. Parts of ships which were lost a century ago will be stored here. The place is a maritime museum."

"We may find a whole ship," exclaimed Madge.

"What? After coming through the hell-gate we have left behind?"

"The bottle came through," she persisted.

"Though it's a black bottle it must have been white with fear many a score of times. Have you noticed the way in which the logs of our own raft were battered and bruised?... No, the way in was vile, and, I had better warn you now, the way out may be worse."

"Oh, why?" cried both girls.

"Because of the absence of Indians. Consider what an ideal site this would be for a colony of savages. Plenty of fish, birds and oysters--sand--even a few level strips which might be cultivated--if the South American Indian ever does till the land. The logic of the situation is clear. Our refuge is inaccessible. That is just the difference between romance and reality. In the fairy tale, once you slay the dragons guarding the enchanted palace the remainder is a compound of nectar and kisses. In real life, having stormed the fortress, you find yourself besieged."

None disputed his conclusions. They were learning to think like him, and each had been struck by the virgin solitude of this land-locked sea-lake, which must compare favorably with the most fertile and exceedingly scarce localities of the kind in an area of many scores of thousands of square miles.

"Anyhow, while you finish your pipe, it's up to me to fix the fire," said Sturgess blithely, leaping to his feet, and

beginning to arrange a number of big flat stones around and above a pile of glowing charcoal in such wise that rain could not extinguish it, and a few twigs placed among the embers next morning would quickly burst into a blaze.

They had taught themselves these minor aids to comfort. Madge had constructed a very creditable field oven, and Nina, with a bit of sharpened wire and a supply of dried sinews, could sew a skin as a cobbler stitches the sole on to a boot. Physically all four were in splendid condition, so it was a sheer impossibility that they should remain downcast in spirit. Maseden knew that quite well when he recited the trials they must yet face and conquer. He addressed them as co-workers, not as pampered young people who must be humored into putting forth the necessary efforts if they would win through finally.

They slept that night as soundly as though the morning's tribulation was something they had read in a book. Rain pounded on their shelter, but it was roofed with pine branches above the planks, and not a drop entered. They awoke into a world of blue sky and sunshine, and, after breakfasting on oysters, cold fowl, and good water, spent an idle hour in watching the tidal race from the north.

Then, after tending the fire, they set off on a tour of the shore, meaning to note every scrap of wreckage which might be of value. Moreover, Maseden was specially anxious to have a peep at the southern exit.

And thus they made the great discovery.

CHAPTER XV

THE SIMPLE LIFE

Who found the boat? The question has not been answered to this day. Four people held and vehemently expressed different opinions; if they had not agreed ultimately to pool the credit, the foundations of six very firm friendships might have been endangered, because even the sisters were at logger-heads on the point.

No one could dispute the fact that it was Nina Forbes who, with outstretched hand and pointing finger, exclaimed dramatically:

"What is that?"

But the other three yielded her no prior right on that account. Were they not all looking at it, and thinking that which Nina said?

Each could establish a most reasonable claim if the matter were adjudicated by a prize court. Firstly, Maseden had ordered a close survey of the coast, and, if this very proper precaution had not been taken, the boat would be rotting yet on an uncharted beach. Secondly, if Sturgess had not slipped on a rock and scarified his chin rather badly there would, thirdly, have been no need for Madge to suggest that he should wash the wound in fresh water, and even insist that this should be done.

Lastly, there was Nina, who literally demanded an explanation of a long, low strip of taut canvas visible above a small sand hill on which tufts of coarse grass were struggling for life.

The simplest way out of the difficulty was to admit that sheer, unadulterated good luck brought about an incident which probably changed the whole course of events, though a white and shining patch of skin on Sturgess's left leg testifies to this day that his accident was primarily responsible for it.

Two fair-sized streams ran from the hills into the straits on that side. Near the first was pitched the camp. Well hidden near the second was the boat.

Now, these rivulets, though fairly deep and swift, were not torrents; that is to say, they drained a watershed by no means so steep as Hanover Island. Their volume was more regular, inasmuch as they were not wholly the outcome of the latest downpour of rain. To avoid the necessity of fording them, one had to walk a long way seaward until their waters began to spread over the reef in a hundred little runnels, and one could leap from rock to rock.

Indeed, it was while Sturgess was so doing that he barked his shin, a most painful if not dangerous operation; in this instance, it evoked language which the girls pretended not to hear.

Having crossed the stream, however, Madge examined the damage, and would have it that the sufferer take off his boot and sock, and forthwith lave the wound in fresh water.

What he really wanted to do was to wander away out of earshot and relieve his feelings by the spoken word. He obeyed, however, and all four went up the right bank (which, as Sturgess and Madge jointly cited in their contention, they certainly would not have done otherwise) to a point where the river was free of salt-water.

In the result, curiously enough, Sturgess's excoriated wound was left absolutely to its own devices. Both he and Madge, not to mention the other two, were startled out of any further thought of such a minor casualty by coming full tilt on to a ship's boat, trimly sheeted in gray canvas, dry-docked, one might say, behind a sandhill.

After an incredulous stare, Maseden answered Nina's eager question.

"It is one of the life-boats of the *Southern Cross*," he said, and his voice was hushed, almost reverent. "There is her number, with the ship's name. She was carried on the starboard side, just behind the forward rail on the promenade deck. I used to look up at her and admire her lines."

By this time they had raced up alongside the craft. She appeared to be undamaged. Maseden unlaced a portion of the canvas cover. She was dry as a bone inside.

"Say, Alec, d'you know that every boat was stocked with provisions and water for twenty people for fourteen days? I heard the captain give the order."

Sturgess was so excited that he almost yelped the words.

"I saw the stewards putting the stuff on board," said Maseden.

"There's tea, and coffee, and condensed milk, and butter, and tins of meat and jam," cried Nina.

"And ship's biscuits, and a spirit stove, and matches, and barrels of water," chimed in Madge.

Maseden was tapping the planks and peering at so much of the keel as was visible, but he could find no sign of injury. The smart white paint had been badly scraped amidships and in the bows, but the wood was not splintered. To the best of his belief the craft was thoroughly seaworthy. She carried her full complement of oars, a mast, and lugsail. In fact, she was almost in the exact condition in which she had left the ship.

Two pulleys and a part of a broken davit showed how she had been wrenched bodily from her berth and flung into the sea by the first great wave that crashed over the *Southern Cross* when the steamship swung broadside on to the reef under the pull of the aft anchor.

"Come along, everybody!" shouted Maseden, and the ring of triumph in his voice revealed the depth of his feelings. "We start building a new camp at once. Within less than a fortnight the spring tides which brought her here will be with us again, and we must be ready for them."

"Can't we launch her on rollers?" demanded Sturgess.

"I doubt it. She was docked here by a backwash which does not occur very often, judging by the herbage growing among the sand. She is a heavy craft, too. I don't think the four of us could move her. We'll have rollers in readiness, of course, but we must cut a channel for the tide, and so make sure of floating her... By Jove! *What* a piece of luck!"

It took them an hour or more to sober down. For once, Maseden's orders were tacitly ignored, even by himself. Instead of helping in the construction of another hut the girls were busy with the lashings of the canvas cover. Every true woman has the instinct of the good housewife, and these two could not rest content until they had examined and classified the stores.

None of them could resist the temptation of a bottle of coffee extract, some condensed milk and a tin of biscuits. The spirit-stove was lighted, some water boiled and they drank hot coffee and ate wheat for the first time in seventeen days.

Their greatest surprise was the quantity and variety of stores on board. There were knives and forks, enameled plates and cups, even such minor requisites as salt, pepper and mustard.

Of course, the chief steward of the *Southern Cross* had been given many hours in which to make preparations. Being a resourceful man, when the lockers were packed with their regulation supplies he stuffed "extras" into odd corners.

Poor fellow! The pity was that an adverse fate had denied him any benefit from his own foresight.

Although the castaways entered with good heart upon their second campaign against the forces of nature, the immense advantages now enjoyed as compared with their condition on Hanover Island did not blind them to the difficulties yet to be faced and conquered ere the haunts of civilized man might be reached. There was no gainsaying the cogency of Maseden's logic; the absence of aborigines from a spot so favored as Rotunda Bay (the name allotted to their new location), supplied positive proof of the impracticable nature of all approaches by sea.

How far the barriers might extend they had no means of knowing. They could guess how forbidding they were from the character of the northerly channel, and it was easy to believe that one such dangerous passage alone would not have deterred tribesmen accustomed to navigate these perilous waters.

So, in the intervals of labor, they gave close heed to the tides and their action. For instance, Maseden would knock together a small raft, launch it at high water and watch its subsequent course. He found, at first, that it stranded invariably. Then he took it to the tiny estuary of the second river, waited until the ebb was well established, and let it swing out with the current.

This time, as he anticipated, it was carried swiftly southward, and was seen no more, thus confirming his belief that the rise and fall of the tide set up a circular movement of an immense body of water always tending in the same southerly direction, retarded during the flow, with resultant acceleration during the ebb.

One day, when observation farther afield was desired, they all four set off soon after dawn, and were close to the southern narrows at high water. Then, as the shore gradually became practicable, they followed the receding tide until farther advance became dangerous. Seen from a distance, one of the cliffs offered a not impossible climb, and closer

inspection showed that, by hard work, and some roping, they could reach the summit.

The girls, who had positively refused to be left "at home," were now equally determined to make the ascent. The soles of their light boots had long since given out, but each and all now wore moccasins of sealskin, and very serviceable and comfortable footwear these proved, being impervious to the jars of the roughest rock surface, and most excellent for climbing.

After an hour's hard work they stood on a narrow saddle overlooking a seaward precipice, and the vista before their eyes was at once awe-inspiring and disheartening. Mile after mile, nothing but broken water met the eye. The reefs were countless. In fact, the resistance they offered to the incoming tide direct from the Pacific was such that, in all likelihood, it accounted for the delay which set up the extraordinary race past Hell Gate.

Even Sturgess was upset by the far-flung chaos. A strong wind was blowing up there, and he sank his voice in the hope that his words would reach Maseden only.

"Rotten!" he said. "It would knock the stuffing out of a brass dog."

"No secrets, please," cried Madge promptly. "What did you say, C. K.? Are you telling Alec that there is no way out?"

"Yep," was the disconsolate reply.

"We have not quite determined that fact yet," said Maseden coolly. "Having done a stiff climb, suppose we get our money's worth, and sit down? Never mind the unpleasant prospect in front. Let's keep a sharp look-out for a log traveling in mid-stream, and watch it as long as possible."

Nina, who was endowed with excellent good sight, was the first to detect a nearly submerged tree-trunk bobbing about in the channel, nearly a mile distant. The atmosphere happened, however, to be unusually clear that day, so they could follow the progress of the derelict for another mile or more. As soon as it emerged from the actual channel between the two headlands, it swung away to the left, or eastward, and kept on that course until lost in the waste of waters.

Maseden whistled in sheer vexation when he gave up the attempt to follow this floating index any longer.

"What is it now, son?" inquired Sturgess.

"The worst," snapped the other vindictively.

"Great Scott! Didn't you like the look of that log. I thought it lolloped along in a devil-may-care style that was rather attractive."

"But it turned towards the land, and not towards the sea."

"I guess that's so."

"And doesn't that convey any meaning to you?"

"Sure. The tides hereabouts go all ways for Sundays. Before that thing reaches Nelson Straits it has to round the eastern end of the island opposite.... Yes, yes, Alec. You've wised me up on heaps of things I didn't give a hooraw in Hades for at one time. I can tell the time by the sun, skin an eel, or a seal, or a teal, open oysters like a bar-keep, and read an eddy like a Mississippi pilot. And, to my reckoning, our boat, or any boat, has as much chance of winning through that proposition out there as a lump of butter in a fiery furnace. I never did hold very strongly by that story about Shadrack, Mesack and Abednego. I've a notion we haven't got the complete facts. One day in Pittsburg--"

"Silence, please, for the passing of the next log, which happens to be a boat!"

Nina's voice rang out clearly. She well knew the astounding significance of the words, but the daily round of hardship and adventure were molding her character on new and stronger lines. She was not, nor ever could be again, the somewhat conventional young lady who had sailed from San Juan little more than a month ago. She could face now, with an unflinching and critical eye, perils which then would have blanched her cheek and set the blood pulsing in her veins.

Even her sister, who had not made out the object to which Nina had called attention, put an alarming question quite calmly.

"A boat!" she cried. "Oh, Nina, not *our* boat?"

So many seemingly impossible things had occurred that the stout life-boat they left tied securely in a small dock which was flooded by each tide might conceivably have broken loose.

"No," came the reassuring answer. "Not our boat. It looks like one of the native coracles Alec has told us of. But it is empty. At any rate, there is no one sitting upright in it."

By this time the others had seen the craft, which she was the first to detect. In their anxiety and excitement they stood up, one by one, as though the couple of feet thus gained would give a better view-point. There could not be the least doubt that they were looking at a roughly-fashioned but distinctly seaworthy boat, which danced along on the crest of a rapid current, and whirled around, as though in sport, when some black rock thrust its obstructing fangs into the tide-way. Apparently, it was traveling quite safely.

Then, as if to give them a really useful object lesson, it was caught between two rocks and turned clean over. A second somersault righted it, and, like the log, it sped away to the east.

Maseden brought back the dazed and troubled wits of his companions to the particular business in hand.

"See that you are properly roped," he said. "We're heading for camp, as quickly as we can get there. Don't hurry over the first part of the descent, however. There are two bad places on the rock face."

They reached the shore safely, unroped, and set off to walk three hard miles in record time. As they neared their refuge they saw the boat, now aground in its tiny canal. Near at hand were the white embers of their fire, which would soon be ablaze when fresh logs were added. Some washing, stretched on a line, lent a strangely domestic touch to the encampment.

But the one profoundly relieving fact was self-evident. No party of marauding Indians had swooped down on their ark and its stores. Wherever the derelict boat had come from, its occupants were not to be seen in any part of Rotunda Bay. As Maseden put it tersely:

"We found it hard enough to get here. Others seemed to have tried and failed."

Still he and Sturgess decided to mount guard that night. The girls were not supposed to know of this new arrangement, until Maseden was about to awaken Sturgess for his second spell of sentry-go. Then Nina emerged from the rear portion of the shack.

"Lend me your watch, Alec," she said pleasantly. "I'll take these two hours.... No, you mustn't argue, there's a dear-fellow--" the concluding word was added rather hurriedly, being an obvious afterthought. "I'll call Madge next, and it will be broad daylight by the time her spell is ended."

"I'm not sleepy," he murmured, sinking his voice so as not to disturb the others. "I was only going to rouse C. K. because he will be annoyed if I don't stick to schedule."

"I haven't slept at all," the girl confessed. "If you're not going to rest, let us talk. Or, perhaps, that is not quite the right thing to do."

"Not if there was any real fear of an attack," said Maseden, leading her to the small sand hillock near the boat. "I am convinced we are safe enough, but I should never forgive myself if the camp were rushed owing to our negligence.... Sit here. The tide is rising. We can distinguish the water-line, and remain unseen ourselves. Of course, we should speak hardly above a whisper."

Some inequality in the sloping surface brought them rather close together when they sat down. Nina moved, with a little laugh of apology. Her action was quite involuntary, but it nettled Maseden.

"I don't want to flirt with you, if that is what you are afraid of," he grunted. "In present conditions spooning would be rather absurd. Not that my particular sort of marriage tie would restrain me. Don't think it. Enforced obedience of that sort is foreign to my nature."

"I gather that you really want to quarrel with me," was the glib answer.

Of course, any woman of average wit could have put a man in the wrong at once with equal readiness though given a far less vulnerable opening, but Maseden realized his blunder and drew back.

"A too strenuous life seems to have spoiled my temper," he said. "I used to be regarded as a somewhat easy-going person."

"Probably that was because you had things all your own way."

"You may be right. A man is the poorest judge of his own virtues or faults. For instance, I have always prided myself on a certain quality of quick decision, once my mind was made up. But of late I find myself lacking even in that respect."

"Isn't it possible you are not actually sure of your own mind?"

"Shall I submit the case to you?"

"Would that be wise? I would remind you of your own phrase--in present conditions."

"But I think you ought to know," he persisted. "Weeks ago, on the day you shot the sea-lion, in fact, C. K. told me he meant to marry Madge, if the lady is willing, that is. The statement startled me, to put it mildly. I rather scoffed at it, which nettled him, naturally. I was on the point of acquainting him with the facts, but was stopped by the gun-shot. Since then he has never mentioned the matter again, and I have been averse from pulling it in by the scruff of the neck--"

"Why do so now?" put in the girl quickly.

He could not see her face, but the note of alarm in her voice was not even disguised.

"Because, day by day, I see more and more clearly that our friend's love of your sister is a very real thing. I see, too, or think that I see, a response on her part. From a common sense point of view, what else could one expect? Two young people, each eminently agreeable, are thrown together by fate in circumstances of great and continuous personal danger. The artificial intercourse of civilized life is impossible from the outset. They see each other as they really are. Each has to depend on real characteristics, not on shams. Can one imagine a more ideal method of choosing one's future partner than those in which we have lived during the past month?"

This was what lawyers call a leading question, and Nina shied at it instantly.

"Everything you have said may be true, Alec," she said, "but you have advanced no reason whatever for disturbing our pleasant relations. Surely all these problems may be allowed to settle themselves when, if ever, we re-enter the everyday world?"

"That is just my difficulty," continued Maseden doggedly; he was resolved now to have an irritating hindrance to pleasant relations settled once and for all. "Is it fair to Sturgess to let him believe there is no bar to his wooing? Of course, my marriage was a farce, and can be dismissed as such. But what will C. K. think, what will he say, when he hears of it? Won't our silence--yes, *our* silence--you cannot shirk a part of the responsibility--be open to misinterpretation? May it not bring about the very catastrophe we want to avoid?"

"I really don't understand," said the girl in a frightened way.

"Then I must make my meaning clear, even though it hurts," he said determinedly. "If I tell Sturgess now about the Cartagena ceremony, though rather late in the day, it is not too late; whereas, if I wait till we reach New York, how astounded and mystified he will be by the legal process which I must set on foot to secure your sister's freedom and my own! Why, the result might be tragic. If C. K. knows now, he can, if he chooses, seek from Madge an explanation of the whole mad business. She may give or withhold it--that is for her to decide. But at least we shall all be acting squarely and above-board. I put it to you strongly, for the sake of each one of us, that Sturgess should be told the whole truth."

For a little while there was silence. Nina seemed to be weighing the pros and cons of the matter with much care.

"I think you are right," she said at last. "I differ from you only in a small but--to a woman--very important particular. Madge, not you, should tell C. K. what happened in Cartagena. It is her privilege. It will come better from her. In the morning, when opportunity offers, she and I will talk things over. I am sure I can persuade her as to the course she should adopt."

"Leave it to me, Alec. Before to-morrow evening C. K. shall have heard the full story of that unfortunate marriage. He will tell you so himself. After that, I suppose, your troubled conscience will be at rest, and the matter need not be discussed further until it comes before the courts."

"I seem to have annoyed you pretty badly by raising the point now," said Maseden.

"No, indeed! It is not so. In a sense, I am glad. My sister and I are very dear to one another, Alec, and no one likes to parade the family skeleton, even in such a remote place as Rotunda Bay."

Maseden felt that he had bungled the whole business rather badly, but he saw no advantage in leaving anything unsaid.

"What I cannot make out," he muttered savagely, "is how I ever came to regard you and Madge as being so much alike. Of course, you resemble each other physically, but in temperament you are wide apart as the poles."

"Dear me! This is really interesting. In what respects do we differ?"

"Madge is emotional, you are self-contained. She would have cried had I spoken to her about you as I have spoken of her to you, but you survey the problem coolly, and solve it, probably on the best lines. Sometimes, you puzzle, at others, vex me. You are ready and willing to confide in Sturgess, but refuse me your confidence. I find Madge easy to read; you remain an enigma. I believe you would almost die rather than enlighten me as to the true history of my marriage."

"Oh, bother your marriage! Can't you talk of something else?"

"I am prepared to talk about you during the next hour."

"How boring for both of us."

"Only a minute ago you welcomed my efforts as an analyst."

"I was mistook, as the children say. These personal matters seem ineffably stupid when one sees the dawn appearing over the walls of our prison. We may never get away from here, or lose our lives in the attempt. It will be of very small significance then as to why a sorely-trying girl agreed to marry a man she had never seen, and who was under sentence to die before the ink was dry in the register... Still, Alec, I'm pleased we have had such a candid discussion. I have come round to your point of view, too. It is *not* fair to C. K. to keep him in the dark. To-morrow, as ever is, if you don't work us so hard that we have no time for chatter, I promise you that Madge shall tell him everything."

"And me nothing?"

"That is implied in the bargain, is it not? Does it really concern you? You were speaking for C. K., not for yourself... Oh, no, we're not going to re-open the argument. Just let matters remain where they are, please. I want you to satisfy a woman's curiosity on a matter of more immediate importance. When do you purpose leaving here? Shouldn't we start soon? At this season we have fine weather of a sort. Don't we incur a good deal of risk by each week of delay?"

"Hullo, you two!" came a cherry voice. "A nice bunco game you've played on me! There was I, snoring like a hog, while you were spooning under the stars. Wise Alec and Naughty Nina! But wait till I tell your poor deluded sister. A whole tribe of Indians could have crept up and tomahawked you where you sat."

They started apart, almost guiltily. Each shared the same thought. How much, or how little, had Sturgess heard?

CHAPTER XVI

THE DOWRY

Both Maseden and Nina looked and felt like tongued-tied children, and Sturgess was not slow to note their confusion.

"Gee, if there was an orchard anywhere around, I'd think you two had been stealing apples," he cried. "Sorry, Nina, if I've butted in on a heart-to-heart talk, but it's not often I can josh our wise Alec, so I'm bound to take the few chances that come along."

He little knew evidently how closely their talk had concerned him, and the fact that he had not overheard anything which would supply a clue to the topic under discussion was, in itself, a great relief.

"Nina appeared when I was about to call you," said Maseden quietly. "She demanded her share of the watch, and as I was not inclined for sleep I remained on duty. Of course that is no excuse for an inattentive sentry. I propose that you shoot me straight off and imprison Nina for the remainder of her natural life."

"I sentence the pair of you to rest until breakfast is ready. There's no appeal from the court. About, tum! Quick, march!"

Nina hurried away. Maseden, thinking he would not be able to close an eye, followed her slowly, lay down, and was soon asleep.

The boat's stores had revealed neither soap nor towels, so the early morning wash remained a primitive affair. A pool in the stream was set apart for the girls, while the men scrubbed among the rocks. Sturgess aroused Maseden a few minutes before breakfast was ready.

"Come this way," he said, nodding in the direction of the boat. "I want to show you something."

Maseden noticed that the other man's hands and moccasins were soiled with the whitish-brown deposit through which a channel for the boat had been delved. Then he saw that no small part of the said channel was blocked by the debris of a fresh excavation.

Now, among the treasures on the boat were a couple of axes. Given an ax, some spice of ingenuity and a fair stock of patience, and any man can fashion an astonishing variety of useful articles. Singularly enough, Sturgess, who was gifted with the artist's sense of proportion, could hew a spade out of a plank more skillfully than Maseden, and he was inordinately proud of the achievement.

"What the deuce have you been up to?" demanded Maseden at sight of so much misdirected industry.

"You wouldn't guess in a week," was the complacent answer. "This morning I was standing around doing nothing, when, as the tide fell, I spotted a bulge in the right bank of our canal. I wondered what had caused it, after our trouble in lining the walls with stakes, so I nosed around with a shovel. Then I got all fussed up, and didn't care where I threw the dirt.... See what *I've* found, old scout!"

By this time they were in the trench, from which the tide had only recently receded. Sturgess's zeal had cleared away some two cubic yards of silt, and Maseden saw at once that a part of the hull of a small vessel of some sort had been laid bare. Moreover, a few blows with an ax had removed sufficient of the rotting timbers to give access to the hulk's interior.

It was a most interesting find. An old-time craft had been brought to her last resting-place within a few feet of the spot where the *Southern Cross's* life-boat was embedded. Evidently in the course of years she had sunk in the soft deposit, and probably formed a nucleus for a new sand-bank. At any rate, she was completely covered, and lay there keel uppermost.

"Have you been inside?" said Maseden, eyeing the doorway broken by the ax.

"You bet your life," said Sturgess.

"Was the air foul?"

"Fine. I guess the lime hereabouts attended to that. Anyhow, I carried in a blazing stick, and it burned all right."

"Skeletons on board?"

"Not a bone that I could see."

"What are you keeping back, then? You can't humbug me, C. K. There's something on your chest. Get it off!"

Sturgess craned his neck over the edge of the channel to make sure that neither of the girls was near.

"From hints I've picked up now and then, when Madge felt she must either talk or bust, I've come to the conclusion that old man Gray's death means poverty to that small bunch," he said. "Now, *I'm* pretty well fixed, and I guess *you'll* never be hard pushed to buy a food ticket, so I want your brainy assistance to arrange things for the girls' benefit. See? It should--kind of--make matters easy--when it comes to a show-down."

"What have you come across? Spanish treasure?"

Maseden peered into the dimly lighted interior of the wreck. Apparently the inverted deck was about four feet below the level of the opening, and Sturgess had broken into the after part of the hull.

"Let me go ahead and pass out the boodle," said Sturgess. "I found it in a wooden box, which is clamped with iron, but it has nearly fallen to pieces."

He lowered himself to what had been the ceiling of a cabin, and moved cautiously among a litter of rotting wood, evidently the furniture which had once rendered the tiny apartment habitable. He came back with laden hands, and passed out a curiously shaped jug, or flagon.

Maseden examined it critically.

"By Jove!" he cried; "this is Aztec work, and hammered out of solid gold!"

"There's five more of the same sort," said Sturgess, in a voice cracked with excitement. "And *this* strikes me as something worth while."

He produced a crudely modeled figure of a puma, the body in silver and the head, feet, and tail in gold. The eyes and claws were of polished quartz, and were bright as when the ornament left the hands of the Mexican lapidary who fashioned it. The metals, of course, were tarnished, the silver being black with age, but both men realized that they were gazing at a splendid specimen of a long-forgotten art.

"How much of this sort of stuff is there?" said Maseden, his imagination running riot as to the possible history of this unrecorded argosy.

"Twelve pieces altogether," chuckled Sturgess. "Six gold pitchers, four animals and two carved dishes, each of gold. I've rummaged around carefully, and that's the lot. For'ard of this section is a hold, and, from what I can make out, it was loaded with furs and cloth, but the cargo is all mussed up with salt and lime."

"Show me one of the dishes."

Sturgess brought forth an oval-shaped dish, made, like the vessels, of solid gold. On its broad rim were chased twelve weird-looking creatures which reminded Maseden of the signs of the Zodiac; in the sunken center appeared a very elaborate design consisting of four trees, a bird perched on the topmost branches of each. Long afterwards he learned that this cartoon represented, in Aztec picture-writing, the four famous chiefs who founded the Aztec dynasty.

At any rate, he knew at the time that the hoard which Sturgess had discovered was of great archaeological interest, apart from the intrinsic value of the precious metals, itself no small sum.

"We ought to devote the necessary time to a thorough survey of the wreck," he said thoughtfully. "Meanwhile what have you at the back of your head about Nina and Madge? What did you mean by saying it would make matters easier?"

"Well, suppose you and I agree to give 'em the proceeds of the sale," and Sturgess handled one of the jugs lovingly. "There's sixty ounces of pure specie in this pretty thing alone, I'll bet. Then, if it dates away back, the price goes up like a rocket."

Maseden knew that the really important part of his question had been avoided.

"We must think it over," he said.

"Think *what* over?"

Sturgess, whose face was on a level with Maseden's knees, scowled up at his friend with such an air of indignant

surprise that the other man laughed.

"I am not planning a daylight robbery of two fatherless orphans," explained Maseden. "Our difficulty will be to persuade these two to accept their legitimate half share, let alone the whole of the plunder. Shan't we give them a hail, and let them see the pirate's *cache* before breakfast? Because that is what it is. These things were stolen from some Aztec shrine."

"Why Aztec?"

"Why not?"

"Peru is a far more likely place."

"Yes, if these utensils were not of Mexican origin. The signs on the dishes are the animal-names used in the Aztec calendar."

"Crushed again!" said Sturgess, clambering out of the wreck. "But say, professor, how did you ever manage to stow away those odds and ends of information? I'm your age, and not exactly a fool, but I never had time to read."

"You never made time, you mean. If you had lived seven years on a solitary ranch you would be forced to buy books and read them. My inclination turned naturally to the records of the country I lived in. The stories of the Spanish invaders in Mexico to the north and Peru to the south were more romantic than any novel. You've heard of Captain Kidd, the buccaneer, of course, but I suppose you know nothing of the Welshman Henry Morgan, and his exploits on the Spanish Main?"

"Not as much as would go on a dime in big type."

"Well, Morgan would have made Kidd shine his boots if they had ever met."

"Gee whiz! Henny must have been *some* Thug.... Hi, Madge. Where's Nina?"

"You two ought to have been washed quarter of an hour ago," came Madge's wrathful cry. "I've been looking for you everywhere. Breakfast will be spoiled!"

"Madge is quite right," said Maseden. "Breakfast is more important than loot. Eat first, and discuss the pile afterwards."

This sound advice availed him or Sturgess little afterwards. Both girls were vexed that the discovery was kept from them even during that short space of half an hour. They were placated, however, by being allowed to share in the labor of clearing a sufficient area around and above the wreck to permit of its exact size being ascertained. It was only a small craft, the keel measuring some fifty feet in length, yet, as Maseden was careful to point out, the early navigators deemed such vessels large enough to cross the mighty Atlantic.

When the tide rose, and the wreck was flooded again, it floated. This was foreseen, and the expectant watchers had a number of stout poles in readiness, with which they under-pinned the hull on one side. Thus it was rendered much easier of access later.

Beyond a couple of beautifully carved and chased rapiers, the blades of which were largely protected by leather scabbards hardened by salt water, and a number of copper cooking utensils, they found nothing more of value. The cargo, which appeared to have been furs and mats of painted reeds, was wholly destroyed. The vessel had carried two masts, whose stumps, broken off short near the deck, seemed to indicate the mischance which had befallen her in the Pacific. There were no cannon or other arms of any sort in or under the wreck, but as she had surely come there by way of Providence Beach and Hell Gate, she had probably rolled over countless times during the journey.

She was built of oak. The bluff bows and high-pitched forecastle and poop dated her as a product of the early seventeenth century. No trace of a name was discernible, but the bulwarks had been torn off. The absence of an elaborate figurehead was significant. She was a strongly constructed, but not highly finished little ship.

As to her history or nationality, the only reliable tokens were the swords, which were Spanish, with Toledo blades. The copper cooking-pots were Mexican. In a word, she was ostensibly a trader, and Maseden believed that the iron-clamped box containing the treasure had been hidden beneath the floor of the cabin, because the planks were broken where the heavy package had apparently fallen through.

One thing was certain. The similarity of the six flagons, the two dishes and the four animal figures showed that they came from an Aztec *teocalli*, or temple, of great wealth and importance. It was highly improbable that any town on the west coast of Mexico contained any such fame. If, therefore, they had been looted from the interior of the country, a

reasonable assumption was that some band of Spanish adventurers, finding the way hopelessly blocked to the east, fought their way westward, and actually built the vessel which should convey them to far-off Cadiz.

It was a strange hap that laid bare their plunder to the eyes of four descendants of the race which was destined to sweep them and their barbarous methods off the high seas.

After a day of hard work and many thrills, Maseden was moved to accept the discovery as a good omen.

"I had in my mind to suggest that we should renew our voyage by to-morrow's first tide," he said, as they sat near the camp-fire after the evening meal. "Just as the Romans consulted the oracle before starting on any great undertaking, so have we been given a happy augury by having thrust into our hands, so to speak, a notable treasure. Friends, I propose that we accept the decision of the gods, and weigh anchor in the morning."

For no assignable reason, the suddenness of this resolve seemed to startle the others.

"Have you made up your mind, then, that the channel is practicable?" inquired Sturgess after a marked pause.

"The only channel we know is practicable," said Maseden.

"Do you mean that we should return the way we came?" put in Nina in an awed tone.

"It offers our only means of escape," was the grave answer. "To my mind, if we attempt the southern exit we go to certain death. We have a roomy boat, a sail, and oars. By putting off slightly before high water we can reach the mouth of the gorge just on the turn of the tide. I think we can get through without any real difficulty, and even beach our boat in the open and shallow channel of Hanover Island which we were making for when the raft was swept out of its course. We have discussed the tides many times, and we all believe that we shall find ourselves in the main tidal stream again on the other side of that island opposite," and he pointed to the mass of black hills outlined against the eastern sky. "It is only the 'lesser of two evils,' I admit, but it yields a possibility; whereas I regard any attempt to navigate the southern avenue as absolutely fatal."

"Why the rush for the morning tide?" queried Sturgess.

Then Maseden laughed.

"You have fallen a victim to the prospecting mania," he said cheerfully. "Having made a good strike, you want to follow it up. I don't blame you. I believe this beach would pay well for digging. Before you were through with the search you would have a fine collection of odds and ends. But I'm minded to be superstitious for once. That puma with the glistening eyes has seemed to wink at me all day and say 'Get me and yourself out of this quick!' I don't want to impose my wishes on you others, but my advice is: Start to-morrow!"

Madge, listening intently, nodded.

"You are always right," she said emphatically. "Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest--"

She hesitated, as though conscious that her tongue was running away with her. The quotation, though apt, was peculiarly infelicitous. It did not please Sturgess; it reminded Maseden of an extraordinary relationship which he had tried in vain to ignore; it jarred on Nina Forbes's sensitiveness, because it recalled the promise she had made at dawn but had not had any opportunity of fulfilling.

She it was who broke up the conclave abruptly by springing to her feet.

"If we're going sailing the angry seas to-morrow, it's high time we were trying to sleep," she said. "Come, Madge.... By the way, is there to be any more guard-mounting to-night?"

"Yes, and you have no concern therein," said Maseden firmly.

"Who's keeping guard?" inquired Madge. "This is the first I've heard of it."

"Alec has had an attack of the fidgets ever since he saw that empty coracle," said Nina. "But I'm the worst sort of sentry, anyhow, and you would be no better, dear, so let us snooze selfishly, and be ready to help the men in to-morrow's hard work."

"I've never before known a verse from the Bible break up a meeting like that," commented Sturgess thoughtfully when the girls had gone. "Somebody might have heaved a tin of kerosene into the fire, the way Nina jumped up."

"The words may have evoked distressing memories," said Maseden incautiously.

"As how?"

Sturgess's alert brain was very wide awake at that moment, but Maseden contrived to extricate himself.

"That famous phrase of Ruth's contains the essence of an otherwise uninteresting Biblical story," he said. "If Ruth had not been so faithful to her mother-in-law we might never have heard of her."

"Was Naomi her mother-in-law?"

"Yes. Ruth, herself a widow, married Boaz."

"I guess I was sort of mixed up about it."

"Lots of people are," said Maseden dryly, and the subject dropped.

They were astir early and, when the tide served, put off with as little ceremony as though they were going on a river picnic.

The boat, of course, was far more easily managed than the raft. By keeping in the slack water inshore they contrived to reach the mouth of the gorge about the beginning of the ebb, and their calculations were completely verified by the smoothness and safety of their subsequent passage.

Maseden stood in the bows with an oar in readiness to sheer away from any obstruction in mid-stream. The two girls each took an oar, and Sturgess steered, also with an oar, as the broad-bladed rudder ran a foot deeper than the keel, being intended to act as a center-board when the sail was in use.

So preoccupied were they with their task that they hardly noticed the spot where the cliff had fallen away soon after they had passed beneath. Even the canopied rock on which they found sanctuary after the loss of the raft merely attracted a momentary glance. Madge, eyeing the fissure which had so terrified her, was about to say something when a warning shout from Maseden caused her to pull a few vigorous strokes.

They sheered past a flat boulder. A couple of vultures, scared by the unwonted apparition of a boat, flapped aloft, and they all saw, stretched on the rock, some portions of a human skeleton which most certainly had not been there when they came that way little more than a fortnight earlier.

The uncanny sight vanished as swiftly as it came. None spoke. The pace of the stream was quickening, and each had to be in instant readiness to obey orders.

At this stage Maseden asked the girls to reverse their positions and pull steadily. In consequence they were backing water, and thus checking the boat's way appreciably. By this means they rounded an awkward corner without any trouble, and again their eyes dwelt on the towering hills and wooded slopes of Hanover Island.

Maseden and Sturgess now began to press laterally towards the eastern channel. Two possible openings were abandoned because of the ugly reefs sighted only a couple of hundred yards away. At last, when practically in the center of a two-mile-wide passage between the three islands, Maseden saw a long stretch of open water.

Shipping a pair of oars, and leaving the steering and general look-out to Sturgess, he called on the girls to pull in the orthodox way. The three bent to the task. After ten minutes of really strenuous effort they were sensible of a greatly diminished drag in the current. Five minutes later they were in slack water, and speedily thereafter the boat ran aground.

"Hooray!" yelled Sturgess, who alone had any breath left to celebrate their victory. Somehow, little as they had gained in actual distance, since Providence Beach was only three miles away, they all felt that their chief enemy was conquered. They had profited by the initial mistake of keeping in mid-channel; they had learned a great deal about the tricks and changes of the Pacific tides; they had secured a first-rate boat, and, lodged in skins as a portion of the ballast, was a treasure of no mean proportions.

Small wonder that they were elated, or that Maseden's strong face softened into a smile of satisfaction as he drove the boat's anchor securely into a crevice in the rocky beach.

But he neither forgot the skeleton on the rock in Hell Gate nor failed to interpret correctly its sinister message, so it was his careful scrutiny that first revealed a figure lying on the shore at high-water mark about a quarter of a mile to the east. He surveyed it steadily for a while until the others, too, saw it. Then he made up his mind as to the only practicable course of action. He unhooked the anchor.

"All hands overboard," he said quietly. "We must get the boat afloat."

They obeyed instantly. The girls returned on board, their task being to steady the boat with the oars. Maseden took a cudgel, which he preferred to a sword, and hurried towards the prone figure. Sturgess followed, some fifty yards behind, with the rifle, his mission being to cover the retreat, if need be.

Neither Nina nor Madge uttered a word. They were becoming hardened to danger. They knew full well that, for some unimaginable reason, a territory hitherto closed to Indians was now open to them, and Maseden had left his companions under no delusions as to the characteristics of the wretched tribes which infest the lower coast and islands of Chile.

But the particular business of the women at the moment was to keep the boat in such a position that the men could jump in and shove off into deep water without delay, and they attended to that and nothing else.

War makes soldiers, and the struggle for life had assuredly made these two girls brave women.



CHAPTER XVII

RUNNING THE GANTLET

Maseden was not greatly concerned about the dead Indian lying on the shore. What he really expected was a sudden rush of savages from an ambuscade, since it was now certain that a party of natives had descended on Hanover Island. Some might have escaped, but others had come to grief.

The mere presence of a body showed that one, at least, must have died quite recently, while the bleaching bones passed in Hell Gate had probably been alive two days earlier. Some vultures were already circling high overhead, and he wondered why the birds had not begun their ghoulish task.

He could not recollect what manner of sepulture the aborigines adopted, but, from every point of view, it was more than strange to find a corpse abandoned on the beach in such conditions, unless, indeed, some drowned man had just been cast up there by the receding tide.

If that were so, why did the vultures wait?

He was on the alert, therefore, for any suspicious movement among the nearest trees and tall grasses, and warned Sturgess to keep a sharp look-out in the same direction.

"These natives are treacherous brutes," he said. "They may have seen that our boat was heading this way, and be simply waiting an opportunity to stick harpoons into us. Don't shoot actually on sight, but be ready to put a stopper on anything like an attack."

The words had hardly left his lips when the body on the beach moved! Slowly and, as it seemed, painfully, the Indian raised head and shoulders, and turned in the direction of the voice, finally sitting up sideways and using the right arm as a support.

Then, as Maseden drew near, he saw that this was not a man, but a woman, a woman so emaciated and feeble that the first astonished glance he took her to be middle-aged, whereas, in reality, she was not yet eighteen. She was stark naked, and he soon discovered that her left leg was broken.

The unfortunate wretch had dragged herself to an oyster bed, as an array of freshly opened shells testified; but there was no great supply in that place; the water was too shallow. At any rate, Maseden had no other means of estimating how long she had been there; indeed, he gave little thought to that consideration, because the problem of what to do with her arose instantly.

He argued, however, that the members of her tribe could not be close at hand, since the merest instinct of self-preservation would lead them to assist one of their number rendered helpless by an accident, though, among these wild folk, an old woman might be regarded as of no account.

He spoke to her in Spanish, asking what had happened, and she appeared to have a vague sense of his meaning; but her eyes were glistening with terror and fever, and he could make nothing of a mumbled reply except a word that sounded like *humo*, "smoke." She showed extreme fear at sight of the gun carried by Sturgess. Holding out her left hand as if pleading for mercy, she collapsed with a groan.

Sturgess, of course, was as fully aware as his companion of the difficulties raised by the discovery of this maimed creature.

"Well, by way of a change, Alec, I guess we're up against a mighty tough proposition," he said, scratching his head in sheer perplexity.

"We have only one course open, I take it," said Maseden, though he, like Sturgess, felt that they might well have been spared this additional burden.

"That's so. But--are broken legs in your line?"

"I have a notion that the bone-setter has to straighten and adjust the fracture by main force, and then bind the limb tightly, leaving the rest to nature. We have a spare oar. Chop the blade into two lengths of about fifteen inches, and get the girls to cut narrow strips out of the canvas cover. Bring me my oilskin, and what is left of the cover. We can carry her in that. Leave the rifle with me--and hurry! On no account must either Nina or Madge come away from the boat. Be sure and impress that on them. We may have to run for our lives any second."

Sturgess soon returned with the improvised splints and bandages. He also brought a tin of beef essence which Madge had found among the boat's stores and was hoarding carefully for such Lucullian feast when soup would appear on the menu.

When Maseden spoke of the remains of the canvas cover he had in mind the fact that the girls had fashioned the greater part of the coarse material into divided skirts. Seals were not plentiful in Rotunda Bay, and the devising of garments had become a sheer necessity.

They persuaded the Indian girl to swallow some of the beef extract. After tasting the first mouthful she would have emptied the tin, but this Maseden would not permit, because he knew the ordeal that was coming.

It was a tough job, too. In a sense, it almost proved more trying for the amateur surgeons than for their unfortunate patient. Luckily, she fainted at the first wrench. Then they set their teeth and pulled the broken bones into their correct positions as well as they could adjudge them. When the girl revived she was already clothed in the oilskin and slung in the canvas sheet as in a hammock, while the limb was bound immovably between two roughly fashioned splints.

Maseden imagined that this creature of the wild was, in all probability, as hardy as a cormorant, and equally voracious. At any rate, when laid in the boat, she gobbled up the remaining contents of the tin, ate ravenously of ship's biscuits and salt beef, and drank a mug of coffee in a gulp. When she discovered that no more food would be supplied she yielded to an evidently overwhelming desire to sleep.

Before closing her eyes, however, she had something to say. She was afraid of the men, but obviously placed trust in the two girls, neither of whom knew a syllable of Spanish beyond the few phrases which all travelers in South America must perforce acquire.

Madge, having the gift of music, contrived to mimic certain words with tolerable accuracy, and "smoke," "boats," "bad men," seemed, to Maseden's ear, to emerge from the guttural Indian accents. In one important respect, the wishes of the new addition to the party were quite understandable. She pointed to Providence Beach, indicated the boat, and made it clear that she counselled a prompt move eastward.

At last Maseden evolved a fairly intelligible notion of what she was endeavoring to convey. He believed, and rightly so, that she was telling her rescuers how a number of Indians had been attracted to Hanover Island by the smoke of the castaways' fire. They assumed a wreck, with its prospect of loot, and, egged on by greed, had ultimately dared a passage hitherto regarded as impracticable. Some had been killed; others had escaped, and were now on the camping-ground at Providence Beach.

Apparently the girl was warning these strangers against her own people and recommending a speedy flight to safer quarters. Oddly enough, her advice coincided with Maseden's own views. By landing on that part of the coast, and lighting a fire, they would be incurring a grave risk if there were Indians about, since the few miles' strip of shore, difficult though it was, would be negotiated easily by natives.

The abandonment of the injured girl he could not account for, nor was he sure the boat had been observed, granted even that Providence Beach was not actually occupied by savages. But he was not inclined to take any chances. Deep water flowed yet in the main channel, and the day was not far advanced.

So he and Sturgess shipped the oars and pulled until they were weary; before night fell they had met the rising tide, and made a good landing, not on Hanover Island, but on the eastern end of Island Number Two.

They slept in the boat as best they could, the men taking turns at mounting guard, as in addition to the now somewhat improbable chance of being attacked, their craft had to be maneuvered into slack water as the tide rose and fell. They were all heartily glad to see the dawn and eat a good meal.

The very smell of food awakened the Indian girl. Like a healthy animal recovering from hardship, she was growing plumper and comelier under their very eyes. With each hour she shed a year in appearance, and her confidence increased in about the same ration.

When she discovered that Maseden alone spoke Spanish she tried to explain matters to him. But her own knowledge of the language was of the slightest, and he was only able to confirm his overnight belief as to the danger of remaining in the vicinity of their first landing-place.

Singularly his close acquaintance with the San Juan *patois* proved most helpful. It occurred to him that this might be so, as the root words of Indian tribes throughout the South American continent have undergone fewer changes than would have been the case among civilized peoples. Many were in use among the Spanish half-castes on the ranch, and this aborigine grasped their meaning at once. Good linguist though he was, however, Maseden failed to extract more

than a glimmering of sense from her uncouth accents.

But none could fail to be impressed by her relief when the boat was afloat and traveling east. They soon quitted the channel between the islands and entered the wide expanse of Nelson Straits. The weather was fine, and a steady wind from the southwest encouraged Maseden to rig the sail.

Having a wholesome respect for the Pacific tides, he meant to hug the coast of Hanover Island. But after studying the clouds intently for an hour, the Indian girl signified that she wished to be lifted in her hammock. She then pointed to some small islands just distinguishable on the horizon, and apparently situated in the middle of the straits.

She saw the hesitancy in Maseden's face, and by this time had evidently singled him out as the leader of the party. Then she turned to Nina Forbes, and her gestures said as plainly, no doubt, as her words:

"If I can't persuade him, perhaps *you* can. Tell him to take the course I recommend."

For some reason Nina's cheeks grew scarlet under the brown tan of constant exposure to the weather, nor did a pronounced wink by Sturgess at Madge tend to restore her composure. But she met the Indian girl's appeal with seeming nonchalance and bravely ignored the obvious inference.

"I suppose she thinks that I may exercise some influence in the matter, Alec," she said, striving in vain to suppress a nervous little laugh. "I do honestly believe she means well. She is extraordinarily grateful to us. I have been watching her, and there is a dog-like devotion in her eyes when we render any little service that is reassuring."

"Those islets out there may be bare rocks," protested Maseden. He had little knowledge of sailing boats, and hesitated at a long trip in these fickle waters.

"Perhaps that is why she wishes us to go that way. They lie due east, and that is something in their favor."

Still was he dubious, largely owing to the intervening stretch of open sea, but again he essayed to question their would-be pilot.

The girl was quite emphatic in her direction as to the course, and equally opposed to the more cautious method he favored. A good deal of this was expressed in pantomime, but it was none the less understandable.

Finally, finding that the others had faith in her, Maseden nodded to Madge, who was at the tiller, as the rudder had been shipped when the sail was hoisted; and the boat was put across the wind. The Indian girl smiled, and was satisfied. They lifted her down to her place amidships, where her head rested on the package of treasure, and she remained there contentedly many hours.

Long before the violet-hued blurs in front took definite shape as a group of two fair-sized islands, with trees, lying among a great many stark rocks, sticking straight up out of the sea, the voyagers became aware of at least one good reason for their guide's choice of direction. The coast of Hanover Island began to fall away sharply to the northeast, and a wide gap opened up between it and the nearest land, a gap which must have been crossed in any event.

Maseden himself was the first to admit that they had been given sound advice.

Luckily the wind remained steady, and brought their craft on at a fair pace against a falling tide. Nevertheless it was a long sail, far longer than any of them had anticipated, and the shadows were deepening when the men again lifted the Indian girl level with the gunwale to find out if she could recommend the safest way of approaching a particularly forbidding shore.

She understood at once what they wanted, and indicated a narrow channel between two gigantic outlying rocks. Though it was precisely the one of three possible waterways which no stranger would have chosen, they did not dream now of disputing her judgment. The passage was made more easily than they had counted on, and a second time was their faith justified, because a strip of white beach soon showed on the line where trees and sea met.

The boat was run ashore, and a fire was lighted. The weather had become much colder, probably owing to the absence of shelter from the hills under which they had camped during the past month. The Indian girl offered no objection to the fire. In fact, when laid near it in a sand hollow, she fell asleep long before any of them.

The boat, of course, had to be safeguarded, as they landed at low water. Were it not for a fissure in the rock which permitted them to row fully a quarter of a mile nearer high-water mark than would have been possible otherwise, they must have devoted a wearisome time to the task of hauling her in as the tide rose. Fortunately, there was no heavy surf. The reefs they had seen some fifteen miles to the westward had broken up the long Pacific rollers, and the breeze was not strong enough to disturb this inland sea.

Nina and Madge elected to sleep on the sand.

"You can have too much of a good thing," explained Madge laughingly, "and, greatly as I prize our ark, I am tired of it to-day. Every bone in my body is aching."

They had, of course, given up each skin and strip of canvas they possessed in order to render the Indian girl more comfortable during the voyage, and a ship's boat can be a most irksome conveyance in such circumstances.

When the tide was high Sturgess and Maseden, before they, too, turned in, rose to make sure that the anchor could not drag during the night, and Sturgess electrified his friend by choosing that odd moment to allude to the Cartagena marriage.

"Say, Alec," he said, "you sure have had the time of your life ever since you were hauled off to San Juan and sentenced to be shot."

Maseden imagined that the New Yorker was merely referring to the incidents following the shipwreck.

"I don't see exactly how life has been more of a sizzle for me than for you and the girls," he said.

"Ah, come off it, Alec!" laughed the other. "You know better than that. But I guess I'll have to hand the explanation on a tray. Madge and Nina have told the facts about your wedding. Gosh! What a jolt it must have given you to find your wife on board the *Southern Cross*!"

"You *know*?" gasped Maseden.

"Yep. They up and told me while you were gathering fire-wood. Nina said she had promised you to put the full hand on the table at the first opportunity. She's done it."

"Nina! Didn't Madge say anything?"

"You bet your life. She was tickled to death. It's been worrying her no end."

"May I ask--"

"No, you mayn't. It was square of you, Alec, to insist that I should come in on the inside track. Of course, I wasn't born and bred in little old New York for nothing, and I had my doubts a while back. One day, too, you were within an ace of blurting out the whole yarn. I remember it well. I'm glad now you didn't. It would have made things kind of difficult for me. But both girls are a bit shy where you're concerned. You don't blame 'em, do you?"

Maseden was absolutely bewildered. Sturgess was an irresponsible, devil-may-care fellow in many respects, but these effervescent qualities cloaked a fine sensibility, and it was astounding to find him treating the matter so lightly.

"I--I hardly know what to say," he stammered.

"Say nothing. The tangle will straighten out in time. We're going to win through all right, so let us forget the San Juan affair till it overtakes us. You ain't going to switch off from Nina on to Madge, I guess, so you and I won't quarrel, and the other kinks in the chain will sort themselves if we all go easy."

"Tell me this. What was the cause of the marriage?"

"I don't know."

"You don't *know*?" Each word was a crescendo of astonishment.

"No. What business is it of mine, anyhow?"

"But you yourself have told me that you mean to marry Madge."

"Sure as death."

"Yet--"

"Sorry, Alec. I've promised to keep mum. Suppose we leave it at that."

"What is there to keep mum about?"

"Hanged if I can tell you, though you yourself haven't been what you might call bursting with information during the past month."

"It was a woman's secret, C. K."

"And that's just how I size it up at this sitting."

Sturgess's logic was unanswerable, but Maseden was in high dudgeon as he strode back to the camp-fire. He was far more angry with Nina than with Madge. He suspected that Madge simply followed her sister's instructions, and the injustice of this steady refusal of confidence was aggravated by the fact that Sturgess seemed to know more about the ins and outs of the affair now than he did.

True, the New Yorker said he was still in ignorance of the motive which led up to the marriage, yet he had hinted at the possession of knowledge withheld from the man who had saved their lives not once but a dozen times. Nina was to blame. Maseden was certain of that. He would have liked to shake her.

As it happened, she was either sound asleep or pretending it, so he, too, curled up in the sand and slept till long after dawn.

The new day began with an unexpected difficulty. The Indian girl was cheerful as a grig during breakfast. She ascertained their names, which she pronounced fairly well. "Nina" she had no trouble with. "Madge" she made into "Mad-je." Maseden was "Ah-lek," and Sturgess "See-ke." Her own name had a barbarous sound, if, indeed, it was a name at all; so Madge christened her "Topsy," which seemed to please her. But her light-heartedness vanished when she saw preparations being made to renew the voyage. She protested volubly, pointed to a colony of seals and well-filled beds of oysters, and generally implied an earnest desire to remain on the island.

Eastward, it would appear, were other "bad men" and "much smoke," but, whatsoever her motive, Maseden sternly overruled her. She was greatly distressed when placed on board the boat, and sulked for a couple of hours. As the coast drew near, however, she evinced renewed anxiety, and signified that she would act as pilot again.

The land seemed to be a replica of seaward islands; a fast-running tidal stream passed due east between two gaunt promontories. According to Maseden's reckoning the straits they were now entering should open into Smyth's Channel, and he bent his wits to the task of getting Topsy to understand that he wanted to meet one of the big ships which follow that route.

He believed she understood, but there could be no doubting she was so deeply concerned as to the probable whereabouts of the inhabitants of the coast region that she gave little heed to the wishes of her rescuers.

Oblivious of the pain she must be enduring, she contrived to perch herself in the bows, and scanned each bay and inlet of the ever-narrowing passage, though this was no subsidiary channel, but a deep and swift tide-way. The wind was strong and favorable and the boat was traveling fully eight knots an hour, a speed which no native craft could hope to rival. Still, Topsy's marked uneasiness led Maseden to examine the rifle and make sure that its mechanism was in good order and the magazine charged.

He had no definite notion as to the type of weapons used by the Indians. Nearly all savages are armed with spears and clubs, but he believed that a people so low in the social scale as these South American nomads would not possess firearms. At any rate, he bade all hands keep a sharp look-out, and specifically ordered Sturgess and the girls to take cover in the event of an attack, unless an actual attempt was made to board the boat, in which case the girls could thrust with the rapiers and Sturgess might do good work with an ax.

They ran on several miles without incident, and were beginning to think that their guide was, perhaps, swayed more by recollection of earlier sufferings than by any active peril of the hour, when Topsy, whose piercing black eyes were ever and anon turned to the bluffs on either hand, uttered a sharp cry and pointed to a low cliff overhanging a bay they had just passed on the left.

Three thin columns of smoke were ascending from its summit.

Maseden could make nothing of her excited speech, but he understood her gestures readily, and took it that the smoke was a signal, while the danger, whatever it may be, lay ahead.

And, indeed, they had not long to wait for an explanation. From around a point not a mile distant, and directly in front, appeared a number of coracles, eight all told, and each containing two men, or a man and a woman. It was clear that this flotilla meant to waylay them, and the terror exhibited by the Indian girl was only too eloquent as to the fate of the boat's occupants if they allowed themselves to be overpowered.

Maseden disposed his forces promptly. Sturgess was given the tiller. Topsy was put back on her couch in the bottom of the boat, and Nina and Madge were told to crouch by her side until their help was called for. From the outset the Americans did not dream of attempting to parley. Topsy's unfeigned dread was sufficient to ban any such quixotic

notion.

The coracles were strung out in an irregular line, covering a width of about four hundred yards, and, in laying his plans, Maseden recalled the strategy of a certain great admiral.

"Head slap for their center," he told Sturgess confidently. "That was Nelson's favorite way of attack. If possible, he always broke the enemy's line in two, and I suppose it paid him. I think these heavy-caliber bullets will rip a native craft as though it were made of brown paper, and I should be able to sink at least four before the others can close in."

Sturgess nodded.

"What Nelson says goes," he grinned.

The battle opened at a range of one hundred yards, and Maseden's first shot buckled the framework of the nearest coracle, so that it sank like a stone. There was a spurt of steam as the fire which every Indian boat carries reached the water, and two men swam away like otters.

The second shot struck a little too high. It whizzed through the craft's hide cover and lodged in an Indian's body, because the man yelled frantically. Maseden fired again, and damaged another coracle.

But by this time he had made the unpleasing discovery that these light skiffs could be propelled very rapidly for a short distance. In each a man or woman was paddling with furious energy, while their companions were using slings. Small, heavy stones rattled against and into the boat.

Sturgess was struck twice on the breast and left shoulder, and was only saved from serious injury by the stout oilskin coat he was wearing. Even so, he went white with pain, but he neither uttered a word nor neglected his task, which was to keep the sail filled and the boat traveling.

Maseden had two objects in mind--to beat off their assailants and yet keep sufficient ammunition in stock lest other Indians were encountered later. He sank two more coracles, and had killed or wounded three men, when a flint pebble struck him on the head, finding the exact spot where he was injured during the wreck.

He sank to his knees, and tried to say something. He believed he heard a crash and some shouting. Then the sky and hills and swift-running waters whirled in a mad dance before his eyes, and he lost consciousness.



CHAPTER XVIII

THE SETTLEMENT

Just as before, when he awoke on board the *Southern Cross* in surroundings so bewildering that he gave up the effort to localize them, his puzzled eyes now surveyed white-painted panelled walls, a brass-bound port-light, and some tapestry curtains. At any other time he would have realized at once that he was in a ship's cabin, but now an uncomprehending stare soon yielded to a torpor of pain.

He believed that a gentle hand adjusted a bandage on his head, and was aware of a grateful coldness where before there had been heat and a throbbing ache. Afterwards--he thought it was immediately, though the interval was a full half hour--he looked again at the walls and ceiling with something of real recognition in his glance.

"Glad to see you're regaining your wits, Mr. Alexander," said a man's voice, a strange but very pleasant voice. "Lucky for you you've got the right sort of thick head, or, from what I hear, it would certainly have been cracked twice."

Mr. Alexander! Who was he? And where was he? Where were--

"May he talk a little now, doctor?" and Maseden would have had to be very dead if he did not know that Nina Forbes was sitting by his side. He turned, and even remembered to repress a groan lest some one in authority might not grant her request.

Even so the doctor was dubious.

"He must not be allowed to get excited," he said.

"Then may he listen to me a minute?"

"Yes, if you really keep to schedule."

"Don't move, Alec!" whispered Nina, and there seemed to be a note in her voice that Maseden had heard only once before, though he could not recall the occasion. "We're on board a mail steamer bound for England, but she touches at Punta Arenas and Buenos Ayres, so you must be 'Mr. Alexander,' not 'Mr. Maseden,' until we reach home. Don't ask why just now. I'll tell you to-morrow, or next day, when you are stronger. You will trust me, won't you?"

"Trust you, Nina! Yes, forever!"

He looked at her, as though to make sure that his senses were not deceiving him and that it was really Nina Forbes who sat there, a Nina with her hair nicely combed and coiled and wearing a particularly attractive pink jersey and white serge skirt.

He thought that her eyes--those frank blue eyes he had gazed into so often--were suffused with tears.

"Why are you crying?" he demanded, with just a hint of that domineering way of his.

"Not for grief," she said quietly. "But you must drink this now, and go to sleep. When you awaken again, perhaps the doctor will let C. K. come and chat with you."

"C. K.? Is he all right?"

"Yes."

"And Madge?"

"Yes. Not another word. Drink--to please me."

"I'll do anything to please you."

He swallowed some milk and soda-water; took a whole tumbler-full, in fact.

"That's fine," he said. "Now I'll hold your hand and you'll tell me--"

"You're going to close your eyes and lie still," she said firmly. "If you don't I'll leave you. If you do, I'll stay here."

"I'm bribed," he said, smiling. Soon he slept, but this was nature's healing sleep, not the coma of insensibility. When next he entered a world of reality he found Sturgess sitting where Nina had been.

"Going strong now, Alec?" inquired his friend.

Maseden did not answer at once. He wanted to be quite sure that the wretched throbbing in his head had ceased. Yes; there was a great soreness, but it was of the scalp, not of the internal mechanism. He sat bolt upright.

"Hi!" shouted Sturgess, "you mustn't do that! Gosh! The doctor man will raise Cain with me if he knows I let you move."

"I'm all right, C. K."

"You're going to flatten out straight away, or I'll shriek for help."

Maseden lay down. The dominant emotion of the moment was curiosity. Perhaps, if he kept quiet, Sturgess would talk.

At any rate, the New Yorker was much relieved, and said so.

"You've nearly hopped it," he explained anxiously. "It was a case of touch and go with you for two days, and--"

"Two days!" gasped Maseden. "Have I been stretched here two days?"

"And more. We were picked up by the *Valentia* on Thursday evening, and now it is Sunday morning."

"Everything seems to happen on a Sunday," said Maseden inconsequently; but Sturgess understood.

"Sunday is our day," he agreed. "Now, if you don't butt into the soliloquy, but show an intelligent interest by an occasional nod, I'll switch you on to the Information Bureau. The doc said I might, just to stop you from worrying."

"When an Indian with a spit lip got you with a stone at about five yards there were two coracles on each side of us. I suspicioned that the Thugs in them meant to spring aboard at the same time, which would have meant trouble, so it was up to me to spoil the combination. I shoved the helm hard over and drove into the two on the port side. Our heavy boat went through them as though they were jelly-fish, and the sudden rise of our starboard gunwale upset the calculations of the other crowd."

"Everybody, including you, rolled over with the sudden lurch, but Nina gathered herself together, grabbed your gun, stood straight on her feet, and said to me: 'Do you know which of these men hit Alec?' 'Yes,' I said, 'that joker with the criss-cross mouth. But you lie down. We're clear now.' Without another word she drew a steady bead on the stone-slinger and got him with the first shot."

"Then she attended to you. It seemed almost as though we had reached the limit, with you lying like dead, and me weak and sick, because the slingers gave me a couple to begin with, and the Indian girl screaming for all she was worth. Nina was just crooning over you like a mother nursing an ailing baby, so Madge came and took the tiller--not before time, as I didn't know enough to run with the wind again."

"We missed a howling reef by a hair's breadth--missed it only because the new course had taken us close inshore towards the north. Half an hour later we were in Smyth's Channel, and didn't know it, so we would have been sailing yet into the middle of the Andes if the *Valentia* hadn't bumped around a corner. Since then we three have been setting the scene for you when you come on deck. The passengers are the right sort, every man and woman among 'em all wool and a yard wide. Tell you what, Alec--I'd better warn you--Nina and Madge have fixed up a star turn for you on your first appearance."

Sturgess paused to grin largely, so Maseden broke in with a question.

"Are we at sea now?" he inquired.

"No. We're anchored at Punta Arenas. The girls have gone ashore to see that Topsy is well fixed in a mission-house. The man who runs it came aboard for mail. He talks Topsy's lingo, so now we know why we happened on her. She broke her leg when one of half a dozen coracles was upset, and the brutes simply left her there to die, as they were in such a dashed hurry to go for the supposed loot of a wrecked ship. She will be all right here. I've attended to the financial side of it. They tell me that a hundred dollars will make her a great heiress."

"What about my name--Alexander?"

"Gee whiz! I was nearly forgetting. That was Nina's notion. She's real cute, that girl. She sized up the position in San Juan, and in case there might be any difficulty while the ship is in South American waters gave your name as Philip Alexander. She remembered that there was a Mr. Alexander on board the *Southern Cross*, and it would be just silly to try and pass you off as a broncho-buster. No one gave any heed to your clothes. Our collective rig was so cubist or futurist, in general effect, that your *vaquero* outfit passed with the rest."

"The skipper is about your size, and he has sent you a suit. The girls are buying linen and underclothes for all of us in Punta Arenas. I had no money, so instead of borrowing from the other people I went through your pants for five hundred dollars. You'll find a note with your wad, so that you can collect if I peg out before we find a bank."

Then Maseden laughed, and was heard by the doctor, who was coming along the gangway.

"Halloa!" he said. "Was it you who laughed, Mr. Alexander?"

"Yes, doctor."

"Any pain in your head?"

"Outside, yes; inside, no."

"Feeling sick?"

"Sick. I could eat a pound of grilled steak."

"You'll do! Wonderful health resort, that wild land you've been wandering through. You have survived the nastiest concussion, short of absolutely fatal injuries, I've come across. I can't prescribe steak just yet, but if you get through the night without a temperature I'll allow you on deck to-morrow for a couple of hours."

Maseden chafed against the enforced rest, and rebelled against a diet of milk and beef tea, but the doctor was wiser than he, and the patient acknowledged it when really strong again.

On the day the ship left Buenos Ayres he was able to dress unaided and reach a chair on deck without a helping arm. The boat which had proved the salvation of the castaways had been hoisted on board, and that particular part of the deck was allotted to the party of four. The other passengers were never tired of hearing them recount their adventures, and Maseden, to his secret amazement, discovered that Nina Forbes seemed to find delight in attracting an audience.

Madge and Sturgess could, and did, stroll off together for many an uninterrupted chat, but Nina was always surrounded by a coterie of strangers, some of them men, young men, frankly admiring young men.

Maseden endured this state of affairs until the ship had signalled her name and destination at Fernando Noronha, whence there was a straight run home. Then, disobeying the doctor, and coming on deck for the first time after dinner, he found Nina ensconced in her corner alone.

He took her by surprise. She would have sprung up, but he stopped her with a firm hand.

"No, you don't," he said, pulling a chair around and seating himself so that his broad back offered a barrier to any would-be intruder. "You and I are going to have a heart-to-heart talk, Nina. I've been waiting many days for the chance of it, and now is the time."

She tried to laugh carelessly.

"What an alarming announcement," she tittered. "Wherein have I erred that I am to be catechised? Or is it only a lecture on general behavior?"

"I'll tell you. While we were trying to dodge the worries of existence round about Hanover Island I gave little real thought to my own affairs. But the calm of the past few days has enabled me to sort out events in what I may term their natural sequence, and the second rap on the head may have restored my wits to their average working capacity. Perhaps it will simplify matters if I begin at the beginning. The woman I married--"

"Are you still harping on that unfortunate marriage?"

The tone was flippant enough, but its studied nonchalance was a trifle overdone.

"Yes," he said quietly. "I promise that you will not be bored by the facts I intend to put before you--now--to-night--unless you resolve not to listen."

There was no answer. Somehow, every woman knows just how far she may play with a man. Had Nina Forbes chosen, she might have sent her true lover out of her life that instant. She did not so choose. Indeed, nothing was further from her mind. She did not commit the error of imagining that Maseden would pester her with his wooing and wait her good pleasure to yield. His temperament did not incline to gusts of passion. She must hear him now or lose him forever.

"Of course I'll listen," she said timidly.

"Thank you. Well, then, my wife signed the register as Madeleine. That is not your sister's name."

"No."

"Nor yours?"

"No."

"Yet you led me to believe that I had married your sister?"

"No. You assumed it."

"What really happened was that you assumed the name of Madeleine. Nina, *you* are my wife!"

"In a sense, yes."

Though the promenade deck was lighted by a few lamps, there was a certain gloom in that corner. Nina's face was discernable, but not its expression, and a curious hardening in her voice brought to Maseden a whiff of surprise, almost of anxiety. Happily he had mapped out the line he meant to follow, and adhered to it inflexibly.

"In the sense that you are legally Mrs. Philip Alexander Maseden," he persisted.

"I may or may not be. I am not sure. I used a name not my own. It was the first that come into my head--a frightened woman's attempt to leave herself some loophole of escape in the future."

"You are mistaken, Nina. I know enough about the law to say definitely that it is the ceremony which counts, not the name. You will see at once that this must be so. If you married another man to-morrow, and signed yourself 'Mary Smith,' you would still be committing bigamy."

At that she laughed.

"I must really be careful," she said.

"I only want to fix in your mind the absolute finality of that early morning wedding in the Castle of San Juan. It makes matters easier."

"To my thinking it makes them most complex."

"Not at all. You and I have only reversed the usual procedure. Common-place folk meet, fall in love, go through a more or less frenzied period of being engaged, and, finally, get married. We began by getting married. Circumstances beyond our control stopped the natural progression of the affair, but I suggest that the frenzied part of the business might well start now."

He caught her left hand and held it. She did not endeavor to withdraw it, but he was startled by her seeming indifference. Still, being a determined person, even in such a delicate matter as love-making, he pursued his theme.

"You well know that I mean to marry you, Nina, though I have regarded myself as bound to your sister until freed by process of law," he went on. "But I ought to have guessed sooner that Madge would never have allowed Sturgess to become so openly her slave if she had contracted to love, honor and obey me. She might, indeed, have shared my view that the marriage was a make-believe affair as between her and me, but she would have held it as binding until the law declared her free. Then, that day in Hell Gate, when the hazard of a few minutes would decide whether we lived or died, you meant to tell me the truth before the end came. Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You have no right to ask." Her voice was very low.

"I can answer my own question. You wanted to die in my arms, Nina, with our first and last kiss on our lips. Fool that I was, I was so concerned about the height of a tide-mark on a rock that I gave no heed to the faltering speech of the woman I loved. The next time I heard those same accents from you was when I came to my senses on board this ship. For a few seconds you bared your heart again, Nina, and again I was deaf.

"You must forgive me, sweetheart, though such grievous lack of perception was really the highest compliment I could pay you. The notion that I was married to Madge was firmly established in my mind, and I literally dared not tell you that you were the one woman in the world for me till the other obstacle was removed. Seldom, if ever, I suppose, has any man been in such a position. Of course, there would have been no difficulty at all if I had happened to guess the truth--"

"That is just where you are mistaken, Alec," and the words came with a sorrowful earnestness that Maseden found vastly disconcerting. "What woman with a shred of self-respect would agree to regard such a union as ours binding? Now, you have had your say; let me have mine," and she snatched her hand away vehemently. "I married you as part of an infamous compact between that trader, Steinbaum, and Mr. Gray.

"My family is not wealthy, Alec. When my mother married a second time she did so largely on account of Madge and myself. She lacked money to educate us, or give us the social position every good mother desires for her daughters. But Mr. Gray, though a man of means, frittered away a good income in foolish speculations. He was worth half a million dollars, and believed himself such a financial genius that he could soon be a multi-millionaire. Instead of making money, he lost it, and the latest of his follies was to finance Enrico Suarez in a scheme to seize the presidency. The attempt was to have been made two years ago, but was postponed, or defeated, I don't know which--"

"Defeated," put in Maseden. "I know, because I helped to put a stopper on it."

"Well, the collapse of that undertaking and its golden promise frightened my stepfather. After a lot of correspondence between Steinbaum and himself he came to South America, bringing with him practically the remnants of his fortune. My mother was too ill to accompany him, and he refused to travel alone, so we two girls were given the trip. Naturally, we were quite ignorant of the facts, and believed he was merely visiting a little republic in which he had financial interests.

"By chance we arrived in Cartagena on the very day Suarez had planned for the president's murder--and yours, too, for that matter. Your arrest and condemnation gave the conspirators a chance of repaying Mr. Gray the money he had advanced. They were afraid he would lodge an official complaint, and get the State Department to interfere. But they had not the means in hard cash, and it occurred to one of them--Suarez, I believe--that if one of Mr. Gray's daughters married you, and inherited your estate, the property could be sold for a sum sufficient to clear his claim and leave a balance for the other thieves.

"That is the precious project in which I, the elder of the two, became a pawn. Mr. Gray terrified me into compliance by telling me that we would be paupers on our return home. For myself I cared little, but when I thought of my mother I yielded. I am not excusing myself, Alec, though I little guessed the true nature of the bargain. I see now that Suarez and Steinbaum wished to avoid the actual semblance of having committed daylight murder and robbery. They might justify your death as a rebel against the state, but they could not explain away the seizure of your property, whereas its sale by your widow would be a most reasonable proceeding.

"Please understand that I believed I was only carrying out a formal undertaking meant to enable my stepfather to recover money honestly lent. Even so, my resolution faltered at the last moment, and I signed the register in my mother's name. And now I have bared my heart to you, and you see how--utterly--impossible--it is--Oh, Alec, don't be cruel! Don't torture me! I can never, never be your wife, because I can never forgive myself!"

Alec, the wise, as Sturgess had often styled him, showed exceeding wisdom now by letting her cry her fill. Never a word did he say until the tempest subsided. Then he took her hand again and drew her to him.

"Tell me one thing, Nina," he said gently. "What became of the ring--our ring?"

"It is tied around my neck--on a bit of ribbon," she sobbed.

"Then it shall remain there until we reach New York," he said.

"But--I want--to keep it--as a souvenir--of all that has passed," she said brokenly.

"So you shall, dear one. You would never feel satisfied, anyhow, with a Spanish marriage, so we'll try an American one."

"Alec, I cuc--cuc--can't marry you. I'm too ashamed."

He laughed happily, and drew her to him.

"You can't wriggle out of the knot now, girlie," he said. "But, just to behave like other folk, we'll begin again at the beginning, and not at the end. Nina, do you think you can learn to love me quick enough to permit of a real wedding when we arrive in New York? You and I have gone through so many experiences since we met that we can dispense with some of the preliminaries to courtship. Shall we fix a date now? Say three weeks after we land, or sooner, if matters can be arranged."

She lifted her tear-stained face, and her soul went out to his in their first kiss.

Sturgess, when he heard of the latest development, "got busy," as he put it, on his own account. He, of course, had been told the exact facts by Nina on that night passed on the island in Nelson Straits. The upshot of the general agreement speedily arrived at was a noteworthy double wedding, at which, as a topic of conversation, the beauty of the brides rivaled, if it did not eclipse, their extraordinary adventures.

It should be said, as a fitting rounding off of a record of singular events, that Maseden not only obtained the money held in trust for him by the consul at Cartagena, but the proceeds of the sale of the ranch as well. Enrico Suarez was stabbed to the heart by a maniac with a grievance. Senor Porilla, an honest man, according to South American standards, became president, and saw to it that Maseden's rights were safeguarded. Even the wily Steinbaum was compelled to disgorge to Gray's executors.

The Aztec treasure was sold for a mint of money to a millionaire collector, and this sum was settled on Mrs. Gray for life, with reversion to her daughters in equal shares.

If any one is really curious to ascertain the identity and whereabouts of Mr. and Mrs. Philip Alexander Maseden or Mr. and Mrs. C. K. Sturgess, all that is necessary is to visit a town on the coast of Maine any August, and keep an eye peeled for a ship's life-boat converted into a yawl and named "*The Ark*." Therein will be found some very pleasant people, and, with the help of the foregoing history, the rest of the task should be simplicity itself.

THE END.