

== FICTION ==

Francis Lynde

Pirates Hope



eBookTakeAway

== FICTION ==

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

BY FRANCIS LYNDE

PIRATES' HOPE
THE FIRE BRINGERS
THE GIRL A HORSE AND A DOG
THE WRECKERS
DAVID VALLORY
BRANDED
STRANDED IN ARCADY
AFTER THE MANNER OF MEN
THE CITY OF NUMBERED DAYS
THE HONORABLE SENATOR SAGEBRUSH
THE PRICE
A ROMANCE IN TRANSIT

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

PIRATES' HOPE

[i]

PIRATES' HOPE

[ii]
[iii]

BY
FRANCIS LYNDE

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS
1922

COPYRIGHT, 1922, BY
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

[iv]

Printed in the United States of America

Published April, 1922



[v]

TO
EDWARD YOUNG CHAPIN

FRIEND OF MANY YEARS AND
KINDLIEST OF CRITICS, THIS
BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY
INSCRIBED.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I INTRODUCING MR. MACHIAVELLI VAN DYCK	3
II THE SHIP'S COMPANY	19
III THE MAJOR--AND OTHERS	36
IV THE LOG OF THE <i>Andromeda</i>	50
V ANY PORT IN A STORM	61
VI A SEA CHANGE	72
VII SHORE LEAVE	86
VIII INTO THE PRIMITIVE	103
IX THE BULLY	115
X THE BONES OF THE <i>Santa Lucia</i>	131
XI FINDERS KEEPERS	144
XII BONTECK UNLOADS	159
XIII THE WIND AND THE WAVES ROARING	175
XIV HAND TO MOUTH	193
XV THE MERRY WAR	212
XVI A MARATHON AND AN ULTIMATUM	235
XVII CAPTAIN ELIJAH SCORES	251
XVIII UNDER A GIBBOUS MOON	266
XIX THE FORWARD LIGHT	285

PIRATES' HOPE

I

INTRODUCING MR. MACHIAVELLI VAN DYCK

To those who knew him best and had known him longest, Bonteck Van Dyck, sometime captain of his university eleven, a ball player with the highest batting average on the university nine, a large-lettered star in everything pertaining to athletic accomplishments, and above and beyond this the fortunate--or unfortunate, as one chooses to view it--inheritor of the obese Van Dyck fortune, figured, like the dead kitten discovered on the ash heap by the investigative infant, as "a perfectly good cat, spoiled."

As was most natural, the spoiling was usually charged in a lump sum to the exaggerated fortune. In the university Van Dyck was a breezy, whole-souled, large-hearted man's man, the idol of his set and fraternity and a pathetically easy mark for the college borrower. Past the college period, however, there came rumors of a radical change; sharp-edged hints that the easy mark was becoming an increasingly hard mark; vague intimations that this prince of good fellows of an earlier day was attaining a certain stony indifference to suffering on the part of those who sought to relieve him of

some portion of the money burden. Nay, more; it was whispered that he was not above using the bloated bank account as a club wherewith to dash out the brains of his opponents, not only in the market-place, but at the social fireside, where, as a handsome young Croesus, owning a goodly handful of Manhattan frontages, sailing his own yacht, and traveling in his own private car, he was the legitimate quarry of the match-making mothers--or fathers.

Though we had been reasonably close friends in the university days, it so chanced that I had seen next to nothing of Van Dyck during the three years immediately following the doling out of the coveted sheepskins in Commencement Week; and the echoes of these derogatory stories--echoes were all that had drifted out to me in the foreign field to which, as a constructing engineer, I had gone soon after my graduation--were somehow vastly unconvincing. But on a certain memorable autumn evening in a New Orleans hotel, when I found myself sitting across a table for two as Van Dyck's guest, listening while he explained, or tried to explain, why he had cabled me from Havana to meet him at this particular time and place, it was disconcertingly evident that the golden youth of the old university days had really developed into something different--different, and just a shade puzzling.

"You see, Preble, you are the one man I was most anxious to find," he was saying, for the third time since the half-shell oysters had been served. "By the sheerest good luck I happened to run across Bertie Witherspoon in Havana, and he told me that you were, or had been, running the blockade, or something of that sort, down on the Venezuelan coast, and that a wire to the Barcado Brothers' New Orleans headquarters would probably reach you."

"Running the blockade!" I broke in derisively. "That is about as near as a New York provincial like Bertie Witherspoon could come to any fact outside of his native Borough of Manhattan! There is no blockade on the Venezuelan coast; and I've been building a railroad from Trujillo up into the Sierra Nevada de Merida. Does this trifling difference make me any less the man you were anxious to find?"

"Not in the least," he returned, with the old-time, boyish smile wrinkling at the corners of his fine eyes. "But I do hope you've got your railroad built and are footloose and free to take another commission."

"No," I said; "the railroad isn't finished. But as it probably never will be, under the present Venezuelan administration, we can leave it out of the question."

"Then you could take a month or so off, if you should feel like it?"

"I could, yes; if the hotel bills wouldn't prove to be too high."

Again the good-natured smile identified the Teck Van Dyck of other days for me.

"There won't be any hotel bills," he said gently. "You are to be my guest on the *Andromeda* for a little cruise."

"On the *Andromeda*?" I exclaimed. "You don't mean to say you've got that baby Cunarder with you down here in these waters?"

"Yea, verily, and for a fact," was the smiling reply. "I came up the big river in her this afternoon. Been knocking about a bit among the islands to dodge the country-house invitations up home."

"Out of tune with the little social gods and goddesses?" I ventured.

"Out of tune with a good many things, Dick. This is a sorry old world, and the people in it are sorrier--most of 'em. Everything's a bore."

I laughed.

"Since when have you been soaking Diogenes and the later Cynics?"

"Chortle if you want to," he returned. "Old Man Socrates had it about right when he said that virtue is knowledge, and Antisthenes went him one better when he said, 'Let men gain wisdom--or buy a rope.' Another time he says, 'A horse I can see, but horsehood I can not see.' That applies to humanity, as well."

"Meaning that things--and people--are not always what they seem?"

"Meaning that people are so seldom what they seem that you can ignore the exceptions. Somebody has said that there are two distinct entities in the ego; the man as he sees himself, and the man as God sees him. That is only a fraction of a great truth. There are as many entities as the man has human contacts; he is not precisely the same man to any two of his acquaintances, and he is a hypocrite with most."

"Bosh!" said I, thinking I had the key to all this hard-bitted, and lately acquired, philosophy. "You have too much money, Bonteck; that is all that is the matter with you."

He put down his oyster fork and looked me squarely in the eye. He was the same handsome, upstanding young Hercules that he had always been, but there was something new and more or less provocative in the contemptuous set of the mouth and the half belligerent emphasis of the well-defined jaw.

"You've said it, Dick; I have too much money, and other people haven't enough," was his rather enigmatical retort. Then: "You may call it madman raving if you like, but I've lost my sense of perspective; I can't tell an honest man--or woman--when I see one."

"All of which leads up to?----"

"To the thing which has brought me to New Orleans, and to my reason for wiring you from Havana. My philosophy has led me to the jumping-off place, Dick. Before I am two months older I am going to know at least one small bunch of people for what they really are under their skins. And you are going to help me to acquire this invaluable information. How does that proposal strike you?"

"It strikes me a trifle remindfully, if you insist on knowing," I said. "I haven't been altogether out of touch with the home people, and quite a few of them have had something to say about this loss of perspective that you've just confessed to. I've been writing most of the gossip off to profit and loss, but----"

"You needn't," was his brusque interruption. "As I've said, this is a pretty rotten world, if anybody should ask."

"Is it, indeed? How many millions does it take to give a man that point of view?"

"That is the devil of it," he said, with a touch of bitterness. "Will you believe me when I say that, apart from yourself and two or three other honest money-despisers like you, I don't really know, as man to man, or man to woman, half a dozen people on the face of the planet?"

"I'll believe that you think so. Still, that is all piffle, as you very well know. So far as the women are concerned, it merely means that you haven't met the one and only."

Van Dyck was silent while the waiter was placing the meat course. During the plate-changing interval I became unpleasantly conscious of the presence--the curiously obtrusive presence--of a dark-faced, black-mustachioed little man sitting two tables away, and apparently engrossed in his dinner. Why this one foreign-looking individual, out of the many late diners comfortably filling the large room, should disturb me, I could not determine; but the vague disquietude came--and remained. Twice I thought I caught the small man watching my tablemate furtively from beneath his heavy eyebrows; and when Van Dyck began to speak again, I was almost certain I detected that half mechanical cocking of an ear which betrays the intentional and eager eavesdropper.

"The one and only woman," said Van Dyck musingly, taking up the thread of the table talk at the point where it had been broken by the shifting of plates. "That is another exploded fallacy, Preble. There are dozens of the 'one-and-onlys,' each with a scheming mamma, or a grafting father, or an impecunious guardian who has been thriftlessly making ducks and drakes of his ward's trust funds. And they are all so immitigably decent and well-behaved and conventional that butter wouldn't melt in the mouth of a single one of them. They never, by any chance, let you see one-sixty-fourth of an inch below the surface."

"I grant you surfaces are more or less deceptive," I admitted. "But your charge is too sweeping. You can't lump humanity any more than you can the stars in heaven."

"Can't I? Wait and you shall see. And it isn't altogether what you are thinking; that I have been 'touched' so often that it has soured me. Heaven knows I've been a perfect Pool of Bethesda to a whole worldful of financial cripples ever since I left the university; but I don't especially mind the graft. What I do mind is the fact that it makes smiling hypocrites out of the grafters, big and little. Not one of them dares show me his real self, and there are times when I am fairly sick at heart for one little refreshing glimpse of humanity in the raw."

"Which is more piffle," I commented. "You didn't cable me to come and eat a New Orleans dinner with you on the bare chance that I'd let you work off a batch of grouches on me, did you?"

His answer was delayed so long that I wondered if he were trying to determine beforehand how much or how little he might be obliged to tell me. But finally he broke ground, rather cautiously, I thought, in the field of the explanations.

"No; I didn't ask you for the purpose of unloading my peculiar and personal grievances upon you, tempting as that may have been. I have a deep-laid plot, and I want you to help me carry it out. It is just about the maddest thing you ever heard of, and I've got to have at least one sane man along--as a sort of sea-anchor to tie to when the hurricane begins ripping the masts out of us, and all that."

"In other words, you are out to pick up a bit of moral backing for the plot. Is that it?"

"You have hit it precisely. You are to go along and hold me up to the mark, Dick. If I show any signs of weakening, you are to jab a knife into me and twist it around a few times. You are on salary, you know--if you care to have it that way."

"If you say money to me again, I quit you cold, right here and now," was my answer to that. And then: "Pitch out and tell me: what is this piratical scheme that you are afraid you may not have the nerve to carry through?"

The plotter sat back in his chair, regarding me through half-closed eyelids; and again I thought I caught the dark-faced foreigner two tables distant stealthily watching him.

"On the face of it, it looks almost as thrilling as an old maids' tea party--and not any less conventional," Van Dyck began. "You have been around and about a good bit in the Caribbean, haven't you?"

"I suppose I might be able to pilot the *Andromeda* into most of the well-known harbors, if I had to," I boasted.

"Good. But you haven't been much out of the regular steamer lanes?--or have you?"

"Now and then; yes. Once, when I was trying to blow around from Carthage to La Guaira in a coasting schooner, our old tub of a wind jammer was caught in a hurricane and piled up on a coral reef. We were Crusoes on the ghastly little island for nearly a month before a tramp steamer happened along and saw our signals."

Van Dyck nodded as one who is hearing what has been heard before.

"You wrote home about that adventure, as you may, or may not, remember, and the story got around to me. Afterward, I chanced to see in the shipping news the report of the captain of the tramp 'tanker' which had picked you up. Your island wasn't down on any of the charts, and Captain Svenson gave the latitude and longitude as a matter of information. Have you any idea what island it was--or is?"

"No. As you may imagine, I was only too glad to see the last of it when we were taken off."

"It is said to be the Lost Island of the old English plateship harriers--Sir Frankie Drake and the rest," Van Dyck went on. "There is a story that Drake once ran a Spanish treasure ship into the lagoon which encircles the island, shot it full of holes, and finally burned it after a siege lasting a couple of days. The tale adds that during the two-day fight the Spaniards had time to unload and bury some of the gold bars in the galleon's cargo. Drake tried to make his prisoners tell what they had done with the treasure--so the story goes--and when they proved obstinate he sailed away and left them to starve. At a somewhat later period the island appears in the legends as 'Pirates' Hope'--place where the black-flag rovers used to put in to refit. Nobody seems to know why it hasn't been put down on the modern charts."

I closed my eyes and a cold little chill ran up and down my back. Van Dyck's yarn was probably only a figment of the story-tellers, but it brought back most vividly the memory of that despairing month I had spoken of; the dragging hours and days, the pinch of starvation, the hope deferred as we stared our eyes out sweeping the meeting line of sea and sky that never--until that last welcome day--gave back a sign of the world out of which we had been blotted. Also, the story resurrected another memory, one which had been almost forgotten with the lapse of time. There had been relics on the island; a few bits of the iron and woodwork of an ancient wreck, and a few bleached bones--human bones. Still, I had all the incredulity of one who had listened to many marvelous tales of the sea.

"You can hear dozens of yarns like that about every coral island and cay in the Caribbean," I said.

"I know," he agreed. "And on a pleasure voyage it helps out wonderfully if you have some one along who can tell them. How would the old Spanish Main strike you as a winter cruising ground for the good ship *Andromeda*?"

It was at this point that I began to see a few rays of daylight--or thought I did.

"Show me the *Andromeda's* passenger list and I can tell better," I laughed.

"Your fellow voyagers will be people you know, or used to know--the majority of them," he returned; then, with what seemed to be a curious lack of enthusiasm, he enumerated them. "I've invited the newly married Greys; the Ph.D. Sanfords; Major Terwilliger and his nephew, Jerry Dupuyser; Conetta Kincaide and her dragoness aunt, Miss Mehitable; Madeleine Barclay and her father; young Grisdale and his bull pup; and Hobart Ingerson. And last, but by no means least, Mrs. Eager Van Tromp and her three daughters."

"Heavens!" I interjected. "Why didn't you include all of New York, while you were about it? Do you mean to tell me that you have all these people with you in the *Andromeda*?"

"Not yet, but soon," he qualified. "They are on the way down here in my private car. I'm here to meet them, and so, by the same token, are you."

"Good Lord! If you had hired a Hagenbeck to make your collection it couldn't have been more zoo-like! What under the sun were you thinking of, Teck?"

"They are all people I'd like to know better," he rejoined half absently. "The 'collection,' as you so scoffingly call it, was quite carefully chosen, if you did but know it."

"But Ingerson!" I protested.

"I know. Ingerson is a brute, you would say; and so would I, if I were on the witness stand and obliged to testify. But in condemning him we should be in the minority, Dick. He has the *entree* to the best houses in New York, and half of the dowagers in that abandoned city would snap at him for a son-in-law."

"That may well be. But to shut yourself up with him in a yacht party for weeks on end----"

"Your point is well taken. But you will remember that I have admitted the madnesses from start to finish. The vital thing, however, is this: Will you consent to go along with us to add the saving touch of sanity? Don't turn me down, Dick," he added, and the adjuration was almost a pleading.

"I'm not turning you down," I hastened to say. "I am merely asking 'why?'"

Van Dyck's face was a study in moody perplexity, and he spoke slowly, almost hesitantly, when he answered my query.

"I don't know that I can explain the exact 'why,' or give a logical reason, even to so good a friend as you are, Dick. The winter-cruise notion originated with Mrs. Van Tromp, I believe; and she is responsible for the inclusion of the major and his nephew. Also, she is the one who asked me to invite Ingerson. She has been playing in hard luck lately, and for the sake of her three girls, who, in her point of view, have simply *got* to marry money, she is obliged to keep the pace. I suppose the prospect of a winter in Florida--the four of them at Palm Beach, with no chance to cut economical corners, you know--appalled her. Besides, she knows the *Andromeda*, and the *Andromeda's chef*. That goes a long way with as good a trencherwoman as she is."

"That will do for a starter," I said. "Let us say that Mrs. Van Tromp and her daughters are bread-and-butter guests. But how about the others?"

Van Dyck did not reply until after the deft serving man had cleared the table and brought the cigars.

"The others, with the possible exception of Billy Grisdale, who is only an infant, are people with whom I should like to become better acquainted, as I have said."

"Which is still purer piffle," I put in. "You've known all of them practically all your life. But go on."

"I've known them, and I haven't known them," he asserted. "There are the Sanfords--the professor and his wife: they typify the older married set, and the casual onlooker would say that they try to give the impression that they are still satisfied and happy. I should like to find out if they really are satisfied and happy. Then there are the Greys; they are still in the billing and cooing stage: I'd like to see if it isn't possible for them to get too much of each other when the doors are all shut and locked and neither of them can duck out for a breath of the fresh air of solitude."

"Jehu!" I muttered. "The blue-bearded old gentleman of the Old-World legend wasn't in it with you. Let's have the rest of it."

Van Dyck's smile barely missed being a saturnine grin, and there was scarcely a suggestion of mirth in it.

"Major Terwilliger poses as a generous, large-hearted old rounder who is eventually going to do something handsome for Jerry Dupuyster, his sister's son. Privately, I have a notion that the major's liberal fortune--which he promises to bestow upon Gerald--is largely, if not wholly, a myth, and that he is selfish enough to keep Jerry dangling as a bait to the scheming mammas--and aunts--for the social advantages and 'side' thereby accruing to Jerry's uncle."

"Conetta Kincaide's aunt, for example?" I interpolated.

"Yes, Aunt Mehitable, if you like. And, this being the case, I have a perfectly normal curiosity to see what will happen when the dragoness gets the major and Jerry in a clear field, with no possibility of a breakaway for them, or of interference with her dragonizing for her."

"Having already used Bluebeard, I'm out of comparisons for you," I said. "What about the Barclays, father and

daughter?"

Van Dyck shook his head and the faintest possible shadow of a frown came and sat between his eyes.

"We needn't be ill-natured on the wholesale plan," he evaded. "You wouldn't suspect a man like Holly Barclay of offering his daughter to the highest bidder, would you? Supposing we admit that he has gone through the fortune that his wife's father got together, and let it stand at that."

"You are not letting it stand at that," I countered shrewdly.

"No, perhaps I am not," he admitted, after a thoughtful pause. "I thought I should like to prove or disprove a thing that I have heard, about Holly Barclay--and Madeleine--and--well, you'll guess it if I don't say it--about Ingerson."

"Again with the clear field and no favor, I suppose," I put in a bit savagely. Then: "Van Dyck, you ought to be shot!"

He was glancing at his watch, and his smile was wry.

"I shall get my little drink of hemlock before the table is cleared, never fear," he said soberly. "Any time you may think I am not getting it, you have my permission to blow the gaff; to call the others together and tell them what I've done to them. That is fair, isn't it?"

I nodded, and again he relapsed into thoughtful silence. Our dinner appointment had been for a rather late hour in the evening, and by now the great dining-room was all but empty, though the small dark-faced man on our right was still dallying with the sweets and the black coffee. A heavy, intoxicating fragrance drifted across from the flowering cereus in the palm room, and the distance-mellowed strains of an orchestra playing in an alcove on the opposite side of the rotunda added another sensuous touch. The glamour of the tropics, a far-reaching breath of the beckoning mystery of shimmering seas, and coral reefs singing to the beat of the murmuring surf--the mystery whose appeal is ever and most strongly to the senses and the passions--was in the air when I said, gravely enough, I make no doubt:

"I'll go with you, Bonteck; and chiefly for the reason you have just given--the reason and the permission. Let this be your fair warning: if at any time your little farce threatens to grow into a tragedy, I shall most certainly call you down."

"I was rather hoping you'd say something like that," he agreed, with what appeared to be the utmost sincerity.

"At the same time," I went on, "it is only fair to add that your expensive experiment will fail. Nothing will happen on the *Andromeda* that couldn't, or wouldn't, happen in a house party at your country place in the Berkshires. You will come back as wise--or as foolish--as you are now."

"Oh, well," he said, pushing his chair back and casting the napkin aside, "we needn't pull the bud in pieces to find out what kind of a flower it's going to be. I can't promise you that you will be greatly edified, and it is quite within the possibilities that you may find yourself frightfully bored. But, in any event, it will help out a little if we leave something to the imagination, don't you think?--something to speculate about and to look forward to. I know it does look rather cut-and-dried in the prospect; eight bells breakfast, luncheon when you like to have it, dinner in the second dog-watch, and cards--always cards when Mrs. Van Tromp can find a partner and a table--in the evening."

He had got upon his feet and was standing before me, an acutely attractive figure of a well-built, well-groomed man in faultless evening dress. The identifying smile of other and less cynical days was drawing at the corners of his eyes when he went on.

"We'll live in hopes. Perhaps we shall be able to smash the *Andromeda* on some reef that isn't down on the charts. Failing that, there is always the chance of a stray hurricane--with the other chance of the engines breaking down at the inopportune moment. We shall find excitement of some kind; I can feel it in my bones."

"Small chance on a baby Cunarder," I grumbled, rising in my turn.

"Oh, I don't know," he offered, in gentle deprecation. "At any rate we can still be hopeful. Now if you are ready we'll go to the railroad station and meet the players. I told you they were on the way down from New York, but I omitted to add that they are due to arrive to-night; within fifteen or twenty minutes, to be strictly accurate. Let's gather up a few for-hire autos and go to the rescue."

THE SHIP'S COMPANY

WE were on the sidewalk--"banquette," as it is called in New Orleans--in front of the hotel, and Van Dyck was marshaling a number of vehicles for a descent upon the railroad station, when a small man with his soft hat pulled well down over his eyes appeared at my elbow as silently as if he had materialized out of the rain-wet pavement.

"Pardon, M'sieu'," he murmured, in the broken English which placed him, apparently, as a native of the French quarter, "ze brother of my cousin ees h-ask me to fin' out for heem w'en M'sieu' Van Dyck's steamsheep comes on N' Orlean. 'Ees h-oncle been de *chef* h-on dat sheep, an' 'ee's want sand heem lettaire. *Oui*."

Van Dyck had started his procession of cabs, and he called to me as the last of the vehicles pulled up to the curb to take us in. Almost mechanically I gave the soft-spoken and apologetic questioner his answer.

"Mr. Van Dyck's yacht came up the river to-day. Tell your cousin's brother he will have to hurry his letter. The *Andromeda* will sail either to-night or to-morrow morning, I believe."

It was not until after I had joined Van Dyck in the waiting taxi, and we were sluing and skidding over the wet pavements on the way to the railroad station, that my companion said: "Didn't I see you talking to a little fellow in gray tweeds and a soft hat just before we drove away from the hotel? Do you know the man?"

"No; he was a stranger to me," I returned. "He asked a question and I answered it. He is the man who sat two tables away on your right in the hotel dining-room. He said he was the cousin of a cousin of somebody who wanted to send a letter to the *Andromeda's* cook, and he wanted to know when the yacht would arrive."

"You told him the *Andromeda* is already here?"

"Yes."

"That's a bit odd," was Van Dyck's comment.

"What is odd?"

"That this little sallow-faced fellow should turn up here in New Orleans practically at the same moment that I do. I spotted him while we were at dinner and wondered if he could be the same one."

"The same one as who? And why shouldn't he be here?" I asked, rather more than mildly curious.

"The same one I have seen at least twice before in the past few weeks. The first time was at our anchorage in the Hudson when he, or somebody very much like him, was the last man overside as we were leaving port a month ago. I understood then that he was a friend of some member of the *Andromeda's* crew and had come aboard for a farewell visit."

"And the second time?"

"The second time was some three weeks later, and the place was Havana. There he, or again somebody exactly like him, was hanging around the water front chinning with any member of the crew who happened to have shore leave. That time he wasn't trying to mail a letter; he was trying to find out why it had apparently taken us three weeks, instead of something less than one, to make the run down from New York to Cuba."

"Did he find out?" I inquired, with a little private wonderment of my own to prompt the query.

"I can't say as to that," was Van Dyck's half-guarded reply. "What is puzzling me now is his--er--omnipresence, so to speak. So far as I know, we left him in Havana. How does he come to be here in New Orleans on the very day of our arrival?"

"That is easy," I said; "the method, I mean--not his object. He could have come by railroad from Key West in less time than it took the *Andromeda* to steam across the Gulf."

"Of course," Van Dyck agreed, quite as if this simple explanation had not occurred to him. And then, since we had reached the station, where, upon inquiry, we found that the New York train was already in, there was time only for a hospitable dash to the platform upon which our prospective ship's company was at the moment debarking.

Though I knew all of Van Dyck's guests well enough to need no introductions, the mob of them that was pouring out of the private car *Kalmia* was overwhelming by sheer weight of numbers.

"Heavens!" I said to Van Dyck as we came upon the scene, "I don't wonder that you wanted help," and therewith we plunged in to bring order out of the platform chaos of mingled humanity and hand baggage.

It was after we had the human part of the chaos marching, with an army of laden red-caps, upon the line of chartered taxis, that Van Dyck thrust a sheaf of baggage checks into my hand.

"Be a good fellow, Dick, and see to it that the heavy dunnage gets started for the *Andromeda's* wharf before you leave, won't you?" he asked. "I'll go on with the crowd, and have one of the taxis wait for you--T. and P. wharf, foot of Thalia Street, you know."

That was how it came about that I was left alone to wrestle with the baggage-masters and the transfer people, and after I had seen the last truck-load of steamer trunks sorted, tarpaulined, and started on its way over town, I returned to the cab rank and found my taxi awaiting me, as Van Dyck had promised.

It was not until I was climbing into the covered cab that I discovered that it was already occupied. As I ducked for shelter from the rain, which was now falling smartly, a voice that I should have recognized if I had heard it on another planet said, "I hope you found my little green trunk with the others. It has all my dinner gowns in it."

"Conetta!" I gasped; and then I saw what Van Dyck had done, either with malice aforethought or in sheer heedlessness. In the taxicab loading there had been an overflow of one, and Conetta Kincaide had been left behind to share the waiting vehicle with me.

"You--you knew this was my cab?" I stammered, after I had accumulated wit enough to shut the door and tell the driver to go on.

"Of course. Bonteck put me in and said you'd be along in a few minutes; that you'd gone to look after the baggage. How do you happen to be here with Bonteck?"

"That," I evaded, "is a rather tedious story. Later on you may have it for what it is worth, if you still care to hear it. Excuse me a moment," and I leaned forward and stuck my head through the open window at the taxi-driver's ear to whisper: "Take your time, and don't bother to make any short cuts."

"What was that you were saying to the man?" was the question I had to answer after I had fallen back into the seat beside the possessor of the cool voice and self-contained manner.

"I was telling him he needn't hurry," I confessed brazenly. "In a few minutes you will be one of the crowd again, and there are three years to be bridged, in some fashion, in those few minutes."

I felt, rather than heard, her little gasp of dismay.

"Do you mean to say that--that you are going along in the *Andromeda*?" she asked faintly.

"It is even so--more is the pity. I had committed myself to Bonteck, in a way, before I knew the names on his passenger list."

"And if you had known, you would have refused?"

"I don't know. Most likely I should; and not altogether out of consideration for you. You see, I am quite frank."

"You are; most refreshingly frank. One might have hoped that time, and--and----"

----"And absence and new fields and faces, and all that, would make me forget," I finished for her. "Unhappily, they haven't. But that is neither here nor there. Though I have kept pretty well out of the civilized world for the past three years, there has been a word now and then from home. Tell me plainly, Connie--how much does Jerry Dupuyster know?"

"He knows that three years ago we were engaged to be married, you and I." The cool voice trembled a little, but it was still well under control.

"That is better," I commented with a sigh of relief; and it was better because, if Jerry hadn't known, there would have been chances for hideous complications on the proposed cruise of the *Andromeda*, or at least, in some inchoate way, I felt there would. "Does Jerry know why it was broken off?" I went on.

"He thinks he does."

"Which is to say that he accepts your Aunt Mehitable's version of it; the one she published broadcast among our friends--that, without any cause assigned, we simply agreed to disagree?"

"I suppose so."

Silence for a square or so, broken only by the drumming of the taxi's motor. Then I took the bull by the horns.

"Shall I tell Bonteck that, for reasons which I don't care to explain, I shall have to drop out of this badly mixed ship's company of his?"

The cool voice had fully regained its even tones when she said: "Why should you?"

"There is no 'why' unless you care to interpose one of your own making. But I should think, with Jerry Dupuyster along----"

"The *Andromeda* is a reasonably roomy little ship," was the calm retort. "And, besides, there are enough of us to afford protection--the protection of a crowd. If you have promised Bonteck, you can hardly break with him at the last moment, can you?"

"You don't care, then?"

"Why should I care? What is done is done, and can't be helped. Aunt Mehitable thinks I ought to marry; I suppose she thinks I owe it to her to marry and set up an establishment of my own. Perhaps I do owe it to her. I've been a charge upon her generosity all my life."

"So you are going to marry Jerry Dupuyster, a lipping club-lizard who apes the English so hard that he forgets that he has a string of American ancestors as long as your arm?" I flamed out.

"Well, if I am, what is it to you, Dick Preble? Or to any one else besides Jerry and me? Also, I might ask what right I have given you to put me upon the rack?"

"None; none whatever," I admitted gloomily. "Still, I have a right, of a sort--the right of the first man. You seem conveniently and successfully to have forgotten. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to forget, though I have tried all of the customary antidotes."

"Other women?" she asked, with the faintest possible touch of malice.

I was resentful enough to meet her baldly upon her own ground.

"There was a young woman in Venezuela; a pure Castilian, with the blood of kings in her veins. I could have married her."

"Why didn't you?" she asked sweetly.

"I have wished many times that I had. I wonder if you can understand if I say that I was afraid?"

"Mr. Kipling says that we can't understand--that we can never understand. But I think I know what you mean. You may have been Adam--the first man, again--for her; but she wasn't, and never could be, Eve--the first woman--for you. Was that it?"

The taxi was finally approaching the quarter of the city in which our wharf lay. There were other things to be said, and they had to be said hurriedly.

"Let us get things straightened out--before the crowd messes in," I said. "Three years ago we were engaged to be married. One day I was obliged to tell your Aunt Mehitable that the comfortable fortune my father had left me had been swallowed up in an exhausted Colorado gold mine, and that I'd have to go to work for a living. She then told me--with what seemed to me to be unnecessary spitefulness--that her will was made in favor of some charitable institution, and since you would thus be left penniless, it was up to me to set you free and give you a chance to marry somebody who could provide for you. Am I stating it clearly?"

"Clearly enough."

"Then she went on to say that the news of my misfortune had preceded me; that you had already been told all there was to tell; and that it would be a kindness to you if I should agree not to see you again."

"And you did me the kindness," she put in calmly. "I ought to be thankful for that. Perhaps I am thankful."

"I was furious," I confessed. "If you will permit me to say it this long after the fact, your aunt carries a vicious tongue in her head, and she didn't spare me. Also, I'll admit that my own temper isn't exactly patient or forgiving. It was the next morning that I had the chance to go to South America thrust at me, and the ship was sailing at noon. I left a

letter for you and disappeared over the horizon."

"Yes," she replied in the same even tone; "I got the letter."

"That brings us down to date," I went on, as the taxi drew up at the wharf. "The next thing is the *modus vivendi*--the way we must live for the next few weeks. You say that Jerry knows that we were once engaged. If he is half a man, there will be plenty of chances for misunderstanding and trouble. We must agree to be decently quarrelsome."

"You have begun it beautifully," she said, with a hard little laugh. "Admitting your premises, what will Jerry think of this taxi drive--without a chaperon?"

"Jerry will never know that you came over with me--unless you tell him."

"Aunt Mehitable can tell him," she retorted, again with the touch of malice in her voice.

"But, for the sake of Major Terwilliger's money, she won't tell him," I ventured drily; and a moment later I was handing her up the *Andromeda's* accommodation ladder with a sharper misery in my heart than I had suffered since the night three years in the past when her dragoness aunt had goaded me into effacing myself.

There was a pleasant bustle of impending departure already going on aboard the yacht when we reached the deck. Most of the women--all of them, in fact, save the youngest of the Van Tromp trio and Annette Grey--had gone to their several staterooms, and the men were scattered--"dotted" was Conetta's word--here and there, apparently trying to find themselves, like so many cats in a strange garret.

"You will go below?" I said to Conetta when I had shown her the way aft.

"Yes; and by myself, if you please." Then, with a quick turn of the proud little head, and a look in the slate-blue eyes that was far beyond any man's fathoming: "Good-night, Dick, and good-by. Perhaps our quarrel would better begin right here and now." And with that she was gone.

It was possibly five minutes later that I met Grey, the newly married, roving in search of his mate.

"Annette?" he queried. "Have you seen her anywhere, Preble?"

"She is with Edie Van Tromp on the bridge," I told him. Then I linked an arm in his and drew him to the shoreward rail, saying: "Don't rush off. Throw that vile cigar away and light a fresh one, and tell me how the New York law partnership is getting along. Remember, there are some weeks ahead of you in which you won't be able to get any farther away from Annette than the length of the *Andromeda*--no matter how badly you may want to."

The married lover twisted his arm out of mine and dropped the stub of his cigar over the rail.

"Preble, you're a brute," he remarked, quite conversationally. And then he added: "By Jove, don't you know, I wouldn't be a bachelor again for the shiniest million that was ever minted! I didn't realize, until within the last few weeks, what a crabbed, dog-in-the-manger beggar it would make of a man."

"Thanks," I laughed. "Experience counts for something, even if it is short and pretty recent, as you might say. Where is the major?"

Grey clipped the end of the fresh cigar I had given him and lighted it. He was sparing me a few moments merely to show me that it was possible for him to stay that long out of sight and sound of the loved one.

"The major is in a class by himself, as you ought to know if you've preserved any fragment of memory, Preble. He is down in the yacht's smoking-room, hobnobbing with a glass of hot brandy and soda, and finishing a novel that he has been reading all the way down from Chattanooga. Think of it--hot toddy in this weather!"

"A veteran--even a Spanish War Veteran--has to do something to individualize himself," I jested; and then Grey took his turn at me.

"You are a veteran yourself, Richard--of a sort. They tell me you have been knocking around here in the tropics so long that you've forgotten all the little decent and civilized ameliorations. Why don't you marry and settle down?"

I laughed.

"Go up yonder on the bridge and ask Annette why some men marry and some don't; she'll tell you," I said; and he promptly took me at my word, at least so far as leaving me was concerned.

A short time after this, just after I had identified the two smokers in the wicker lounging chairs under the afterdeck

awning as Ingerson and Madeleine Barclay's father, the last truck-load of trunks came. While the baggage was going into the *Andromeda's* forehold, Dupuyster, looking more English than any Briton to the manner born, came lounging aft and greeted me chirpingly.

"Lo, old chappie; dashed glad to know you're comin' along, what? Bonty was just tellin' me he'd scragged you for the voyage. Topping, I'll say."

"Topping, if you say so, Jerry. How long have you been over?"

"Eh, what?--how long have I been over? I say, old dear--that's a jolly good one, y' know. But tell me; where is this bally old tub of Bonty's goin' to sail for? Bonty won't tell us. He's as mysterious about it as--as----"

Realizing that he was feeling around in his ultra-British vocabulary for a fitting Anglo-maniacal simile, I helped him out.

"As a bag of tricks, let us say. I don't know, any more than you do, Jerry. Summer seas in midwinter, and all that, I suppose. What do we care?"

"Haw! dashed little, so long as the *Andromeda's* well found in the provision lockers: eh? what? And Bonty will have seen to that." Then: "I've been lookin' about a bit for Conetta. Did she come aboard with you?"

I nodded. "She has gone to her stateroom, I believe."

The young man whose chief end in life seemed to be to out-English the English lighted a cigarette and lounged on farther aft. I followed the movements of his white-flanneled figure with the gaze speculative. Quite as truly as in the case of Bonteck Van Dyck--though in a vastly different manner--here was a "perfectly good cat, spoiled." I had known Jerry Dupuyster quite intimately in the university days; known him for a lovable fellow with rather more, than less, than his fair allowance of brains and ability. But something, either the bait of the major's hypothetical fortune, or too much idleness--or both--had turned him into . . . the speculative train paused. I didn't know what the compelling influences had turned Jerry Dupuyster into, but whatever it might be, it seemed too trivial to warrant the effort needful to try to define it.

Sauntering forward on the starboard promenade I saw that Grey had joined his wife and Edie Van Tromp on the bridge, and that Van Dyck and a lean, hatchet-faced man whom I took to be the yacht's sailing-master, were with them. While I looked on, Goff, the sailing-master, came down to the rail to direct the stowing of the last load of luggage through the open port below. Like some other things in this Caribbean cruise entourage, this man Goff was a new wrinkle, and a rather astounding one. Hitherto--at least in my knowing of them--the *Andromeda's* skippers had been of the Atlantic-liner class, spick and span martinets in natty uniform, with fine, quarter-deck manners, and maintaining a discipline comparable only to that of the Navy.

But Goff was at the other end of the gamut of extremes; a gaunt, hard-bitted old Yankee fishing-smack captain, if appearances counted for anything; hungry-looking, lank and weather-beaten, with a harsh voice and a bad eye. And to emphasize the oddities, the sailormen he was directing seemed to be all foreigners; another sea change sharply opposed to Van Dyck's former notions about manning his yacht.

As it appeared, there was to be no loss of time in the outseting. While the trunks were still tumbling into the hold baggage-room, a subdued clamor came up from the fire hold, and the yacht's twin funnels began to echo to the roar of the stirred fires. A minute later the lower-river pilot, a hairy-faced giant who might have taken the heavy villain's part in comic opera, climbed aboard. With a bare nod to the sailing-master, the giant ascended to the bridge, and almost immediately the yacht's searchlight blazed out, the order to cast off was given, and the trim white hull, shuddering to the thrust of its propellers, edged away into the brown flood of the Mississippi, and made a majestic half-circle in midstream to pass the lights of the city in review as it was headed for the Gulf.

Dodging the pair of smokers under the after-deck awning, I went around to the port promenade, where I stumbled upon Billy Grisdale sitting alone with his bull pup between his knees.

"Hello, Prebby," he said, much as if it had been only three days instead of as many years since he had come down to the East River pier, a fresh-faced prep. school-boy, to see me off for the tropics. "Come over here and sit down and give me a smoke." And when I had done all three: "Rum old go, isn't it? If I wasn't such an ass about carrying a tune, I'd be warbling 'My native land, good-night.' Got your life insured?"

"I'm an orphan and a bachelor; why should I carry insurance, Billy?" I said, laughing at his doleful humor.

"I don't know. Guess I've got a bad case of the hyps. Can't think of anything but that bloody-bones jingle of Stevenson's:

Fifteen men on a dead man's chest,
Yo, ho, ho, and a bottle of rum!"

Teck Van Dyck's a pirate. He's gone daffy over something, and we're all going to heaven in a hand-basket."

Of course this was all froth; pure froth. But there was usually a little clear liquor in the bottom of Billy's stein.

"What ails you?" I asked.

An impish grin spread itself over his smooth, boyish face.

"I'm in love, if anybody should ask you. Everything looks green to me, and I want to chew slate-pencils. *Ergo*--which is college slang for 'Ah, there, stay there'--I'm as daffy as Teck. Don't laugh or I'll set Tige on you. Say, Prebby, do I look like an invalid?"

"Yes; about as much as Mr. John Sullivan did when he carried the world heavy-weight wallop in his good right hand."

"Yet I am an invalid. Doc Fanning says I am, and he's like George Washington. He might lie if he could, but he can't because he's lost the combination."

"What on earth are you gibbering about, Billy?"

"Facts; iron-clad, brass-bound, blown-in-the-bottle, sold-only-in-the-original-package facts. Fanning's the family physician, you know, and he has gone on record as declaring that I need half a winter off in a mild climate. And I don't know to this good minute whether I succeeded in fooling him, or whether he was just plain good-natured enough to size the thing up and fool the governor--I don't, really, Prebby."

"But why?" I persisted.

"The 'why' is a girl, of course; you ought to know that without being told. She's a lulu and a charmer, and if I can't marry her I'll end it all with a bare bodkin. Her name? I'm going to tell you, Prebby; and, again, if you laugh, I'll make Tige bite you. It's Edith."

"Not Edie Van Tromp!"

"Prebby, you're the one only and original wizard. You could make your fortune if you should set up as a guesser."

"Ye gods and little children!" I commented. "Edie Van Tromp is eighteen, if I remember correctly; and you are----"

"I was twenty a few days ago, if you don't mind," he returned, tickling the cropped ears of the bull pup. And then: "'Crazy,' you say? Maybe so--quite likely so. I've got to keep the pace, you know. This little ship's full of crazy people. I'm crazy about Edie, and, if you listen to what you hear, Jerry Dupuyster's crazy about Conetta Kincaide--just like you used to be--and Jack Grey's crazy about his Annette, and Ingerson and Teck are both crazy about Madeleine Barclay. So there you are. And if the wind gets around into the sour east, Teck's going to sink the ship in the deep-blue Caribbean, and drown us all--all but Madeleine--and live happily ever after. Apropos of nothing at all, Prebby, this is a rotten cigar you gave me, and I'm all mussed up and discouraged. What's that bell clanging about?"

"It is striking five bells in the first night watch--otherwise, or landsman-wise, half-past ten o'clock."

"Good!--excellent good. Let's turn in, so we can turn out bright and early for our first shot at the blue water. What do you say?"

I said the required word, and we went below to our respective staterooms. The next morning when I turned out and drew aside the curtain shading the stateroom port light, the sun was shining brightly, and for a horizon there were only the tumbling wavelets of the Gulf of Mexico.

III

THE MAJOR--AND OTHERS

THE first morning in blue water developed the fact that breakfast on the *Andromeda* was destined to be a broken meal. In the white-lacquered dining-saloon, only three members of the ship's company, Major Terwilliger, Madeleine

Barclay's father, and Professor Sanford were at table, though Van Dyck and Billy Grisdale had been still earlier, had already breakfasted and had gone on deck.

As I took my place, the major, affecting the bluff heartiness which was merely a mask for an ease-loving, self-centered habit which never for a moment lost sight of the creature comforts, was trying, quite ineffectually, to draw Sanford into a discussion of the merits and demerits of certain French liqueurs--a subject upon which the clean-living, abstemious professor of mathematics was as poorly informed as any anchorite of the desert.

"Vermuth, now; a dash of vermuth in your morning bitters," the major expatiated; "there's nothing like it for an appetiser. I'm not saying anything against the modern cocktail, properly compounded; it has its place. But for a morning eye-opener it is crude. Believe me, a Frenchman knows the meaning of the word *aperitif* much better than we do."

"Yes?" said the professor, with a palpable effort to galvanize an interest which he was evidently far from feeling.

"Quite so," declared the major; after which he proceeded to enlarge upon American backwardness in the matter of picking and choosing among the potables, inveighing with all the warmth of a past master in the art of good living against the barbarism of taking one's liquor raw.

While the major was giving his alcoholic homily, and not omitting, meanwhile, to keep his plate well supplied with the crispest bits of bacon and the hottest of the rolls, I had an opportunity to observe the silent man whose place was opposite my own. Holly Barclay had changed greatly in the three years which had elapsed since I had last seen him in New York. I never knew--I do not yet know--what particular form his dissipation took, but it had left its indubitable record in the haggard face, the deep-sunken eyes, and in the womanish hands which trembled a bit in spite of an evident effort to hold them steady.

Fragmentary gossip of former days had said that Holly Barclay's bane was women; other whispers had it that it was the gaming table; still others that it was the larger gaming table of the Street. Whatever it was, it had apparently left him a rather ghastly wreck of a man; a prey, not to remorse, perhaps, but certainly to fear. And with the fear in the deep-set eyes there was a hint of childish petulance; the irritable humor of a man who has fought a losing battle with life and expects to be waited upon and coddled as a reward for his defeat and humiliation.

It was a relief to turn from this haggard wreck, and from the sham-hearty major, to the mild-eyed professor. Sanford I had known in the university, and a less self-conscious or more lovable man never lived. Deeply immersed in the natural sciences, which were his hobby, and absent-minded at times to a degree that put to shame the best efforts of the college-professor-joke makers, he was nevertheless the most human of men; a faculty member whose door was always hospitably open to the homesick Freshman, and whose influence for good in the lush field of the college campus was second only to that of his plain-featured, motherly wife.

"Ah, yes," he was saying, in answer to the major's eulogy of chartreuse as a cordial, "it is said to be a distillation from the leaves of *Urtica pilulifera*, the much-abused nettle, I believe. Those old Alpine monks had a wonderful knowledge of the scanty flora of the high altitudes where they built their monasteries. Which reminds me: I hope Bonteck will give us an opportunity to study some of the remarkable plant forms peculiar to the tropics before we return. It would be most enlightening to a stay-at-home like myself."

The major's facial expression was that of a person who has been basely betrayed into casting pearls before swine. That any one could be so benighted as to associate a divine cordial only with the crude materials out of which it might be made was quite beyond his powers of comprehension.

"Hum," he muttered, "I've always understood that the process of chartreuse-making was a secret that was most jealously guarded." And with that he let the pearl casting stop abruptly.

Here was a striking example, one would say, of the ill-assortment of our mixed ship's company manifesting itself at the introductory breakfast at sea. Throughout the meal Barclay said nothing to any of us. His few remarks were addressed to the serving steward, and they were all in the nature of complaints. His coffee was too weak, the bacon was too crisp, the cold meats were underdone. What with the gourmet appetite of the major, and Barclay's apparent lack of any appetite at all, the broken meal was anything but a feast of reason and a flow of soul, and I was glad to break away to the freedom of the decks.

Finding the after-deck untenanted, I strolled forward. The *Andromeda* was loafing along over a sea as calm as a mill-pond, and her course, as nearly as I could guess it from the position of the sun, was a little to the east of south. Van Dyck and Billy Grisdale were on the bridge, and one of the foreign-looking sailormen had the wheel. On the main-deck forward three members of the crew were swabbing down, and two others were polishing brass. As I paused at the rail in

the shadow of the bridge overhang, Goff, the sailing-master, came stumping along. Though no one had as yet told me that he was a Gloucesterman, I took a shot at it.

"This is not much like cracking on with a schooner for the Banks, is it, Captain?" was the form the shot took; and the grizzled veteran of the sea stopped and looked me over with an eye militantly appraisive.

"What you know about the Banks?" he inquired hostilely.

"Little enough," I admitted. "One trip, made when I was a boy, in the schooner *Maria Ann*, of Gloucester, Captain Standifer."

"I want to know!" he said, thawing perceptibly. "Old *Maria Ann's* afloat yit, but Standifer's gone; run down in a dory in a fog." Then, lowering his voice: "You don't belong to this New York clanjamfry, do ye?"

"Not strictly speaking; I signed on in New Orleans."

"Know these waters putty middlin' well?"

"I've sailed them a few times."

"Friend o' Cap'n Van Dyck's, I call'ate?"

"As good a friend as he has on earth, I hope."

At this the old sea dog thrust an arm in mine and led me aft until we were out of earshot from the bridge.

"What d'ye know about this here winter cruise?" He fired the question at me belligerently.

"About its course and destination? Little or much, as you choose to put it. What should I know?"

He paid no attention to my question.

"Cap'n Van Dyck's all right, only he's too dum hardheaded," he confided. "Picked up his 'tween-decks lackeys in New York an' Havana. Don't like the looks o' some on 'em. If you're a friend of the Cap'n's, you keep a weather eye on that slick lookin' yaller boy that waits on table in the dinin'-saloon."

"How am I to keep an eye on him?" I asked.

"When you're eatin' with the folks, you keep 'em from talkin' about things that yaller boy hadn't ought to hear," he bit out, and with that he left me.

Here was a little mystery on our first day at sea. What was it, in particular, that the mulatto serving boy shouldn't hear? My mind went back to the talk of the previous evening, across the table in the dining-room of the New Orleans hotel. Now that I came to analyze it, I realized that it had been only cursorily explanatory on Van Dyck's part. While he seemed at the time to be perfectly frank with me, it occurred to me now that I had all along been conscious of certain reservations. A winter cruise in the Caribbean; for the ship's company a gathering of people whom he had threatened to know better before the cruise ended; these were about the only definite objects he had set forth.

But two things were pretty plainly evident. Goff was deeper in Van Dyck's confidence than I was; and, beyond this, the sailing-master was making the mistake of thinking that I knew as much as he did. It was no great matter, I thought. If the mulatto under-steward needed watching, I'd watch him, trusting to the future to reveal the reason--if any there were--why he should be watched.

Making my way to the awning-sheltered after-deck lounge, which was still untenanted, I picked out the easiest of the wicker chairs and sat down to fill my pipe for an after-breakfast smoke. Before the pipe had burned out, Ingerson put in his appearance, lighting a black cigar as he came up the cabin stair. If I had been free to select, he was the last man in our curious assortment whom I should have chosen as a tobacco companion, but short of a pointed retreat to some other part of the ship, there was no escape.

"Hello, Preble," he grunted, casting his gross body into a chair. "Monopolizing the view, are you? Seen anything of Madeleine?"

"Miss Barclay hadn't appeared when I breakfasted," I returned; and if I bore down a bit hard on the courtesy prefix it was because I hated to hear Madeleine's Christian name come so glibly off his tongue.

"How many days of this are we in for?" was his next attempt.

"That, I suppose, will be left to the wishes of the ship's company."

"All right," he grinned; "I guess I can stand it as long as Van Dyck can."

I stole a glance aside at his heavy featured, half-bestial face. It was the face of a man prematurely aged, or aging, by the simple process of giving free rein to his passions and appetites. Though he couldn't have been more than thirty-two or three, the telltale pouches were already forming under the bibulous eyes. Though I suppose he was fresh from his morning bath, I fancied I could detect the aroma of many and prolonged midnight carousals about him. Van Dyck's intimation that there was even a possibility of Madeleine Barclay's throwing herself away upon this gross piece of flesh came back to me with a tingling shock of repugnance. Surely she would never do such a thing of her own free will.

We had been sitting in uncomradely silence for maybe five minutes when Mrs. Van Tromp, mother of marriageable, and as yet unmarried, daughters came waddling aft to join us. How far she might go in letting Ingerson's wealth atone for his many sins, I neither knew nor cared, but that the wealth had its due and proper weight with her was proved by the alacrity with which she relieved me of the necessity of taking any part in a three-cornered talk. So, when I got up to empty my pipe ashes over the rail, I kept on going, quite willingly abandoning the field to inherited money and its avid worshiper.

With such an unfruitful beginning, one might predicate an introductory day little less than stupefying. But later on there were ameliorations. After luncheon, which, like the breakfast, was a straggling meal with only three or four of us at table at the same time, I found myself lounging on the port promenade with Beatrice, the middle member of the Van Tromp trio, a fair-haired, self-contained young woman with a slant toward bookish things which set her well apart from her athletic older sister and tomboyish younger.

"Westward Ho!" I said, glancing at the title of the book lying in her lap.

"Yes; I've been trying to get the atmosphere. But Kingsley takes too much time with his introductions. Whereabouts are we now?"

I marked the slow rise and fall of the ship as it swung along making its leisurely southing. As in the early morning, the *Andromeda* was logging only loafing speed.

"We are still a long way from the scene of Sir Francis Drake's more or less piratical exploits," I told her. "Do you take Kingsley at his face value?"

"He calls it war, but it seems to me more like legalized buccaneering," she rejoined. Then: "How much of it do you suppose is true?"

I laughed.

"Have you already learned to distrust history, at your tender age?" I mocked. "Isn't it all set down in the books?"

She turned large and disparaging eyes upon me.

"Of course you know well enough that all history is distorted; especially war history where the victors are the only source of information. The other people can't tell their side of it."

"True enough," I admitted. "I fancy old Sir Francis was a good bit more than half a pirate, if all the facts were known. That story about his burning of the Spanish galleon at Pirates' Hope, for example."

"I haven't heard it. Tell it to me," she urged.

I gave her the story as Van Dyck had given it to me, omitting--for no good reason that I could have offered--all mention of my own unnerving experiences on the island of the legend.

"Left those poor wretches to starve because they wouldn't buy their lives off him?" she commented, with a belated horror in her voice.

"It is only a legend, you must remember," I hastened to say. "Most likely there isn't a word of truth in it."

Her gaze was upon the distant merging line of sea and sky, and there was a dreamy look in her eyes.

"I should like to see that island," she said. "I wonder if we shall go anywhere near it?"

If I smiled it was only at the hold the ancient tale had apparently taken upon her.

"Bonteck will doubtless make it a port of call, if you ask him to. But it is hundreds of miles from here."

"What does it look like?"

"Very much like any or all of the coral islands you may have seen pictured in your school geographies, only it is long and narrow instead of being circular, like the Pacific atolls. But it is a true coral island, for all that; a strip of land possibly a quarter of a mile wide and a mile long, densely wooded--jungled, you might say--with tropical vegetation; a beach of white sand running all the way around; beyond the beach, a lagoon; and enclosing the lagoon, and with only a few passages through it here and there, the usual coral reef. The lagoon is shallow for the greater part of it, but outside of the reef the bottom goes down like the side of a mountain."

"Why, you must have seen the island!" she said.

"I have," I answered, rather grimly.

"Did you land on it when you were there?--but of course you must have, to be able to describe it so well."

"Oh, yes; I landed upon it," I admitted.

Again she let her gaze go adrift to leeward. She was evidently reveling in something that seemed to her more tangible than Kingsley's famous story of Amyas Leigh and his voyagings.

"You say it is called Pirates' Hope. Was that on account of Sir Francis Drake's battle with the Spanish galleon?"

"Oh, no; I imagine it got its name at a much later date; in the time of the bold buccaneers. There are two little bays, one on the north and another on the south. Either would be a good place in which to careen the little cockleshell ships of our ancestors and scrape their bottoms. Possibly Morgan or some of the others put in there for that purpose and thus gave the island its name."

"Did you find any relics when you were there?"

It didn't seem necessary to tell this open-minded young woman about the bones, so I turned her question aside.

"The last of the buccaneers was permanently hanged some time in the closing decade of the seventeenth century, if I remember rightly. You'd scarcely expect to find any traces of them or their works now."

"No; that's so," she conceded.

Into the pause that followed I thrust a query of my own.

"Where has Conetta been keeping herself all day?"

"She is with her aunt. It seems that Miss Gilmore isn't a very good sailor."

I laughed because I couldn't help it. If the dragoness was upset by the easy swinging of the *Andromeda* over a sea that was more like a gently undulating mirror than anything else, what would happen to her if we should encounter a gale, or even half a gale?

"You needn't laugh," Beatrice put in reproachfully. "There is nothing funny about seasickness."

"I was laughing at the idea of anybody's being seasick in weather like the present," I explained. "But I fancy it is the old story in the case of Miss Mehitable. If she had nothing worse than a toothache, Conetta would have to play the part of a nurse."

"My-oh!" said my pretty lounging-companion; "it is perfectly easy to see that there is no love lost between you and Miss Mehitable."

"There isn't," I replied shortly; and there that matter rested.

Still later in the day--just at sunset, to be strictly accurate as to the time--there was another compensation for a day which had been hanging rather heavily on my hands. I had gone alone into the yacht's fore-peak, and was wondering if I should have time to smoke another pipe before the dinner call should sound, when a mocking voice behind me said: "Isn't it about time we were quarreling some more?"

I went on filling my pipe without looking around.

"You've been careful not to give me an earlier chance," I said. "How is your Aunt Mehitable by this time?"

"She is able to sit up and take a bit of nourishment." Then: "How you do hate poor Aunt Mehitable, don't you?"

"As I see it, I haven't any particularly good reason to squander any part of my scanty store of affection upon her. Did she know I was going to make one of this mixed-up ship's-quota?"

"Honestly, I don't think she did. She said a tremendous lot of things last night when she saw you with Bonteck. Aren't you going to be decent to her?"

"She is Bonteck's guest, or one of them, and I'm another. South America and the tropics haven't sacked me of quite all of the conventionalities."

"How nice! Of course, we've all been supposing they had. When are you going to tell me some more about the Castilian princess? the one you could have married, and didn't--to your later sorrow."

Strange as it may seem, all this light-hearted mockery cut into me much more deeply than any real bitterness could have. Because, let me explain, it was precisely the attitude she used to hold toward me in the old days when the mockeries were only so many love taps, as one might say; a sort of joyous letting down, or keying up, for her, after a day-long immurement with a crotchety, sharp-tongued maiden aunt.

"I've told you all there is to tell," I said, as gruffly as I could.

"Oh, dear, no; I'm sure you haven't. Was she--is she--very beautiful? But of course she must be; luminous dark eyes burning with--er--with all sorts of things; midnight hair; an olive skin so clear and transparent that you can almost see through it; little aristocratic hands--blue-blooded hands; and a figure . . . tell me, is she large and queenly? or petite and child-like?"

I laughed derisively.

"You seem to have forgotten that not all Spaniards are black. There are some among them as fair as you are. The 'princess,' as you call her, has hair about the color of yours, and her eyes are blue, even bluer than yours. But I don't see what interest you can have in her. I didn't marry her."

"But you may go back there--wherever it is--and correct that dreadful mistake."

"In that case I should first be obliged to murder her present husband. Perhaps I omitted to tell you last night that she was very successfully married to a wealthy young coffee planter, just before I left Trujillo."

"Well, you wouldn't let a little thing like that stop you if you wanted to go back, would you?"

"Oh, no; certainly not. Don Jesus Maria Diego de Traviano would probably do the stopping act--with a soft-nosed bullet. He is a crack shot with a Mauser, as I happen to know."

"Poor you!" she murmured. Then, with the lightning-like change of front which had been one of her chief attractions--for me--in the old days: "Why don't you quarrel?--say something that I'll have to get mad and bitter at?"

I turned to face her and the sheer beauty of her shook me. Yet I did contrive to strike back, after a fashion.

"The voyage is yet young. There will doubtless be many quarrelsome occasions. Just now I don't think of anything more vital than this: if you are meaning to keep Jerry Dupuyster in hand, you are going the wrong way about it. If you seem to prefer my company to his, I have an idea that he would be just Quixotic enough to let you have your own way."

"Thanks, awfully," she laughed, but behind the laugh the slate-blue eyes were saying things out of a very different vocabulary. "That will do very nicely for a beginning. I suppose I shall have to give Jerry a few lessons in the proper reactions. Isn't that the tinkle-tinkle of the dinner gong?"

It was; and a few minutes later our ship's company, lacking only Miss Mehitable, who was still confined to her stateroom, gathered for the first time as a whole around the long table in the dining-saloon of the *Andromeda*. And in the seating I took blessed good care to have Beatrice Van Tromp on my left and motherly Mrs. Sanford for a bulwark on my right.

IV

THE LOG OF THE ANDROMEDA

DURING the first few days of our southward voyaging the routine on board fell easily into the rut predicted by Van Dyck in the talk across the dinner-table in the New Orleans hotel; three meals a day, a good bit of more or less listless lounging under the awnings between times, and rather half-hearted battles with the cards in the evenings.

Day after day we had the same cloudless skies, and the same gentle breeze quartering over the port bow; and each morning there was apparently the same school of porpoises tumbling in the swell under the yacht's forefoot. Marking the course, I saw little change in it from day to day. We were still steering either south or a few points east of south, and if Van Dyck had any intention of touching at any of the Central American ports, the telltale compass in the ceiling of the dining-saloon did not indicate it.

Of the growth of Bonteck's cynical scheme of human analysis there were as yet no signs visible to the casual bystander. Mrs. Eager Van Tromp and Conetta's dragoness aunt sat in the shade of the after-deck awning, reading novels, and fanning themselves in moments when the breeze failed; and the Van Tromp trio, sometimes with Conetta and Madeleine Barclay, and always with Billy Grisdale and his bull pup, when they were not pointedly driven away, roamed the ship from bow to stern, and from bridge to engine-room. The Greys, prolonging their honeymoon, hid themselves in out-of-the-way corners like a pair of lovers; and the Sanfords, serenely enjoying their first real vacation, could be stumbled upon now and then--so Billy Grisdale averred--holding hands quite like the younger pair.

As for the men, candor compels the admission that the deadly blight of *ennui* seemed to be slowly settling down upon at least four of us. Van Dyck, though scrupulously careful of his responsibilities as host, was anything but good company when he was off duty. The major and Holly Barclay, with Ingerson and anybody who could be dragooned into taking a fourth hand, played cards hours on end in the yacht's smoking-room; for nominal stakes, John Grey hinted, when neither Ingerson nor Van Dyck was sitting in, but with the sky for the limit when either of the two really rich men was present and betting.

The second time Grey mentioned this I thought it might be well to dig a little deeper.

"You are Bonteck's guest, Jack, and so am I," I said bluntly. "Are you making charges?"

"Not me," returned the married lover, with a lapse into premarital carelessness of speech. And then, after a reflective moment, "But for that matter, I don't have to make them, Preble. Everybody buys wisdom of the major now and then over the card table. It has come to be a proverb, back home. For a supposedly rich man he plays a mighty thrifty game--and that remark is not original with me, not by a long shot."

"Possibly the major is saving his money for Gerald," I suggested, more to see what Grey would say than for any other reason.

Grey's slow wink was more expressive than many words.

"That worn-out joke doesn't fool you any more than it does me," he asserted baldly. "You've never seen Major Terwilliger in his great and unapproachable act of coupon-clipping, have you?"

I was obliged to admit that I had not.

"Well, neither has anyone else, I venture to say. He is a shrewd, shifty old rounder, Preble; no more and no less. And there are men in New York who will tell you that he sails pretty close to the wind a good bit of the time--that he has to to save his face. It's a nasty thing to say, but I more than half believe he is playing Gerald up to Conetta for purely fiduciary reasons."

"But Conetta has no money," I protested.

"No; but Aunt Mehitable has--a barrel of it. And it will come to Conetta, sooner or later--always provided Conetta marries to please Aunt Mehitable."

Now this statement was not exactly in accordance with the facts, as I knew them, or thought I knew them, and I said so.

"Miss Mehitable's will is already made, and I happen to know that her money will not go to Conetta. It will be divided among a number of charitable institutions."

We were on the starboard promenade forward, and Grey looked around as if to make sure there were no overhearers.

"I'm going to breach a professional confidence and tell you something, Preble, taking it for granted that it will go no farther. One day about three years ago, while I was reading for my Bar examinations in the office of Maxim, Townsend and Maxim, Miss Mehitable did make just such a will as you mention; I know it because I made the transcript of it. That will was left in the office safe, and something like a week later she came back, asked for it, got it, and destroyed it. Then she had Townsend draw another--which I also copied. That one, so far as I know, is still in existence and unchanged. It leaves a few bequests to the charity folk, and the bulk of the property to Conetta."

If Grey had drawn off and hit me in the face I could scarcely have been more dumfounded. For some inscrutable--and wicked--reason of her own, Aunt Mehitable had wanted to break our engagement, Conetta's and mine, and the loss of my patrimony had given her an easy half of the means. Upon hearing of my loss she had quickly supplied the other half by making the will which she didn't mean to let stand--which she had promptly destroyed as soon as I had been safely eliminated. The grim irony of her expedient might have been amusing if I hadn't been so angry. She might easily have lied to me about the disposition of her property, but that would have been against her principles. To quiet what she was probably calling her conscience, she had actually made the will with which she had clubbed me to death; a will which she fully intended to revoke, and did revoke--after I was out of the way.

How much or how little Grey suspected the turmoil he had stirred up in me by his breach of office confidence I do not know, but he was good enough to give me a chance to get back to normal, searching his pockets for a cigar, and, when he had found one, turning his back to me--and the breeze--while he lighted it.

"Do you think Miss Gilmore believes in the major's coupon clipping?" I asked, after I had contrived to swallow the shock he had given me.

Again he let me see the slow wink.

"That is the farcical part of it. For a sharp-eyed, keen-witted maiden lady who has made a good bit of real money buying and selling in the Street, it is little less than wonderful. But it's a fact, Preble; she *does* believe in it. She lets the major write himself off at his own valuation, and never dreams of asking to see a certified check. She seems to regard Jerry Dupuyster as one of the few really desirable matrimonial propositions on the market. That is why she is here--with Conetta."

This last assertion of Grey's told me nothing that I had not already set down as an obvious fact, but his gossipy talk afforded a luminous commentary upon the manner in which an isolated group of human beings will secrete all sorts of small uncharities, if the isolation be only complete enough. These little incidents to the contrary notwithstanding, however, I could not see that Van Dyck was making much progress in his unmasking experiment. Up to this time, and outwardly, at least, we were still only a party of winter loiterers, pleasers, decently grateful to our host and decently and conventionally well-behaved. If there were any plots or conspiracies of the money-hunting sort in the air, they were not suffered to become unpleasantly obtrusive.

But for one member of the party I was conscious of a great and growing contempt. In former days we of the younger set had known Holly Barclay as a sort of reincarnation of the Beau Brummell type; an idler of the clubs who lived upon his wife's money, and who was much too indolent to be even manfully vicious. Good-looking, in a way, self-centered, and even more finically careful for the creature comforts and luxuries than Major Terwilliger, I remember it had seemed grossly incredible to us younger folk that he could be the father of the thoughtful, high-minded and convincingly beautiful young woman who paid him the compliment of being his daughter.

From the beginning of the voyage Barclay's attitude had been sufficiently apparent to me, or I thought it was. I decided that he was somewhat anxiously weighing the pros and cons as between Van Dyck and Ingerson in the matrimonial scale; weighing them strictly with reference to the results as they might affect him, individually, and quite without concern for his daughter's future happiness. That Bonteck was a clean man and a gentleman, while his rival was everything that Van Dyck was not, appeared to cut no figure.

It was hugely farcical, if one could but shut his eyes to the possible tragedies involved. Holly Barclay had joined the *Andromeda's* company to dispose of his daughter. Ingerson had come as a cold-blooded buyer to the market. Miss Mehitable was hoping to corner the major and Gerald Dupuyster; and Mrs. Van Tromp, yielding precedence, of course, to Barclay and his schemings, had come on the chance of dividing the spoils, since one of the two chief matrimonial prizes would be left after Madeleine--or rather Madeleine's father--had secured the other.

That Mrs. Van Tromp's armament was only a secondary battery might have been denied by some. Alicia, the oldest of the trio, was, as I may have said, an attractive young woman of the athletic type, a rider to hounds, a champion swimmer, and a good comrade where men were concerned. In the modern meaning of the term she was a man's woman, with a sort of compelling charm that was all her own.

Beatrice, the second daughter, had, as has been noted, a bookish turn. If she had chosen to study surgery she would have been a ruthless vivisector. As a result of this inquiring bent, she had an astonishing, and sometimes rather disconcerting, knowledge of things as they are. But to offset the touch of the blue-stocking, she owned a pair of long-lashed eyes that kindled quickly at any torch of sentiment, and they were set in a face of uncommon sweetness--winsomeness, one would say, if the word were not so desperately outworn.

Edith, for whose sake Billy Grisdale was cutting a good half of his Sophomore year, was a replica, in rounder lines

and easier curves, of her sister Alicia. Having been carefully held back to give her older sisters a clear field, she was still something of a tomboy, but her very roughnesses were lovable, and Billy's callow folly found, it must be admitted, its full and sufficient excuse in its object.

It was Edie Van Tromp, roaming the yacht like a restless bit of misdirected energy, as was her custom, who came to fling herself into the steamer chair next to mine; this in the afternoon of the day when John Grey had given me still less cause to love Miss Mehitable Gilmore.

"I'm bored, Mr. Richard Preble--bored to extinction!" she gasped, fanning herself with a vigor that was all her own. "Is nothing ever going to happen on this tiresome ship?"

"There are things happening all the time, if we only have eyes to perceive them," I told her, laughing. "In your own case, for example, there is Billy Grisdale. To an interested and sympathetic onlooker like myself it would seem that he is constantly happening in as many different ways as he can devise."

"Oh, Billy--yes," she admitted, with pouting emphasis. Then, with a great show of confidence: "Uncle Dick--I may call you Uncle Dick, if I want to, mayn't I?--if you were only a little older and grayer I might tell you something."

"Tell me anyhow," I urged. "I am old enough to be perfectly safe, don't you think?"

"It's Billy, and you started it," she went on pertly. "That boy is fairly worrying the life out of me. Positively, I'm getting the dreadful habit of carrying my head on my shoulder. He--he's always just there, you know, if I look around."

"Is that why you are bored?"

"I suppose it is; it must be. Nothing can ever come of it, of course. Billy is nothing but just a handsome, good-natured, sweet-tempered *boy*. It would be years and years, and then more years before----"

"So it would," I agreed. "And, besides, Billy has three brothers and two sisters coming along, and Grisdale *pere* is only moderately well-to-do, as fortunes go nowadays."

Instantly Miss Edith's straight-browed eyes flashed blue fire.

"Money--always and forever money!" she flamed out. "I haven't heard anything else all my life! One would think that heaven itself was paved with it and that the angels wear gold coins for charmstrings. *I hate it!*"

"Oh, no, you don't," I hastened to say. "It's a good, broad-backed little beast, and you can always count upon it for carrying the load. And Billy will probably have to make his own way, without even so much as a loan of the little beast."

"I don't care! I think it is perfectly frightful the way we bow down and kowtow to your beast--the great god Cash! I'd rather wash dishes and make bread--for two!"

This seemed to be verging toward the edge of things serious. I knew that Mrs. Van Tromp was suffering Billy only because he was so absurdly young as to be supposedly harmless. But if Edith, the healthy-bodied and strong-willed, were even beginning to take notice, there was trouble ahead.

"We can none of us afford to defy the conventions, my dear girl," I cautioned, taking the avuncular role she had tried to thrust upon me. "And we mustn't let ourselves get into narrow little ruts. The play's the thing, and we are only a part of the audience--you and I."

"The play?" she echoed doubtfully. "You mean the--the----"

"I mean the great human comedy, of course. It is going on all around us, all the time."

"I don't get you," she said, in the free phrase which may have been her own, or may have been a Billy Grisdale transplantation.

"You are too young and inexperienced," I asserted in mock gravity. "Otherwise you could hardly have lived a week in the *Andromeda* without realizing that the stage is set, with the call-boy making his last hasty round, beating upon the doors of the dressing-rooms and summoning the people of the play to come and take their places."

"I can't understand a word you say!" she protested petulantly. "Do you mean Conetta and Jerry Dupuyster?"

"Miss Kincaide and Jerry are only two, and the cast of characters is large. Wait patiently, Edie, and you shall see. Meanwhile, if I am not mistaken, that long, low streak in the west--you can just make it out if you shade your eyes from the sun glare on the water--is land."

She was up and gone at the word, flying to the bridge and crying her discovery--or mine. What the land was, I could not tell. Van Dyck had made a joking mystery of the yacht's course, which, naturally, none of us could determine with any degree of accuracy merely by looking now and then at the telltale compass in the cabin ceiling. I fancied that Van Dyck's object in keeping us in the dark was chiefly to add something to the zest of the cruise, the interest lying in the uncertainty as to what landfall we should first make. As to this, however, nobody seemed to care greatly where we were going, or when we should arrive, so, as one may say, the small mystery had hitherto fallen flat.

But now there was a stir among the after-deck idlers, and Major Terwilliger, thrifty grasper at opportunity, immediately made a pool upon the name of the landfall--with Jack Grey whispering to me that the major had already fortified himself by casually questioning the hard-faced sailing-master as to the yacht's latest quadrant-reading--from which he had doubtless been able privately to prick off the latitude and approximate position of the *Andromeda* upon the cabin chart.

V

ANY PORT IN A STORM

As an easy matter of course, Major Terwilliger won the pool. The land sighted proved to be Cape Gracias a Dios, the easternmost point of Nicaragua. It would say itself that the Mosquito Coast, low, swampy, and with only three practicable harbors along its three-hundred-mile sweep, could have no attractions for a party of winter pleasers, and we were leaving Cape Gracias astern when the *Andromeda's* course was suddenly changed and she was headed for land.

Climbing to the bridge a little later, where I found Van Dyck setting the course for the Madeira-man who had the wheel, I learned the reason for the unannounced change.

"Trouble in the engine-room," Van Dyck explained. "The port propeller shaft is running hot and threatening to quit on us. We'll have to lay up for a few hours until Haskell can find out what has gone wrong."

"The shaft hasn't been giving any trouble heretofore, has it?" I asked.

"No; Haskell says it began to heat all at once, shortly after we sighted land."

"You'll put in at Gracias?"

He nodded. "The harbor isn't much, and the town is still less. But we don't need anything but an anchorage. Haskell thinks we won't be held up very long."

That was a cheering prediction, but the event proved it to be too optimistic. The mechanical trouble turned out to be in the thrust bearing of the propeller shaft, and it was more serious than Haskell, chief of the engine-room squad, had supposed it would be. The bearing which, like everything else on the yacht, had been cared for with warship thoroughness, had apparently run dry and it was badly scored and "cut," as a machinist would say. The repair called for hours of patient scraping and filing, and Haskell, who had served as an assistant engineer in the Navy, was properly humiliated.

"It sure gets my goat, Mr. Preble," he confided to me when I climbed down into his bailiwick some three or four hours after we had dropped anchor in Gracias a Dios harbor. "It looks as if it was on me, and maybe it is, but I've never had anything like this happen to me before--not since I began as an oiler on one of the old Cunarders. We have automatic lubrication; all the latest wrinkles; and yet that cussed shaft's tore up like it had been runnin' dry for a week. You're an engineer--I just wish you'd look at it."

To oblige him I donned overalls and crawled down into the shaft tunnel. A glance at the excoriated bearing showed that Haskell hadn't exaggerated. Quinby, Haskell's first assistant, was scraping and smoothing in a space that was too confined to let a man take the kinks out of his back, and in which there was no room for two men to work.

"That is no hurry job," I told Haskell, after I had crawled out. "I think I may safely tell our people that they may have shore leave, if they want it."

"You can that," Haskell grinned. "We'll be right here to-morrow morning, and blamed lucky if we can heave up the mud hook by some time to-morrow afternoon."

It was too late to spread the news after I left the engine-room. When I reached the main deck all of our ship's company had apparently turned in, though there were lights in the smoking-room to hint that the card-players were still at their favorite pastime. But as I went aft to smoke a bed-time pipe I found Madeleine Barclay curled up in one of the deep wicker chairs.

"Pardon me," I said; "I didn't know there was any one here. Don't let me disturb your maiden meditations. I'll vanish."

"You needn't," she returned quite amiably; then, seeing the pipe: "And you may smoke if you want to. You know well enough that I don't mind. How long do we stay here?"

"That is upon the knees of the gods. I've just been below, and I should say we are good for twenty-four hours, or maybe more, though Haskell thinks we may get out by to-morrow afternoon."

"Do we go ashore?"

I shook my head. "The others may if they want to; I shan't."

"Why not?"

"The *Andromeda* after-deck is much more comfortable than anything to be found ashore in this corner of Nicaragua."

"You have been here before?"

"Yes; I came around here once, something over a year ago, on a steamer from Belize. We made a stop of a few hours and I was besotted enough to leave the ship. I shan't make any such mistake again."

"Gracias a Dios," she said musingly. "I wonder who said it first--and why he was thanking God--particularly?"

I laughed. "Some storm-tossed mariner of the early centuries, I imagine, who was glad enough to make a landfall of any sort."

"Storm-tossed," she repeated. "Aren't we all more or less storm-tossed, Richard?"

"I suppose we are, either mentally, morally, or physically. It's a sad enough world, if you want to take that angle."

"But I don't want to take that angle. When I do take it, it's because I have to."

Being as much of a hypocrite as any of those whom Van Dyck had proposed putting under his analytical microscope, I said: "But there are no constraining influences at work upon any of us aboard this beautiful little pleasure ship--there can't be."

"Do you think not?" she threw in; and then, without warning: "How about you and Conetta, Richard?"

In common justice to Conetta I had to feign an indifference I was far from feeling--which was more of the hypocrisy.

"That was all over and done with three years ago, as you must know, Madeleine. She wasn't aware of the fact that I was to be in the *Andromeda* party; and I didn't know she was to be--at least, not until after I had committed myself to Bonteck. Of course we promptly quarreled the moment we met. Perhaps you may have noticed that we've been quarreling ever since."

She smiled soberly.

"You have made it obvious--both of you; perhaps a little too obvious." Then, after a momentary silence: "Did Miss Mehitable give the real reason for that other and mortal quarrel, three years ago, Richard?"

"The reason she gave was enough, wasn't it?"

"Some of us thought it wasn't. I don't know how you were acting, but Conetta didn't give a very good imitation of a person who has 'agreed to disagree.'"

"I can fill out the picture for you," I said grimly. "I was acting like a man who had been fool enough to lose his temper at the invitation of a crabbed and rather spiteful person who was old enough to be his mother."

"Ah!" she said; "I thought it was Miss Mehitable." Then: "Was it because you had lost your money?"

"Yes," I said, merely because the simple affirmative seemed to afford the easiest way of brushing aside explanations which might not explain.

It was then that Miss Madeleine Barclay became a plagiarist, stealing the very words uttered so hotly by Edie Van Tromp only a few hours earlier.

"Money--always money! I *hate* it, Dick Preble!"

I did not answer her as I had answered Edith.

"It is a holy hatred, Madeleine. The love of money, and what money will buy, has proved the undoing of--but I don't need to preach to you. Let's talk about something pleasant. Have you ever seen a finer night than this?"

"A fine night, and ideal conditions. In a way, we've almost left the strugglesome, toiling, avariciously dollar-chasing old world behind us, haven't we?"

"You say 'almost'; why not quite?"

She made a little gesture inclusive of the *Andromeda* as a whole.

"Too many reminders of the money and what it will buy. We'd need to be shipwrecked upon some uninhabited island to make the isolation perfect. As that isn't going to happen, I think I'll make the most of what we have and go to bed. Good-night." And she left me.

My pipe had gone out and I refilled it. While I had called the night fine, it was measurably warm. With the yacht at anchor there was little breeze, and what little there was came from sea. My stateroom was on the port side, and as the *Andromeda* was lying with that side toward the land, I was reluctant to leave the open air for the closer quarters between decks.

It was while I was smoking a second pipe in comfortable solitude that I fell asleep. The lapse into unconsciousness seemed only momentary, but when I picked up the pipe which had fallen into my lap there was no fire in it and the bowl had grown cold. Also, in the interval, long or short, the yacht's lights had been switched off and the after-deck was shrouded in the soft darkness of the tropical night. From somewhere in the under-depths came a faint clatter of tools to tell me that Haskell and his men were still at work on the disabled shaft, but apart from this the silence was unbroken.

Descending the cabin stair I groped my way to the door of my room, which was the farthest forward on the port side, and I remembered afterward that I thought it odd that the saloon lights were all off. On all other occasions when I had been up late I had found a single incandescent left on; one, at least.

Inside of the luxurious little sleeping-room that had been assigned to me I felt for the wall switch and snapped it. Nothing happened. I snapped it back and on again, and still nothing happened. Down in the machinery hold I could hear the fluttering murmur of the small auxiliary engine which ran the lighting dynamo, and since it was running, there seemed to be no reason why the lights shouldn't come on. But they wouldn't.

While I was speculating upon this curious failure of the lighting system and wondering if it were worth while to go below to ask Haskell what was the matter with the cabin circuit, sounds like the subdued splashing of oars cautiously handled came floating in through the open port. Since I judged it must be midnight or worse, it was only natural that I should want to know why a boat should be coming off to the *Andromeda* after all the yacht's people save myself were abed and asleep. Not being able to see anything from the stateroom port-light, I hurried back through the darkened saloon and up to the deck. From the rail on the shoreward side I could make out the dim shape of the approaching craft. As nearly as I could determine, it was a large row-boat with at least four men in it; at all events there were four oars. I could see and count the phosphorescent swirls as the blades were dipped.

It was evident at once that the boat was coming off to the *Andromeda*. We were anchored well out in the harbor, and there was nothing beyond us; nothing but the harbor mouth and the open sea. Visions of banditry began to flit through my brain. When I had been last in the Caribbean, some three months earlier, Nicaragua had been in the throes of one of its perennial guerrilla wars. A rich man's yacht, offering dazzling loot, might easily be a tempting bait to any lawless band happening to be within striking distance.

While I was straining my eyes to get a better sight of the approaching boat, and deliberating as to whether or not I hadn't better call Van Dyck or the sailing-master, a voice at my elbow said: "So you are up late, too, are you, Dick?" and I faced about with a prickling shock of surprise to find Bonteck standing beside me.

"I must be getting weak-kneed and nervous," I said. "I thought I was the only person awake at this end of things, and you gave me a start. What boat is that?"

"A shore boat, I suppose," he answered evenly. "After I found that we were likely to be delayed until to-morrow, I told Goff he might give some of his men shore leave for a few hours. They were asking for it."

"But that isn't one of the *Andromeda's* boats," I objected.

"No; they didn't take one of our boats; they hailed a harbor craft of some sort. I fancied they'd make a night of it, but it seems they didn't."

"What time is it now?" I asked.

"Two bells in the middle watch--otherwise one o'clock."

While we were talking, the boat was pulled up to the port bows of the yacht and a number of men, some half-dozen or more, came aboard. We could see dark figures climbing the rail, but since the yacht was painted white, and Van Dyck and I were both wearing yachting flannels, I suppose we were invisible to the group at the bows. In a minute or so the boat pushed off, cut a clumsy half circle in turning, and headed for the shore, and there was just enough of my foolish nervousness left to suggest that the oarsmen were still trying not to make any more noise than they could help. But the second thought made me smile at the remains of the nervousness. What more natural than that our returning shore-leave men had cautioned the boatmen against making a racket and waking everybody on the *Andromeda*?

"I take it you've been down with Haskell," I said to Bonteck, after the shore boat had become a vanishing blur in the darkness.

"Yes. He is as sore as a boil about that propeller shaft. Says he never had anything like that happen to him before, and that it reflects upon him as chief. He tried to tell me how unaccountable it was, but I hardly know enough about mechanical things to keep me from spoiling."

"It is rather unaccountable," I offered. "I was down a few hours ago and crawled into the shaft tunnel to have a look at it. Ordinarily, when a bearing as large as that begins to run dry, it gives warning some little time beforehand. But Quinby, Haskell's second, says he put his hand on it less than an hour before it began to complain, and it was perfectly cool."

"Oh, well," was Van Dyck's easy-going rejoinder, "such things are all in a life-time. We're in luck that it didn't 'seize,' as Haskell says, and twist itself off. You're yawning as if you were sleepy. Better turn in and get whatever this hot night will let you have. Good-night."

That was the end of the day for me, save that when I went to my stateroom and once more tried the wall switch the lights came on as usual.

The next morning, after a breakfast so early that I sat alone at the long table in the white-lacquered saloon, I went below and offered my services as those of a highly educated jack-of-all-trades to Haskell.

"By golly, you're saving my life, Mr. Preble," said our chief mechanic, whose eyes were looking like two burned holes in a blanket. "If you'll boss the job and let me get about a couple of hours in the hay----"

"Sure," I agreed; and crawling into the extra suit of overclothes, I proceeded to do it, becoming so mechanically interested in a short time that I not only neglected to call Haskell when his two hours were up, but also let the luncheon hour go by unheeded.

By keeping faithfully at it, our gang got the recalcitrant thrust bearing in shape by the middle of the afternoon, the fires were broken out and the blowers put on, and by four o'clock the *Andromeda* was once more under way and pointing her sharp nose for the open water. As I came up out of the engine-hold to make a bolt for a bath and clean clothes, I saw that Van Dyck had the wheel and was apparently heading the ship straight out toward the Mosquito Cays. As the trim little vessel--which was little only by comparison with the great liners of which it was a copy in the small--went shearing its way at full speed through the heaving ground swell with the westering sun fairly astern, I could not help wondering what our next port of call would be, and if it would be a disabled piece of machinery which would drive us into it.

VI

A SEA CHANGE

WITH the Nicaraguan coast fairly astern, and the *Andromeda* picking her way gingerly among the cays and reefs which extend from fifty to one hundred miles off the eastern hump of the Central American camel, we soon made the

open Caribbean, and our course was once more laid indefinitely to the south and east. If we were to hold this general direction we should bring up in due time somewhere upon the Colombian or Venezuelan coast of South America.

Watching my opportunity, I cornered Van Dyck on the bridge at a moment when he had relieved the man at the wheel; this on our second evening out from Gracias a Dios. As I came up, he was changing the course more to the southward, and I asked him if we were slated to do the Isthmus and the Canal.

"I hadn't thought very much about it," he answered half-absently. "Do you think the others would like it?"

"The Isthmus is pretty badly hackneyed, nowadays," I suggested; "and for your particular purpose----"

"Forget it!" he broke in abruptly. And then: "It's a hideous failure, Dick, as you have doubtless found out for yourself."

"Which part of it is a failure--your experiment, or the other thing?"

"I don't know what you mean by 'the other thing'," he bit out.

"Then I'll tell you: You thought it wouldn't be such a bad idea to show Madeleine Barclay what a vast difference there is between yourself and Ingerson as a three-meal-a-day proposition; as a steady diet, so to speak, in an environment which couldn't very well be changed or broken. Wasn't that it?"

"Something of the sort, maybe," he admitted, rather sheepishly, I thought.

"And it isn't working out?"

"You can see for yourself."

"What I see is that you are giving Ingerson a good bit more than a guest's chance."

"You don't understand," he returned gloomily.

"Naturally. I'm no mind reader."

While the *Andromeda* was shearing her way through three of the long Caribbean swells he was silent. Then he said: "I'm going to tell you, Dick; I shall have a fit if I don't tell somebody. Madeleine has turned me down--not once, you know, but a dozen times. It's the cursed money!"

"But Ingerson has money, too," I put in.

"I know; but that is different. Can't you conceive of such a thing as a young woman's turning down the man she really cares for, and then letting herself be dragooned into marrying somebody else?"

"You are asking too much," I retorted. "You want me to believe that a sane, well-balanced young woman like Madeleine Barclay will refuse a good fellow because he happens to be rich, and marry the other kind of a fellow who has precisely the same handicap. It may be only my dull wit, but I can't see it."

"I could make you see it if you were a little less thick-headed," he cut in impatiently. And then he added: "Or if you knew Mr. Holly Barclay a little better."

It was just here that I began to see a great light, with Madeleine Barclay threatening to figure as a modern martyr to a mistaken sense of duty. Did she know that her father would make his daughter's husband his banker? And was she generously refusing to involve the man she loved?

"It ought to make you all the more determined, Bonteck," I said, after I had reasoned it out. "It is little less than frightful to think of--the other thing, I mean. Ingerson will buy her for so much cash down; that is about what it will amount to."

"Don't you suppose I know it?" he exclaimed wrathfully. "Good Lord, Dick, I've racked my brain until it is sore trying to think up some way of breaking the combination. You don't know the worst of it. Holly Barclay is in deep water. Strange as it may seem, his sister, Emily Vancourt, named him, of all the incompetents in a silly world, as her executor and the guardian of her son. The boy is in college in California, and next year he will come of age."

"And Barclay can't pay out?"

"You've said it. He has squandered the boy's fortune as he has Madeleine's. I don't know how he did it, but I fancy the bucket-shops have had the most of it. Anyway, it's gone, and when the fatal day of accounting rolls around he will stand a mighty good chance of going to jail."

"Does Madeleine know?" I asked.

"Not the criminal part, you may be sure. She merely knows that her father is in urgent need of money--a good, big chunk of it. And she also knows, without being told, that the man who marries her will be invited to step into the breach. Isn't it horrible?"

"You have discovered the right word for it," I agreed. And then: "You are not letting it stand at that, are you?"

He did not reply at once. From the after-deck came sounds of cheerful laughter, with Alicia Van Tromp's rich contralto dominating; came also the indistinguishable words of a popular song which Billy Grisdale was chanting to his own mandolin accompaniment. Presently Jack Grey's mellow tenor joined in, and in the refrain I could hear Conetta's silver-toned treble. It jarred upon me a little; and yet I tried to make myself believe that I was glad she was happy enough to sing. True to her word, she had consistently maintained the barrier quarrelsome between us; and Jerry Dupuyster was playing his part like an obedient little soldier.

"You'd say it was a chance for a man to do something pretty desperate, wouldn't you, Dick?" Van Dyck said, breaking the long pause in his own good time.

"I think you would be justified in considering the end, rather than the particular means," I conceded.

"I have had a crazy project up my sleeve--a sort of forlorn hope, you know. But after working out all of the details time and again, I've always weakened on it."

"Perhaps some of the details are weak," I suggested, willing to be helpful if I could.

"One of them is, and I can't seem to build it up so that it will seem reasonably plausible. Of course you know that I'd pay the father out of the prison risk in the hollow half of a minute if I could make it appear as anything less than sheer charity. But I can't do anything like that openly; and if I should do it in any other ordinary way, Madeleine would be sure to find out about it and argue that I was merely lowering myself to Ingerson's plane--paving the way with the money that she despises. And she'd turn me down again--with some show of reason. I am still sane enough to foresee that."

"If Miss Barclay only had some money of her own with which to buy her release from that unspeakable father of hers," I began.

"That would break the combination easily," he said. "And she did have money once; half of her mother's fortune was left to her--with her father as trustee. It went the same way as Barclay's own half, and the Vancourt trust fund."

With Conetta's voice in my ears I couldn't think straight enough to help him much. What I said was more an echo of my own growing determination regarding Conetta than anything else.

"I'd fight for my own, Bonteck; and I'd do it with whatever weapon came handiest," I declared; and then the return of the steersman whom Van Dyck had relieved put an end to the confidences for the time being.

With the sea routine resumed, and the *Andromeda* once more steaming free and footloose, a night and a day elapsed before I again had private speech with Van Dyck. As before, it was after dinner in the evening, and Van Dyck had sent one of the cabin stewards to ask me to join him in his stateroom. It was a matchless night, and I was lounging with the younger members of the ship's company on the after-deck when the steward came and whispered to me. We were all singing college songs with Billy Grisdale's mandolin for an accompaniment, and I was able to slip away unnoticed.

I found Van Dyck sitting at his table, stepping off distances on a spread-out chart with a pair of compasses, and somehow I fancied that the air of the luxuriously fitted little den was surcharged with the electricity of portent.

"You sent for me?" I queried.

"Yes; sit down and light your pipe," and he motioned me to a chair. "What are the others doing?"

"The young people, with the Greys, are on the after-deck, caterwauling with Billy, as you can hear. There is a bridge table in full blast in the saloon, with Mrs. Van Tromp, Aunt Mehitabel, Holly Barclay and Ingerson sitting in. The Sanfords have disappeared--gone to bed, I imagine; and the major is in the smoking-room, guzzling hot toddies."

"Good!" was the brief rejoinder. "Everything quiet up forward?"

"Why, yes--for all I know to the contrary," I answered in some little surprise. "Why shouldn't it be quiet?"

For a moment Van Dyck seemed embarrassed. And his explanation, when he made it, was half halting.

"There has been some little trouble with--er--the crew, you know. Quite likely you haven't seen any signs of it. I--I've been trying to keep it under cover as well as I could."

"Trouble?--of what sort?" I demanded.

"Why--er--the only kind one ever has with a crew; something like a threatened mutiny, I believe."

I laughed aloud.

"A mutiny on a private yacht? Why, heavens and earth--your men don't have anything to do but to draw their pay and their breath!"

"I know; that is the way it would appear. But there is something behind--something you don't understand. If I should tell you that the *Andromeda* left New York with a quarter of a million dollars in her hold----"

"What's that?" I ejaculated, shocked into sudden and lively attention.

"You must forgive me, Dick, if I don't go into the particulars," he went on hastily. "I might say, with a good degree of truth, that it isn't altogether my own secret. But--but the fact remains."

"A quarter of a mil--Great Caesar!" I gasped. Then the deductive part of my brain began to fit the fragmentary admissions into a probable whole. All summer there had been flying rumors in the West India ports of a revolution brewing in one of the South American republics; an upheaval which was to be financed--in the interests of a great importing corporation--by New York capital. Could it be possible that Van Dyck had foolishly allowed his yacht to be made use of as a money transport?

"You don't mean to say that we have that money on board now?" I protested, when the possible consequences began to make themselves manifest.

"As it happens, we haven't," he replied, quite calmly. "That is why it took the *Andromeda* so long to make the run from New York to Havana. I was getting rid of the impedimenta."

"But if you've gotten rid of it, why should your crew--"

"That is just the point," he explained patiently. "The thing had to be done quietly, and proper precautions were taken at both ends of the line to keep anybody and everybody from finding out that we were carrying a small fortune between-decks. Still, I am afraid it did leak out. That little black-mustached fellow who turned up at Havana, and again in New Orleans----"

"That reminds me of something that occurred to me no longer ago than this morning's breakfast-time," I broke in; "a thing that I've been meaning to ask you about ever since. Manuel, the mulatto boy who usually serves breakfast, was invisible this morning, and he had a substitute."

"Well?"

"I was going to say that, if I'm not greatly mistaken, you have that same mysterious little man--minus the mustaches--on your payroll at this moment, Bonteck. He is the under-steward who goes by the name of Lequat; he was the man who substituted for Manuel this morning, and he was the man who came to me just now to tell me that you wanted me."

It was now Van Dyck's turn to sit up and take notice and he did both, emphatically.

"That fellow?--In the *Andromeda*?" he exclaimed.

"As I say--if I'm not much mistaken. I had a pretty good chance to familiarize myself with his face that night in the hotel dining-room in New Orleans, and I have a fairly decent memory for faces."

Van Dyck fell into a muse, breaking the silence finally to say: "By Jove, Dick, that may prove to be a horse of another color, don't you know!"

Waiving the question as to what the color of the original horse might have been, I stuck to the point at issue.

"If, as you say, you have gotten rid of the money, the situation can't be very alarming. Including engineers, firemen and cabin servants, you can't have over thirty-five or forty men in the crew, all told. There are nine of us in the cabin, and Haskell and the Americans will all stand with us. If we get together and put up a good front----"

Van Dyck interrupted hastily--over-hastily, I thought, for a man of his inches and determination in other fields.

"It is not to be thought of, Dick; not for a single moment, with all these women aboard. Besides, we have no arms. We'd be shot down in cold blood if it should come to blows."

This was so singularly unlike the Bonteck Van Dyck I had known best in the college days that it fairly made me gasp.

"Why, Bonteck!" I exclaimed; "what has come over you? You don't mean to say that you would calmly hand the yacht over to those fellows if they should ask you for it?"

"It might easily be the only thing to do," he asserted, half mechanically. "Of course, as I say, we haven't the money, and they would have their trouble for their pains, after all. Still, it might be difficult to convince them that the gold--the money has been actually disposed of. If they learned in New York that we really took it on board, and didn't learn afterward that it was disembarked elsewhere . . . well, you see how it stacks up, don't you?"

"I see that you are making mountains out of molehills," I retorted. "What does Goff say about this potential mutiny?"

Van Dyck shook his head as if the mention of Goff merely added to the difficulties of the situation.

"That is another thing: Goff may be in it himself. He is an awful tough-looking old pirate. Don't you think so?"

"What I think is that you must have been completely off your head when you changed from your Atlantic-liner master and crew to this old fisherman and his Portuguese."

"Er--somebody recommended him; I forget just who it was," he went on to explain. "I needed a sailing-master who knew the Caribbean well, and who would do what he was told to do and ask no questions. You see the--er--shipping of the quarter million made some difference, and I couldn't afford to have too much intelligence aboard."

Again there was a pause, during which I was trying to persuade myself that this half-hearted young man across the stateroom table from me was really the same Bonteck Van Dyck who had coached crews, captained the Varsity football, and had otherwise proved himself a man and a leader of men--the sort of leader who fights to the final gasp, and even then doesn't know when he is beaten. The inability to do it put a little unconscious scorn into my summing-up of the situation.

"It is up to you, of course," I said. "We are merely your guests, and what you say is what we shall do. At the same time, I think--in fact I know--that you could count upon practically every man in our much-mixed passenger list to help you put down a mutiny."

"That is it--that is just why I sent for you, Dick," he cut in eagerly. "I knew you would be all for making a fight, and that you would probably lead it. For the sake of the women there mustn't be any scrap, you know. It would scare them into hysterics, naturally. If it should come to a showdown we must just make up our minds to take it easy--take the line of the least resistance--if you get what I mean. At the very worst, the mutineers couldn't well do more than to put us ashore somewhere, so that they might have a chance to search the yacht for the money. I have had that in mind all along, and when you came in just now I was trying to figure out our present latitude and longitude. Have you any idea where we are?"

"Trying to figure out?" I echoed. "Do you mean to tell me calmly that you--a navigator yourself and the owner of this ship--don't *know* where we are?"

"I'm ashamed to admit that I don't know--precisely. Goff keeps the reckoning, you see, and I have thought that perhaps he wasn't giving me the correct figures."

If any additional evidence had been needed, here was another and still more startling proof of the devastating change which had somehow been wrought in the Bonteck Van Dyck I had been thinking I knew. One of his hobbies in the past had been the study of practical navigation, and on more than one long cruise he had been his own sailing-master. That he should deliberately turn the *Andromeda* over to a man who had been merely "recommended" by some one whose name was already forgotten was little short of astounding.

"I truly hope there is nothing worse than an ordinary, every-day mutiny in store for us," I said grimly. "Judging from our course--which Goff may have changed every night, for all you seem to know--we ought to be somewhere in the southern half of the Caribbean. The steamer lanes are well charted, but there are a good many cays and islands outside of them--places where the bones of the *Andromeda* might lie until they rotted before anybody would ever discover them."

"And not all of the islands are inhabited, I take it," said Van Dyck, peering down at his chart as if he hoped to

identify some of them.

"You know that as well as I do--or better," I snapped. And then: "What in the name of common sense has turned you into such a milk-blooded shuffler, Bonteck? You talk and act as if you weren't more than half----"

"Listen!" he said hastily, holding up a warning finger.

The stringy tinkle of Billy Grisdale's mandolin had stopped, and with it the singing. Above the murmuring diapason of the yacht's engines we both heard Edie Van Tromp's shrill cry of "Land-o-o-o!" As if the cry had been a pre-concerted signal, it was followed instantly by a confused trampling of feet on the deck over our heads, a sudden slackening of the yacht's speed, and more cries and foot-tramplings.

I was upon my feet and was reaching for the door-knob when Mrs. Van Tromp's throaty scream came from the adjoining saloon where the bridge players were sitting. Before I could turn the knob the door was thrust open, and the under-steward, whose ship name was Lequat, backed by two evil-faced fore-deck men armed with rifles, stood in the doorway. At the appearance of this warlike demonstration I was glad to see that Van Dyck, for once in a way, seemed genuinely shocked.

"You?" he demanded. "How is this? Where is Mr. Goff?"

The little man's smile and bow were like those of a dancing master.

"Ze captaine is sand me to inform you zat you are both ze prisonaire, *oui*. You vill sit down in ze chair and wait patient', M'sieu' Van Dyck--and you, Mistaire Preb'. Zis ees w'at you call all cut-and-dry, and----"

I suppose I sprang at his throat; it was the only thing for a live man to do. But the little beggar was quicker than a cat, and he brought me up all standing, with a huge pistol thrust into my face.

"Aha! you vill choke me, ees it? By gar, Mistaire Preb', eet is possib' I make you--how you say it?--walk ze board--ze plank, yes? You vill sit down on ze chair and tek eet easy. Ze sheep ees belong to h-us, and your fran's 'ave all been lock' up in ze staterooms. You can do notting; *moi*, Alphonse Lequat, vill tek ze comman'."

It was not until after all of this had happened that Van Dyck found his voice.

"Is this--is this a mutiny, Lequat?" he asked, as mild as mush.

"Eet is vat you vill be please' to call heem, M'sieu' Van Dyck, *certainement*. For fifteen, twanty, feefty minute' you vill sit on ze chair, and Pedro, he is stay outside ze door and keel you eef you make noises. Bam-by, *moi*, Alphonse Lequat, s'all come back to tell you vat eet is you s'all do." And then to his men: "*Allons, mes garcons!*"

And with that he backed out of the owner's private cabin, and shut and locked the door.

VII

SHORE LEAVE

COINCIDENT with the taking over of the yacht by the mutineers, the engines stopped; but after Lequat had locked us in and left us, the trampling tune of the machinery began again, though it presently became apparent that we were proceeding at something less than half speed. At first I thought the creeping progress might be Haskell's way of showing his reluctance to obey his new masters; but after the engines had made a few of the slow revolutions we heard the sing-song cry of a seaman in the main chains taking soundings.

"Feeling for an anchorage," said Van Dyck, speaking for the first time since he had asked Lequat that mush-mild question as to whether or not the outbreak was a mutiny. "Wouldn't you put it up that way?"

His query seemed too trivial to merit an answer.

"I haven't any time to waste on the guesses," I said, and most likely the tone was as crabbed as the words. Then: "Are you fully awake at last? Do you realize that you've been held up and robbed of a five-hundred-thousand-dollar yacht?"

His shrug was perfectly spineless.

"'What can't be cured must be endured'," he quoted, handing me the time-worn maxim as if it sufficiently accounted for everything. "Of course, as the person chiefly responsible, I'm all kinds of sorry for you and the others. It's a horribly rude interruption to our pleasure jaunt, and I take it there is no telling what these fellows may do to us." Then, with still more of the air of the completest detachment: "The nervy beggars! Who would ever have suspected it of them? And to carry it off so neatly, too."

"It was all plotted and planned beforehand, of course. Didn't this man Lequat say that it was cut-and-dried? Goff is the head and front of it, isn't he?"

"Heaven knows. You wouldn't imagine it of Goff--or would you?"

"I can easily imagine him breaking rock in a Federal prison--which is what he will do--if he succeeds in keeping his leathery old neck out of the hangman's noose!"

"Naturally," Van Dyck agreed easily. "But that is an after consideration. The present realities are what concern us just now. I'm wondering what their next move will be."

"You don't seem to be letting your wonderment disturb you very much." I was still warm, both over the bootless little tussle with Lequat, and because Van Dyck had so ignominiously failed to rise to the occasion--and was still continuing to fail.

"What's the use?" he queried. "We are like the harmless and inoffensive citizen who wakes up in the middle of the night to find a burglar's spot-light shining in his eyes and the burglar's gun shoved in his face. Discretion is always the better part of valor. Haven't you learned that invaluable lesson, knocking about in this harsh old world? But getting back to things present and pressing--there goes our anchor."

The brief roar of the cable running through its hawse-hole told us that the *Andromeda* was in comparatively shallow soundings. We could feel the snub of the anchor as the yacht's way was checked, and a little later the sounds overhead advertised the fact that the mutineers were lowering one of the boats.

Beyond the slap of the lowered boat as it took the water, the noises were less easily definable. There were bumpings and bangings which seemed to come from forward of the bridge, muffled sounds like those of a busy baggage-room at train-time, the shrilling of blocks and tackle, and a skirling chatter suggestive of a steam winch in action. Following these we could hear the low humming of the motor in the dropped electric launch; a murmur which gradually died away as we listened.

Somewhat farther along, after the buzzing motor murmur had come and gone often enough to tell us that the launch was plying industriously between the yacht and some other destination, Van Dyck said: "You'd say they were taking an entire cargo ashore, wouldn't you?--provided the *Andromeda* carried any cargo." Then: "I've cornered a guess, Dick--which you may have for what it is worth. I believe these fellows are meaning to take a leaf out of the book of the old buccaneers of the Spanish Main and maroon us."

"What makes you think that?" I demanded.

"Putting two and two together. That is the hoist winch making all the clatter up forward. They are unloading the forehold--of our dunnage and some part of the provisions, we'll say--and lightering the stuff ashore in the launch. Assuming that they expect to find a quarter of a million dollars hidden away somewhere in the *Andromeda*, they'll figure that they need to get rid of us, and run fast and far to make their get-away, won't they?"

"That sounds sufficiently barbarous to fit in with the rest of it," I fumed.

"Right-o. That being the case, they have only to stow us away in some safe place--where we won't be found and rescued too soon--and then up stick and away; put steam to the yacht and vanish. Once they get going, they'll be safe enough. The *Andromeda* will outrun anything of her inches, short of the torpedo chasers and the hydroplanes, when she is pushed to it. What do you say?"

"I'm not saying anything," I returned crustily. "I'm too busy wondering what in Heaven's name has thinned your blood to the milk-and-water consistency, Bonteck. I've heard a few queer things about you during the past three years, but I wasn't told that you had gone completely dippy. Why, man alive! if your guess is right, you stand to lose a cool half-million in the value of the yacht--to say nothing of what may happen to the bunch of us if we are marooned on some lonesome island in the southern Caribbean!"

"Yes, there is the marooning to be considered, of course," he said coolly, filling his pipe and lighting it. "But we needn't cross that bridge until we come to it. As to the possible loss of the yacht, that is the least of my troubles, just now. She'll turn up again somewhere, I guess; if they don't smash or sink her."

It seemed utterly hopeless to try to arouse him to any adequate sense of the enormity of the thing that had befallen us, and I jumped up and began to pace the narrow limits of the little cabin. Van Dyck's attitude seemed explainable only upon the hypothesis that he had lost his mind, and I wondered if his brooding over the wretched dilemma into which his love for Madeleine Barclay had plunged him hadn't thrown him off his balance. It was certainly beginning to look that way.

While I was tramping back and forth in a fever of gloomy rage and helplessness, with Van Dyck sitting at the table and calmly smoking his pipe, the ship's noises took new forms. There was much tramping up and down the saloon stairs, a rattling of keys in locks, opening and shutting of doors, and the like. Again and again the motor launch repeated its short trips, and between two of them there were voices raised in the adjoining saloon; Ingerson's in savage and profane protest, and Mrs. Van Tromp's in tearful inquiry as to what had been done with Mr. Van Dyck. In due course of time our own turn came, and it was Lequat who unlocked and opened our door.

"Ze momment ees come," he announced, with a bow and a smirk. "Ze anchor ees--vat ees it you say?--hove short, and ze launch ees wait' for you zhentleman. You vill come peaceab'?--or ees it that ve have to asseest you?"

It was now or never, if we meant to try conclusions with this little scoundrel, and I looked to Van Dyck for the answer. He had put on his cap, slung a cased field-glass over his shoulder, and was closing and locking the drawers of the writing-table. As I have said, it was his final chance for making some show of resistance, and he was weakly letting it go.

When we reached the deck, guarded closely by four or five of the mutineers, it became evident that we were the last of the ship's company to be summoned. The night was fine, with a sickle of a moon in its first quarter, and the sea undisturbed by so much as a ripple. The *Andromeda* was at anchor a short distance from one of the many cays with which the southern Caribbean is dotted; a long, low-lying island plumed with palms and densely jungled with tropical undergrowth. The yacht lay within a stone's throw of an outer reef, and the reef enclosed a broad lagoon reflecting the shadows of the palms like a silver mirror under the shimmering moonlight; and the shadowy background of foliage was made blacker by contrast with a ribbon of white sand beach.

Though there was a passage through the reef just opposite the *Andromeda's* temporary berth, the mutineers had apparently been too cautious to try to enter it with the yacht. They had merely felt their way with the sounding line to within bottoming distance on the outside of the reef, and dropped the anchor. There was little question now as to their intention. They were stopping only long enough to get rid of us.

In ominous silence Van Dyck and I were herded toward the accommodation ladder, at the foot of which lay the electric launch. Up to the final moment I was hoping to see Bonteck reassert himself, at least to the extent of protesting against the high-handed crime these scoundrels were committing. When it became apparent that he was not going to say anything, I took a chance for myself.

"I suppose you know what you are doing, Lequat," I barked, after we had taken our places in the launch. "This is piracy on the high seas, and you don't have to be much of a sailorman to know what that means."

"You vill not be trouble you'self 'bout me, Mistaire Preb'," he returned politely. Then, as the man at the ladder foot pushed us off: "*Bon voyage*, M'sieu' Van Dyck. *Bon soir*, and--how you say it?--G-o-o-d-by!"

The launch, manned by a crew numerous enough to have thrown us overboard if we had raised a hand in rebellion, sped silently across to the narrow inlet in the reef and entered the peaceful lagoon. Almost at once a sickening, terrifying conviction began to force itself upon me. From the first out-of-door glance at the surroundings there had been something familiar in the appearance of the reef, the pond-like lagoon, and the low-lying island. As we were passing through the inlet the moonbeams struck out the black and shattered remains of a wreck hanging upon the outer reef a short distance on our right, and then I *knew*!

"The Lord have mercy!" I gasped; and Van Dyck looked up quickly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The wreck of the *Mary Jane*!" I whispered, pointing to the black skeleton on the rocks. "This is the island I told you about--the horrible place where we were shipwrecked a year ago last winter!"

"You don't say so!" he returned; and then, to make the reply still more trite: "What a remarkable coincidence!"

His indifference was maddening, and my temper--the temper that had once cost me any shadow of a chance that I might have had in persuading Miss Mehitable Gilmore that, money or no money, Conetta's happiness, as well as my own, was of more importance than any mere fortune lost or gained--this flyaway temper got the better of me and I said

things for which I was sorry the moment they were said.

"Pile it on as thick as you please, old man," Ván Dyck rejoined, meekly, after I had abused him like an angry fishwife. "It is coming to you--and to the others, as well. What they will do to me presently will doubtless be good and plenty, and you'll have your revenge."

Two minutes later the launch was nosing the white sand of the beach, and the man at the tiller made motions for us to get out. Ván Dyck stepped ashore and I followed him. A few yards away, at the edge of the jungle thicketing, our cabin castaways were huddled around a great pile of luggage and ship's stores. Their greeting of Ván Dyck when he joined them was all that his most vindictive accuser could have desired; cries and reproaches, eager questionings and sobbing protests from the women; and from the men a fierce storm of demandings led by the major and Holly Barclay. Since Jerry Dupuyster made no move to do it, I drew Conetta quickly out of the Babel and walked her beyond earshot. Major Terwilliger was so far forgetting himself as to swear savagely at his late host, and Ingerson's language was brutal.

"Tell me, reasonably and sanely, if you can, Dick, just what has been done to us," urged my companion, with a little shiver of fright or disgust--or possibly of both; this when we paused to watch the retreating launch cleave its way across the lagoon to the waiting yacht.

"I don't know very much more about it than you do," I told her. "There is a mutiny, with a plot to steal the *Andromeda*, it seems, and it is quite evident the thing was carefully planned. I was below when it climaxed and so saw nothing of what was happening on deck. They didn't hurt anybody, did they?"

"I think not. It came so suddenly that they didn't need to use force. We were under the awning, just as you left us. Edie Ván Tromp saw this island and called out 'Land-o,' and the next thing we knew a lot of men with guns had surrounded us and were ordering us to go to our staterooms and to be quick about it. That little dark-faced understeward who talks so brokenly seemed to be the leader. He was polite enough about it, but when Jack Grey and Billy began to protest, he made four of his men grab them."

"Then you were hustled below?"

"Yes. When we got down to the saloon, more of the armed men were shoving the bridge players into the staterooms, and Hobart Ingerson was swearing awfully. So was the major when they dragged him out of the smoking-room."

"They are swearing yet," I said. "What did your aunt say?"

"She didn't say a single word; she just walked into our stateroom ahead of me, as stiff as a poker, and I couldn't get a word out of her. I don't know whether she was scared, or just too angry for words. She sat on the edge of her bed like a frozen statue until they came to take us ashore. What are the wretches going to do?--leave us here on this deserted little strip of an island?"

The answer to her question was at that very moment shaping itself before our eyes. While its propeller was still churning idly, the electric launch was hooked and hoisted to its davits, the anchor was broken out, and the *Andromeda* began to forge slowly ahead, again with a man in the bow heaving the lead and calling out the soundings.

"We are marooned," I said soberly enough, I guess. "It may be for a day, a week, a month or a year. I happen to know this island only too well. I was shipwrecked upon it once. Those are the bones of our old schooner, the *Mary Jane*, out yonder on the reef."

She gave a little gasp of shocked surprise.

"You shipwrecked?--and I never heard of it!" she exclaimed. "How long were you here, Dick?"

"Nearly a month. A tramp steamer, blown out of its course between Colon and La Guaira by a hurricane, saw our signals and took us off."

She glanced over her shoulder apprehensively.

"There are no--no savages, are there?" she shuddered.

I shook my head. "Hardly; not in the twentieth century. For that matter, I doubt if there ever were any. The place isn't big enough to support much of a population."

We were walking again now, keeping to the hard sands, and turning our backs resolutely upon the vanishing white phantom which was the ship that was deserting us.

"There are eighteen of us," Conetta said, after a time. "Doesn't that mean starvation, sooner or later?"

"There were six of us who were washed ashore from the *Mary Jane*," I said. "We lived on shell fish and cocoanuts--just barely, as you might say. There is a tradition that we were not the first, and that the others, the crew of a Spanish treasure ship marooned by the old English sea rovers, did starve."

"Heavens!" she breathed. "The place ought to be full of ghosts! But you don't believe those terrible old tales, do you?"

"They were true enough, doubtless; but we needn't go out of our way to localize them. In the present instance----" I was about to tell her of the remains of the ancient wreck farther down the beach, but I thought better of it and switched--"in the present instance we are not going to starve, for a while, at least. The mutineers have given us a fighting chance by dividing the ship's stores with us. Didn't you hear the launch going back and forth before you were taken off?"

"Yes, I heard it," she acknowledged. "That must have been part of the plan, too." Then she stopped and faced me suddenly. "Where was Bonteck while all the rest of us were being hustled out of the way?"

"He was a prisoner in his stateroom, locked in, and with a man on guard."

She looked me squarely in the eyes after a disconcerting fashion which might have been acquired from her downright aunt.

"Do you know that, Dick? Or is it only a friendly guess?"

"I know it because I was locked in with him. The mutineers had given us our orders--told us that we were down and out, you know."

"And you made no resistance--you two?"

I didn't say anything about my futile attempt to choke Lequat.

"Bonteck seemed to be afraid of a general massacre, or something of that sort, if we should put up a fight."

"I'm not satisfied," she returned promptly. "It is too absurd. Could a thing like this have been planned without some hint of it getting to Bonteck? And then there is Mr. Goff: you don't mean to tell me that that crabbed, sour, shrimmy old piece of New England honesty and prying curiosity could be kept from finding out."

"Bonteck hints that Goff may be heading the mutiny."

"That," said Conetta, with calm conviction, "is simply nonsense. I wouldn't believe it, not if Mr. Goff told me so himself." And then: "Shall we go back to the others now? The storm seems to have blown itself out: and we mustn't forget--you and I--that we have agreed to disagree."

Her use of Aunt Mehitabel's phrase touched off that cursed temper of mine again, and if I had made any reply at all it would have been one that I should have repented of. So we walked back to the haphazard landing place in sober silence.

When we joined the main body of castaways it seemed that Van Dyck had contrived by some means to stem the storm of question and reproach and to quiet it, for the time, at least. The women were sitting apart on the boxes of canned things, and Grey and Grisdale, under Bonteck's directions, and with his help, were setting up the three tents which the mutineers' generosity, or chivalry, had included in our dunnage. Somebody had kindled a small fire on the beach, but the night was so warm that, apart from the cheer of it, the blaze served no purpose other than to light up the somber faces turned toward it.

After the tent-pegging--in which I hastened to share a part when I saw what was toward--we four made an attack upon the boxed stores. There were provisions in plenty; meats in canvas and meats in tins, vegetables fresh and vegetables in cans, ship's biscuit, and a variety of the other more ornamental--and less filling--kind; tea, coffee, sugar and evaporated cream; all of the calories to make a balanced ration. Last, but not least, there was a beaker of fresh water, though as to this, there were two good springs on the island, and a rill from one of them was trickling into the lagoon a few yards from our landing place.

Besides the necessary proteins, hydrocarbons and the like, there were a few of the luxuries; a case of liquors, a box of candles, another of cigars, cigarettes and tobacco, soap and towels, and even a couple of mirrors ravished from the bulkheads of the *Andromeda*--these last, I dare swear, a thought of the dancing-master Lequat's.

For beds there was a bale of canvas hammocks; and somebody's chivalric promptings--Lequat's or another's--had gone the length of including the baggage-hold-stored steamer trunks of the women, though we men had only the clothes we stood in.

Before our amateur camp was fully pitched the dark cloud of dismay and disheartenment began to show rifts here and there. After all was said, we were all alive and well, with plenty to eat and drink, and with no immediate prospect of hardship. Perhaps it was no matter for surprise that Sanford, the absent-minded professor of mathematics, was the first to rise to the philosophical demands of the occasion.

"I dare say there isn't a civilized human being in the world who hasn't, at one time or another, wished to be situated just as we find ourselves at the present moment," he began, after Grey and Billy Grisdale and the Van Tromp girls had goaded him into his proper class-room-lecturer's attitude. "For the time being--which we may very properly hope will not be unduly extended beyond the pleasant and profitable limit--we shall be able to live in a little world of our own making. If we have any resources of our own to fall back upon--and I trust none of us is wholly lacking in that respect--we may prove and try them, and quite possibly we may discover that, after all, environment, the conventions, the social machinery with which our civilization has surrounded us, are by no means strictly necessary to the sane, normal human being. Let us, therefore, eat and drink, and be thankful that things are no worse with us than we are at present finding them."

As if he had been an after-dinner speaker rising to express his pleasure at being among us, the professor was heartily applauded, and, following his suggestion, we had a bed-time snack of biscuits and tea around the handful of camp-fire. And, such is the force of good example, by the time the second pannikin of water was boiling, the younger members were making a jest of the most serious adventure that had ever befallen any of them. Jerry Dupuyster was pouring tea for Beatrice Van Tromp; Conetta had deliberately left her aunt's side to come and sit on the sand between Annette Grey and me; and Madeleine Barclay, as fetchingly beautiful in her white yachting flannels as she had ever appeared in her richest dinner gown, was listening patiently--nay, sympathetically, I thought--to Bonteck's well-worn explanation (which did not explain) of how it had all come about.

To offset these cheerful ameliorations there were a sufficient number of death's heads at the feast, as a matter of course. Major Terwilliger, contemplating a prospect which promised little in the way of his cherished diversions, sat apart and grumbled peevishly because the tea tasted smoky. Holly Barclay, robbed at one sheer stroke of all the little refinements and luxuries which made the sum of his aimless and worthless life, was still in the bickering stage; and Ingerson, with the few restraints which he recognized stricken away, was a plain brute, taking no pains to conceal his angry disgust, and making snappish bids to be let alone when any one was charitable enough to speak to him.

As for the women, the three who would be the first to feel the pinch of any privations that might come upon us were behaving beautifully, putting the major's gloom and Barclay's pettishness and Ingerson's grumpy rage to shame. Mrs. Van Tromp--a most easy-going soul when she could forget for the moment that she had three marriageable, and as yet unmarried, daughters on her hands--had already forgotten her reproachful complainings. Conetta's Aunt Mehitable was arguing peacefully with the professor on the philosophical aspect of the situation, though quite without prejudice, I fancied, to the sharp eye she was keeping upon Conetta in her new juxtaposition between Annette Grey and me. Mrs. Sanford, who, in spite of her motherliness, was a frail little body physically, was apparently regarding the hammock beds with some degree of trepidation; nevertheless, she went on sipping her tea with evident relish, and she found time and the spirit to smile understandingly across the circle at Billy Grisdale and Edie Van Tromp, and to stoop and pat Billy's bull pup, when the dog, finding that his master had no present use for him, wandered from one to another to stick his extremely *retrousee* nose into any hospitable palm that offered.

"Shall we be able to keep this up, do you suppose?" Conetta whispered to me, between the last two bites of her biscuit.

"I think the moonlight, what there is of it, is entrancingly beautiful, don't you?" I laughed. "'Sufficient unto the day (or night)----' You know the rest of it. I'm willing to let to-morrow take care of itself. Are you?"

"Maybe I am." Then, with a return to the old-time dartings aside: "What do you imagine Jerry is finding so alluring in Bee Van Tromp? He has never read a book in his life."

"Beatrice isn't all book," I retorted. "On this voyage which has come to such an abrupt halt I have been finding her a very charming young woman. Her eyes, now."

"Shush! Any woman can make eyes at a man. If you'll look around at me, I'll show you."

"Not any more," I said, and the saying was purely in self-defense.

"Wait," she teased. "The island is small--you said it was, didn't you?--and you can't always look the other way." Then: "Can't we even quarrel decently, Dickie Preble?"

Mrs. Van Tromp was rising stiffly and I was saved the necessity of replying.

"Time to go to bed, my dears," said the mother of three with great good-nature. And then to me: "Dick Preble, are you sure you fastened my hammock securely? Because, if you didn't--well, you know--I'm dreadfully heavy. There now! Wild horses wouldn't have dragged that admission out of me at home. Conetta, you rogue, you're laughing at me, but you're blushing, as well, and that's one of the conventions, too. Never mind. I'm afraid every second step will be on a crab, or a scorpion, or some other hideous thing. Good-night, all!"

VIII

INTO THE PRIMITIVE

It was I who told Edie Van Tromp that the name, or legendary name, of our island was "Pirates' Hope," and when she announced it at our first camp breakfast it was acclaimed with a cheerful unanimity which went far to show how, after a night's rest, we were able to make a jest out of what had figured, only a few hours earlier, as a crude calamity.

After breakfast, Van Dyck, throwing off the lethargy which had apparently bound him hand and foot when a little decision might have turned the tables upon the mutineers, took his place energetically and capably as the governor of our little colony. Under his directions a signal was set at the nearer, or western, end of the island, enough of the jungle was cleared to enable us to pitch the tents under the shade of the palms, a cooking camp was established, and a rude thatched shelter was built to protect the stores and luggage.

In these various industries there were only three idlers among the men--the major, Holly Barclay, and Hobart Ingerson; and Edie Van Tromp, volunteering to go with me to start a smoke fire at the signal cape, was furious.

"Wouldn't that set your back teeth on edge, seeing those three able-bodied gentlemen sunning themselves on the beach while everybody else is getting blisters on their hands!" she flamed out, with a fine disregard for the little grammatical inaccuracies. "I'd be ashamed!"

"You shouldn't deny the gentlemen the privilege of smoking their after-breakfast cigars in comfort," I protested, grinning. "Perhaps, after the cigars are all gone, and we come down to just plain pipes and plebeian cut-plug tobacco--"

"I don't care! It's perfectly horrid of them, *I* think. Mother got us women together this morning while you men were fixing the tents, and we all agreed to do the cooking, taking turns at it. When it comes my turn, I shall tell those three loafing gentlemen that they can undertake to wash the dishes, or go hungry!"

"Good!" I applauded. "You are a real, honest-to-goodness human woman, under the skin, aren't you, Edie?"

She stuck out a pretty under lip at me.

"Did you ever, for one little fraction of a minute, doubt it, Mr. Richard Preble?"

"No; it is only fair to say that I have never doubted it. You and Billy are the real thing, whatever may be said for the remainder of us."

"Billy is a darling!" she declared enthusiastically. "Last night, when those pirates rushed us with their guns, you know, I wanted to cry; boo-hoo right out like a silly baby. It was just plain scare. A grown man would have tried to comfort me, I suppose, but Billy joshed me and made fun of me until I was too mad to be scared. Isn't it a thousand pities that he's so young, and so--so----"

"So poor?" I finished for her. "It is; a thousand pities. But there is hope on ahead, my dear child. Billy will outgrow his infancy some time; and you mustn't lose sight of the fact that, so far as poverty and riches are concerned, we all look very much alike, just now."

In such light-hearted banterings back and forth we put the quarter-mile of beach behind us and got busy with our smudge-fire building at the foot of the stripped palm-tree which carried one of Madeleine Barclay's knitted shoulder wraps for a distress signal. With a few palmetto leaves and bits of rotting wood to crisp and smoulder in the blaze we soon had our smoke column erected; and beyond this there was nothing much to do save to scan the horizon for the

hoped-for sail.

"Do you really believe we shall be taken off before long, Dick Preble?" was Miss Edith's soberly put query, this after the fire was well established, and we were doing the horizon-sweeping stunt.

"Do you want the bald truth, or some nice little hopeful fiction?" I asked.

"You may save the fictions for Conetta and Madeleine and Annette, if you please. As you were kind enough to admit, a few minutes ago, I am a woman grown."

"Then I shall tell you plainly, Edie. I know this island. It is quite some distance from the nearest of the steamer lanes. It may be a long time before any one finds us."

She was silent for a little while, but the resolute, girlish eyes were quite unterrified. When she spoke again it was of a different matter.

"Dick," she began earnestly, "do you believe there is anything more than foolishness at the bottom of all the talk we bear about a woman's intuition?"

"All sober-minded people admit that there is, don't they?" I said.

"There is something behind all this that is happening to us," she asserted gravely; "something that I can feel, and can't grasp or understand. It is as real to me as the breeze in those palms, or this staring sunshine, and is as intangible as both."

"You have been talking with Conetta," I said shortly.

"About this? No, I haven't. What makes you say that?"

"No matter; go on with your intangibility."

"This sudden mutiny and the way it was hurled at us: it is all so strange and unaccountable. Who ever heard of the sailing-master of a private yacht turning pirate? And especially a dear, cross old Uncle Elijah, whose ancestors probably came over in the *Mayflower*?"

"Is Bonteck saying that Goff headed the mutiny?" I asked.

"He is letting the others say it, which is just the same."

"As you say, it is fairly incredible. Yet the fact remains. We are here, and the *Andromeda*, with Goff on board, has vanished."

"I know; but the mystery isn't to be solved in any such easy way as that. What possible use can Uncle Elijah or his crew of Portuguese and mixed-bloods make of the *Andromeda*, which is probably known in every civilized harbor of the world as Mr. Bonteck Van Dyck's private yacht?"

I hesitated to tell her the story of the treasure-carrying. That was Van Dyck's secret, so long as he chose to make a secret of it.

"As to the object of the mutiny, we are all entitled to a guess," I said. Then I offered one which was plausible or not, as one chose to view it: "Suppose we suppose that some one of the Central or South American countries is on the edge of a revolution; that isn't very hard to imagine, is it?"

"No."

"Very well. The sharpest need of the rebels in any revolution is for arms and ammunition; next to this, a fast ship to carry the arms and ammunition. If there should happen to be money enough in the revolutionary war-chest, isn't it conceivable that even an Uncle Elijah might be tempted?"

She turned and looked me squarely in the eye.

"Is that your guess, Dick Preble?" she demanded.

"It is as good as any, isn't it?" I replied evasively.

When she said: "It doesn't satisfy me; it is too absurd," her repetition of Conetta's protest of the previous night was almost startling.

"There are times when you women are almost uncanny," I told her, but she merely laughed at that.

"The absurdity isn't my only hunch," she went on, after the frank-speaking manner of her kind. "This Robinson Crusoe experience is going to be a dreadful thing, in a way. There won't be any illusions left for any of us, I'm afraid--any more than there were for the people of the Stone Age."

That sage remark brought on more talk, and we speculated cheerfully on the death of the illusions and what might reasonably be expected as the results thereof. My chatty companion had a lively imagination, and her forecastings of the changes that would ensue in the different members of our colony were handsomely entertaining.

"And you," she said, when she had worked her way around to me in the prophesying; "I can just see what an unlivable person you will become."

"Why should I be so particularly unlivable?" I asked.

"That awful temper of yours," she went on baldly. "With all the civilized veneer cracked and peeling off--my-oh!"

Now it is one thing to be well assured, in one's own summings-up, of the possession of a violent temper, and quite another to be told bluntly that the possession is a commonly accepted fact among one's friends and acquaintances. Edie Van Tromp's assertion of the fact as one that had--or might have been--published in the newspapers came with a decided shock.

"Am I as bad as all that?" I protested.

"Everybody knows what a vile temper you have," she replied coolly. "Anybody who couldn't get along with Conetta Kincaide without quarreling with her-----"

"Oh; so she has told you I have quarreled with her?"

"There you go," she gibed. "One has only to mention Conetta to you to touch off the powder train. What makes you quarrel with her, Uncle Dick?"

"What makes you think I am quarreling with her?"

"Hoo! I've got eyes, I guess. Of course, you've been decently polite to her, but a blind person could see that it was just put on. The veneer wasn't cracked then. I shudder to think what will happen when it gets all cracked and peelly."

I thought it was time for a diversion, so I turned the tables upon her.

"How will it be with you after the veneer glue lets go?"

"Oh, me?--I'm just a crude little brute, anyway. I don't just see how I *could* change for the worse. I'm saying this because I know it is what you are thinking. But there's one comfort. Billy won't see any difference in me, no matter what I do. And Billy himself won't change; he's too obvious."

We prolonged our watch until nearly noon, when the professor and his wife came out to relieve us. It may say itself that during our two hours or more of horizon-searching we saw no signs of a rescue vessel. In the wide three-quarters of a circle visible from the western point of the island--a point where I had spent many weary hours after the shipwreck of the *Mary Jane*--there had been only the calm expanse of sea and sky with nothing to break the monotony.

At the camp under the palms we found things settling into some sort of routine. A fire was going in the rude fire place built of rough chunks of the coral, and Mrs. Van Tromp and her athletic eldest were cooking dinner. The major and Holly Barclay were still loafing on the beach, both of them smoking as though we had a Tampa cigar factory to draw upon instead of a strictly limited supply of Van Dyck's "perfectos." Madeleine and Beatrice Van Tromp, working together, were trying to fashion a basket out of stripped palm fronds--though just what purpose a basket would serve I couldn't imagine.

Billy Grisdale, suddenly become useful, was gathering bits of wood for the cooking fire. Jack Grey, who, besides being a rising young attorney, had a flair for building things, was adding to the thatch of the dunnage shelter, and Annette was helping him. Ingerson was invisible, and so was Van Dyck. Miss Mehitabel, whose health may or may not have been all that it should be, was lying in her hammock, and Conetta, ever dutiful, was fanning her with a broad palmetto leaf. Among the workers it was Jerry Dupuyster who appeared in the most original role. In the nattiest of one-piece bathing suits--supplied, as I made no doubt, out of the luggage of one of the Van Tromp girls--he had swum the lagoon to the wreck of the *Mary Jane*, where he now appeared, a symphony in cerise stripes and bare legs, hacking manfully at the wreck with a hand-axe to the end that we might increase our scanty stock of firewood.

After the noon meal, at which Van Dyck appeared just as we were sitting down to it, Jerry and I were told off to go on sentry duty at the eastern end of the island, where we were to establish another distress signal.

"Us for the sentry-go, old chappie," said Jerry cheerfully, and together we took the beach trail for our post.

Reaching the eastern extremity of things after a walk of perhaps three-quarters of a mile along the beach, we presently had an improvised flag flying from a lopped tree, and after we had lighted a smoke smudge there was nothing more to do but to watch for the sail which I, for one, did not expect to see.

"Jolly rum old go, what?" said Jerry, casting himself full length upon the sand when our labors were ended. "Shouldn't mind it so much, don't y' know, if we didn't have the women along. Smoke?" and he handed me his tobacco bag.

"The women, and one or two others," I qualified, filling my pipe.

"Haw, yes: Hob Ingerson, for one. Actin' like a bally cad, Ingerson is. Needs to have some chappie give him a wallop or so, what?"

"Yes; and when it comes to the show-down, I rather hope I'll be the 'chappie'," I said.

"Not if I see him first," Jerry cut in, and this, indeed, was a new development.

"You're under weight, Jerry; you wouldn't make two bites for Ingerson if you should try to mix it with him."

"Eh, what?" exclaimed the transformed--or transforming--one, sitting up suddenly. "If he doesn't stop his dashed swearin' before the women, I'll take him on; believe me, I will, old dear."

"What makes you think you'd last out the first half of the first round with a big bully like Ingerson?" I asked, grinning at him.

"Number of little things, old top; this, for one," and he opened his shirt to show me something that looked like a ten-dollar gold piece suspended by a silken cord around his neck.

"And what might that be?" I inquired, mildly curious.

He pulled the string off over his head and handed me the gold disk. It proved to be a medal, struck by some gentlemen's boxing club of London, testifying to the facts that Mr. Gerald Dupuyster was a member in good standing, and that he had won the medal by reason of his being the top-notch in the club's series of light-weight matches.

"I never would have suspected it of you, Jerry," I commented, returning the medal. "In fact, I should have said you were the last person on earth to go in for the manly art of self-defense. What made you?"

"Oh, I say!--all the chappies with any red blood in 'em go in for it over there, y' know. Jolly good sport, too; what?"

"Here's to you, if you conclude to try it on with Ingerson," I laughed. "I'll be your towel-holder. But Ingerson isn't the only one we could do without on this right little tight little island of ours, Jerry."

"You're dashed right. There's Barclay, for another."

"Yes; and----"

"Say it, old dear. Don't I know that the old uncle is cuttin' up rusty? Grouching because he can't sit in an easy-chair and swig toddies no end! Makes me jolly well ashamed, he does."

Here was another astonishing revelation. From what I had seen on shipboard--from what we had all seen--there had been ample grounds for the supposition that Jerry was a mere pawn in any game his uncle might choose to play. But now there seemed to be quite a different Jerry lying just under the cracking crust of the conventions. The discovery took a bit of the bitterness out of my soul. If I couldn't have Conetta for myself, it was a distinct comfort to know that she wasn't going to draw a complete blank in the great lottery. Under all of Jerry's Anglomaniacal fripperies there was apparently a man.

At the refilling of his pipe this changed, or changing, Jerry spoke of my former immurement on the island, saying that Conetta had told him a bit about it, and asking if I wouldn't tell him a bit more. So once again I told the story of the ill-fated voyage of the *Mary Jane* and its near-tragic sequel for six poor castaways.

"Rummy old go, that," he commented, when the tale was told. "Dashed easy to see how a chap might lose out on all the little decencies when the belly-pinch takes hold. Are we likely to come a cropper into that ditch before some bally old tub turns up to take us off?"

"I'm hoping not," I said.

He was silent for a time, and when he spoke again it was to say: "We've eighteen mouths to fill, old dear; how long can we fill 'em out of the blooming tins; eh? what?"

I shook my head. "Van Dyck and I checked the provisions over this morning while we were storing them. We shall do well enough for two or three weeks; maybe longer, if we're careful not to waste any of the food."

At this my fellow watcher swore roundly in good, plain American.

"Saw Holly Barclay turn up his damned nose and pitch his ship's biscuits into the lagoon this morning," he explained. "Said something about their not bein' fit for a human being to eat, by Jove!"

"He'll sing another tune if we have to come down to cocoanuts and sea worms," I prophesied. Even this early in the game it was plainly evident that Barclay, the major, and Hobart Ingerson were going to be our sorest afflictions when the pinch should come.

In such fashion we wore out the afternoon, blinding our eyes, as I had many times blinded mine in other days, with fruitless searchings of the unresponsive waste of waters. At dusk we built up the signal fire to make it last as long as possible and returned to the camp at the other end of the island. When we came in sight of it, Mrs. Van Tromp and two of her girls were putting the supper for the eighteen of us on a clean tarpaulin spread upon the beach. Van Dyck met us just before we joined the others.

"Nothing?" he queried.

"Nothing," we answered.

And the evening and the morning were the first day.

IX

THE BULLY

THAT remark of Edith Van Tromp's, to the effect that the illusions would all be swept away, had its confirmation before we had tholed through the first week of our island captivity. Little by little the masks slipped aside, and some of the revealments of the true character hiding behind them--some of the revelations, but not all--were grimly illuminating.

Before the week's end I saw the major slyly slip the last box of the precious cigars under his coat when he thought no one was looking and go off to hide it in a shallow hole scooped in the dry sand of the beach edge at a safe distance from the camp. Later, I came upon him as he was burying a couple of bottles of the diminishing supply of liquor in the same place--and he lied to me and said he was digging for shell-fish.

Two or three days earlier than this, Holly Barclay had taken to his hammock bed in a fit of purely imaginary illness, exacting constant attendance and pampering in which he made a toiling slave of his pretty daughter. When the pampering began and continued with no sign of abatement in the querulous demands Barclay was making upon Madeleine, Van Dyck grew gloomy and snappish, and I knew that the day was only postponing itself when Bonteck would flame out at the sham invalid and tell him exactly and precisely what a selfish malingerer he was.

Still lower in the unmasking scale came Ingerson--the real Ingerson--who had lapsed into a sullen barbarian; unshaven, unbathed, and with the coarse warp and woof of him showing at every threadbare seam. What time he had free access to the liquor, he drank himself ugly at least once in every twenty-four hours; and when Mrs. Van Tromp finally shamed him out of his daylight attacks upon the liquor chest, he took to raiding it after the camp was asleep, keeping this up until one night when he found that the remainder of the bottled stuff had disappeared. After this he became a morose threat to everybody, and even Mrs. Van Tromp ignored his millions and turned a cold shoulder upon him.

Three nights after his unsuccessful effort to turn up another bottle of whiskey in the stores, the drink maniac tried it again, and this time Van Dyck awoke and caught him at it.

"Looking for something you haven't lost, Ingerson?" he said, speaking quietly to keep from disturbing the others.

Ingerson backed out of the palmetto-thatched store shelter and whirled upon Van Dyck with a face which, as the firelight showed it to me, was that of a devil denied.

"Where have you hid it?" he demanded hoarsely. "Tell me, or I'll wring your damned neck!"

Ván Dyck's smile was almost as devilish as Ingerson's teeth-baring snarl.

"You needn't make a racket and wake the camp," he said in the evenest of tones. "I did hide it, and it was partly to give you a decently fair chance. Come with me." And he got up and the pair of them disappeared among the palms.

Not trusting Ingerson any more than I would have trusted a snake, I rose silently and followed them into the shadows, coming in sight of them again as they entered a little open glade on the opposite side of the island. Ingerson had halted and was gesticulating angrily.

"I want to know here and now what you meant by that 'decent chance' break you made at me!" he was saying. "If you mean Madge Barclay, I can tell you right off the bat that you're a dead one!"

"We will leave Miss Barclay quite out of it, if you please," said Bonteck, still apparently as cool as Ingerson was hot. "You want liquor, and I've brought you here to give it to you."

"We'll settle that other little thing first," Ingerson broke in truculently. "You put up this winter cruise, that you've bungled and turned into a starvation picnic, with the notion that you were going to corner the market for yourself, I suppose. I'm here to tell you that you lose out. Barclay makes this deal without any brokers, and I hold an option on him."

"You will have to make that part of it a little plainer, I'm afraid," said Ván Dyck; and now there was a dangerous softness in his voice.

"You can have it straight, if you want it that way. Barclay's in a hole for money; he's always in a hole. I've agreed to pay him out, once for all, and he's accepted the bid."

"And the price?" queried Bonteck gently--very gently.

"You can ask Madge about that," was the surly rejoinder. And then: "Get a move: where have you hid that whiskey?"

"You shall have the whiskey presently, Ingerson; but first I'm going to give you something you've been needing a good bit worse for a long time. Put up your hands, if you know how!"

It was a very pretty fight, out there in the moonlit glade, with the camp far enough removed to make the privacy of it safe, and with no ring-side audience, so far as either of the combatants knew, to hiss or applaud. Ingerson was no coward, neither was he lacking in bull strength, nor in the skill to make fairly good use of it. Though he went in at the beginning with a handicap of blind rage, the first few passes steadied him and for a minute or so it looked as if Bonteck had taken on a full load.

But, as a very ordinary prophet might have foretold, Ingerson's late prolonged soak--for it was nothing less--presently got in its work. Twice Ván Dyck landed swinging body blows; and though neither of these would have winded a sober man, the second left Ingerson gasping and with his jaw hanging. I thought that settled it, and it did, practically, though the bully was still game. Handling himself as coolly as if he were giving a boxing lesson on a gymnasium floor, Ván Dyck landed again and again, and each blow was sent home with an impact that sounded like the kick of a mule.

Ingerson stood up to it as long as he could, and when his wind was gone he went into a clinch. Bonteck broke the clinch with a volley of short-arm jabs that was little less than murderous, and when he was hammered out of the clinch, Ingerson staggered and went down. I looked to see him stay down, but he didn't. After a moment of breath-catching he was up and at it again, and it took three more of the well-planted body blows to drive him into a second clinch. As before, he failed to pinion Ván Dyck's right arm, and I made sure he tried to set his teeth in Ván Dyck's shoulder.

At this, Bonteck shifted his short-arm jabs from the ribs and swung upon the unguarded jaw; whereupon Ingerson lost his grip and curled up on the ground like some huge worm that had been stepped on.

Ván Dyck stood over him, breathing hard.

"Have you had enough?" he demanded; and when the vanquished one made some sort of grunting acknowledgment, Bonteck brought water from the near-by spring in a folded leaf of a giant begonia and held it while Ingerson struggled to his knees and bathed the battered jaw.

"Now I'll get you your whiskey," said Ván Dyck shortly; and leaving Ingerson to dabble his hands in the cooling water, he went aside into the jungle, returning after a minute or so with a case-bottle. "Here you are," he said, giving the

bottle to the beaten bully; "take it and make a brute of yourself, if that's what you want to do." And then I had to hurry to be before Bonteck in the camp clearing; to be in my place beside the handful of night fire before he should return and catch me out of it. For I had no notion of marring the perfect joy of victory which I knew must be filling his soul.

After this there were other days merging slowly into weeks; days of back-slippings into deeper depths of the primitive, a retrogradation in which we all participated more or less; days in which we stolidly maintained the signal fires at either extremity of the island and wore out the dragging hours as best we could, scanning the horizon for the coming sail of rescue, though each succeeding day with less hope of seeing it, I think.

More and more markedly the conventions withdrew into a past which was daily growing to seem more like life in a former avatar than a reality once ours to possess. From merely slipping aside now and again, the masks were carelessly dropped and suffered to remain where they fell. Seen in the new perspective, there were many surprising changes, and not all of them were disappointing. For example: Mrs. Eager Van Tromp, in her normal state a good lady driven to distraction by her efforts to hold her footing on the social ladder and so to marry her daughters adequately, became, *en sequestre*, the good-natured, plain-spoken mother of us all, and a past mistress in the fine art of camp cooking--a specialty in which she was ably seconded by all three of her daughters, also, when she would permit it, by Mrs. Sanford, Annette Grey and Conetta.

Courageous fortitude best describes the change that had come over Madeleine Barclay. With her irritable father to placate and wait upon, and with Ingerson's attitude toward her coming to be that of blunt possessorship, she was by turns the patient nurse to the malingerer and the cheerful heartener of the rest of us. Never, in all those depressing days of hope deferred, did I hear her complain; and always she had a steadying word for the despairing ones: if a ship didn't come for us to-day, it would come to-morrow, and into the most dejected she could put new life--for the moment, at least.

In John Grey and Annette, and in the professor and his wife, the changes were the least marked. For the newly married couple nothing much seemed to matter so long as they had each other. Once or twice, indeed, I surprised Grey with a look in his eyes that told of the dread undercurrent that must have been underlying his every thought of the future and what it might hold for Annette, but that was all. And as for the older couple--well, perhaps they had attained to a higher and serener plane than any to which we younger ones could climb. Day in and day out, when he was not doing his apportioned share of the common camp tasks, the professor was immersed to the eyes in a study of the lush flora of the island, thumbing a little pocket Botany until its leaves were worn and frayed with much turning. And where he wandered, his wife wandered with him.

In Miss Mehitable, too, a transformation of a sort was wrought. For many days she held sourly aloof and had bitter words for Van Dyck, and black looks for me when by any chance I was able to deprive her for a time, long or short, of Conetta's caretaking and coddling. But with the lapse of time I fancied that even this crabbed lady was beginning to lose her sense of the mere money distinctions, and I was rash enough to say as much to Conetta on a day when I was so fortunate as to secure her for a companion in the signal-fire watch which Bonteck still made us maintain.

"You shouldn't say such things about poor Aunt Mehitable," was the reproof I got. "This is a very terrible experience for her--as it would be for any woman of her age--and she is really more than half sick."

"Don't mistake me," I made haste to say. "I meant it wholly in a congratulatory sense."

"She has changed," Conetta admitted, adding: "But dear me! we have all changed."

"All the world's queer, excepting thee and me, and sometimes even thee's a little queer," I quoted. "What changes have you remarked--particularly?"

"For one, Major Terwilliger is just a selfish, peevish old man, utterly impossible to live with," she said calmly.

"Amen to that. Yet, one of these days you will probably have to reckon with him as a member of your household. Go on."

She went on, paying no attention to what I had said about householding the major.

"The professor is a dear, just as you'd expect him to be, and so is Mrs. Professor. Annette is as brave as brave, and the way she is keeping up is only equaled by Jack's adorable care of her, which is at the bottom of his constant breezy assurances that each day will be the last of our Crusoeing."

"And Billy?" I prompted.

"Billy is a dear, too. He has changed less than any one, I think. Yesterday, at supper-time, he nearly broke my heart. Perhaps you remember that he got up and went away while we were eating, saying that he'd forgotten something. A

few minutes later I went back to the spring to get some fresh water for Aunt Mehitable and found him sharing his supper with Tige. He'd heard what Major Terwilliger had said about our wasting food on the dog when we'd probably need it ourselves. Wouldn't that make you weep?"

"The dog is much more worthy of his rations than the major is of what he consumes," I averred. "Tige is at least willing to do his best if anybody will show him how. Any more transmutations?"

"Lots of them. Possibly you've noticed that Mrs. Van Tromp no longer tries to shoo Billy away from Edie. That's a miracle in itself. Then there is Madeleine: I have always thought her rather--um--well, you know; rather stand-offish and maybe a bit self-centered. Dick, she is an angel! The way she devotes herself, body and soul, to that father of hers, and still finds time and the heart to chirk the rest of us up, is beyond all praise."

"You can't get a quarrel out of me on that score," I returned. "Madeleine is all that you say she is, and more. As for her father, I guess we can pass him up. Between us two, he is no more sick than I am. And I don't believe he has changed a particle; we are merely coming to know him better as he really is, and always has been."

"I have known him for a long time," Conetta said thoughtfully. Then she agreed with me: "We'll leave him out; he cancels himself on the minus side of the equation, as you used to say of certain people we knew in the old days at home."

I wasn't half sure enough of myself to be willing to have her drag in the old days, so I urged her to go on with her cataloguing of our fellow castaways, saying: "You haven't completed the list yet."

"There is one more to be omitted--Hobart Ingerson," she said soberly, with a shadow of deep disgust coming into her eyes.

"Will Madeleine omit him?" I asked quickly.

"If she doesn't--after what we've been compelled to see and feel and endure! Dick, it's dreadful; simply dreadful!"

"Yet she will marry him," I insisted--purely to hear what my companion would say to that.

"It is unbelievable. What possible motive could she have in doing such an unspeakable thing?"

"A few minutes ago you called her an angel; perhaps it will be the angelic motive. Her father needs money; needs a very considerable sum of money, and needs it badly. She knows of the need--though I think she doesn't know the immediate and exciting cause of it--and she also knows that Ingerson is willing to buy and pay."

"How perfectly horrible!" said my watchmate, with a shudder. And then: "What a pity it is that Madeleine's money was all swallowed up in that bank failure out West."

I smiled when she said that. Madeleine's fortune hadn't gone in any bank failure, neither out West nor back East. This was only another of Holly Barclay's plausible little fictions.

"You mean?--" I suggested.

"I mean that if she had money of her own she might buy her freedom. I imagine it is purely a financial matter with Mr. Holly Barclay. If she could only find some of the Spaniards' gold--find it for herself so that it would belong to her. . . . Wouldn't that be splendid!"

This was something entirely new to me, and I said: "What gold is this you are talking about?"

She looked around at me with wide-open eyes.

"Why--haven't you heard?" Then: "Oh, I remember; Bonteck was telling us the story last evening, while you and the professor were out at the other signal fire." And thereupon she repeated the old tale of the siege and wreck of the Spanish galleon in Queen Elizabeth's reign, with the tradition of the hidden treasure whose hiding place the survivors had refused to betray--paying for their refusal with their lives.

"Of course, that is only a sea yarn--one of the many that are told about those old days and the doings in them," was my comment. "You knew that while you were listening to it, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes; I supposed it wasn't true. I kept telling myself that Bonteck was only trying to start some new interest that would keep us from going stark mad over this wretched imprisonment, and the watching and waiting that never amounts to anything. It's serving a purpose, too. Most of the young ones are turning treasure hunters--going in couples. Jerry Dupuyster was trying to persuade Beatrice to slip away just as we left the camp. I heard him."

That small reference to Jerry and his disloyalty--which was becoming daily more and more apparent, and which I may have omitted to mention--moved me as one of the Yellowstone Park geysers is said to be moved by the dropping into it of a bar of soap.

"One of these fine days I'm going to beat Jerry Dupuyster until his best friend wouldn't recognize him," I said savagely.

Conetta laughed; the silvery little laugh that I was once besotted enough to believe that she kept especially for me.

"There goes your temper again. That is one thing that hasn't changed," she said. And then: "Poor Jerry! You'd have to have one hand tied behind you, wouldn't you?--just to be reasonably fair, you know."

There had been a time when I should have admitted that her gibe hit the mark, but that was before the transformed--or transforming--Jerry had been revealed to me.

"Nothing like that," I said. "He may not have confided it to you, but Jerry is a man of his hands. Hasn't he ever shown you the medal he won in England?"

She shook her head. "There are lots of things Jerry hasn't shown me--yet."

"Well, he has the medal, and it says he was the top-notch in his class in some London boxing club. I give him credit for that; but just the same, there have been times during the past few days when I've had a curious longing to see how near I could come to throwing him bodily across the lagoon."

Again she said, "Poor Jerry!" and had the calm assurance to ask me what he had done to incur my ill will.

"Done!" I exclaimed. "What hasn't he done? If he thinks he is going to be allowed to play fast and loose with you for a chit of a girl like Beatrice Van Tromp----"

Once more her silvery laugh interrupted.

"Beatrice will be twenty-three on her next birthday. She is quite well able to fight her own battles, Mr. Dickie Preble."

"Oh, confound it all; you know what I mean!" I fumed hotly. "He has asked you to marry him, hasn't he?"

"He has," she replied quite calmly.

"Well, isn't that enough?"

"Don't be silly," she said. "You must try to control that dreadful temper of yours. You're miles too touchy, Dickie, dear."

That remark was so true that I was constrained to wrench the talk aside from Jerry and the temperamental things by main strength.

"This treasure-hunting business," I said. "I'm wondering if that is what Bonteck has had on his mind? He has been acting like a man half out of his senses for the past few days. Surely you have noticed it?"

"Yes; and I've been setting it down as one of the most remarkable of the changes we have been talking about. You know how he was at first; he seemed to take everything as a matter of course, and was able to calm everybody's worries. But lately, as you say, he has been acting like a man with an unconfessed murder on his soul. I was so glad when he told us that galleon story last night. He was more like himself."

"He feels his responsibility, naturally," I suggested, "and it grows heavier the longer we are shut up here. While I think very few of us blame him personally for what has happened to us, he can't help feeling that if he hadn't planned the cruise and invited us, the thing wouldn't have happened at all."

"Of course; anybody would feel that way," she agreed, and after that she fell silent.

The weather on this day of our morning watch under the western palm-tree signal staff was much like that of all the other days; superlatively fine, and with the sun's warmth delightfully tempered by the steady fanning of the breeze which was tossing miniature breakers over the comb of the outer reef. Conetta's gaze was fixed upon the distant horizon, and when I looked around I saw that her eyes were slowly filling with tears.

We had been comrades as well as lovers in the old days; which was possibly why I took her hand and held it, and why she did not resent the new-old caress.

"Tell me about it," I urged. "You used to be able to lean upon me once, Conetta, dear."

"It's just the--the loneliness, Dick," she faltered, squeezing the tears back. "We've all been dropping the masks and showing what we really are; but there is one mask that we never drop--any of us. We laugh and joke, and tell one another that to-morrow, or the next day at the very farthest, will see the end of this jolly picnic on Pirates' Hope. But really, in the bottom of our hearts, we know that it may never end--only with our lives. Isn't that so?"

I did not dare tell her the bald truth; that it might, indeed, come to a life-and-death struggle with starvation before our slender chance of rescue should materialize.

"I don't allow myself to think of that," I said quickly--and it was a lie out of the whole cloth. "And you mustn't let your small anchor drag, either, Connie, girl."

"I know; but I can't help hearing--and seeing. This morning early, before most of them were up, I saw Billy and Jack Grey trying to make some fishing lines and hooks; they were jollyng each other about the fun they were going to have whipping the lagoon for a change of diet for us. And yesterday I happened to overhear the professor telling Bonteck that he had made a careful search of the island for the edible roots that grow wild in the tropics, and hadn't been able to find any. Naturally, I knew at once what these things meant. The provisions are running low."

I nodded. It didn't seem worth while to try to lie to her.

"How far has it spread?" I asked. "Mrs. Van Tromp has been trying to keep the scarcity in the background. Does any one else know?"

"I can't say. But I do know that Mrs. Van Tromp is anxious to hide it from her girls--and from Madeleine."

"Why from Madeleine in particular?"

Again Conetta let her honest eyes look fairly into mine.

"Because Bonteck will not have Madeleine told. He means to spare her to the very last, no matter how much she has to waste upon her father's finicky appetite. Only this morning, she had to throw his entire breakfast away--after he'd messed with it and spoiled it--and get him another one!"

This was growing serious; much more serious than I had suspected; and I made a mental resolve to get the men of our party together on a short-rations basis at once. We had been hideously reckless with our stores; no one could deny that.

"This smudge will smoke for an hour or so longer," I pointed out, rising and helping Conetta to her feet. "Suppose we take a walk around on the south beach and look over toward my old stamping ground in Venezuela."

She made no objection, and once we were in motion we kept on, since the southern horizon was just as likely to yield the hopeful sign for which we were straining our eyes as any other. I am morally certain that I had no hunch to prompt the change of view-point, and if my companion had, she didn't mention it. Nevertheless, when we had measured something less than half the length of the island, tramping side by side in sober silence over the white sands, the thing we had looked for in vain through so many weary hours appeared, and we both saw it at the same instant--the long, low smoke trail of a steamer blackening the line where sea and sky came together.

There was nothing to be done; absolutely nothing that we could do to attract the attention of those people who were just out of sight below the blurred horizon. For so long as we could distinguish the slowly vanishing harbinger of rescue we stood transfixed, hardly daring to breathe, hoping against hope that the steamer's course was laid toward us instead of away from us. But when the black of the smoke trail had faded to gray, and the gray became so faint that it was no longer separable from the slight haze of the sky-line, Conetta turned and clung to me, sobbing like a hurt and frightened child. It was too much, and I took her in my arms and comforted her, as I had once had the right to do.

And at that climaxing moment, out of the jungle thicketing behind us came Jerry Dupuyster and Beatrice Van Tromp. Beatrice was laughing openly, and on Jerry's face there was an inane smile that made me wish very heartily to kill him where he stood.

X

THE BONES OF THE "SANTA LUCIA."

CONETTA'S assertion, made in half-confidence to me, to the effect that Bonteck's attitude had changed, had ample

backgrounding in the fact, and the cause--at least, so it appeared to me--was a sharp and growing anxiety.

Time and again I had surprised him sweeping the horizon with the field-glass, which was the only thing he had taken from his cabin stateroom when Lequat had come for us; and while there was nothing especially remarkable about this, I remembered that he had heretofore been turning this duty carelessly over to the various watchers at the signal fires. To be sure, the diminishing supply of eatables was a sufficient cause for any amount of anxiety, but I could not help thinking that there was something even bigger than the prospective food shortage gnawing at him. And that conclusion was confirmed on the day after Conetta and I had seen the steamer smoke, when I came upon him sitting on the beach at the farthest extremity of the island, with his head in his hands--a picture of the deepest dejection.

But with all this, he was still unremitting in his efforts to keep us from stagnating and slipping into that pit of despair which always yawns for the shipwrecked castaway. His revival of the legendary tale of the old Spanish plate ship, with its sequel of the starving crew and the buried treasure, was one of the expedients; and though gold was the one thing for which our marooned ship's company had the least possible use, the story served an excellent purpose.

Treasure-trove became, as one might say, the stock joke of the moment. Even the Sanfords went strolling about the island, prodding with sticks in the soft sand and turning up the fallen leaves in the wood; and Grey proposed jocularly that we stake off the beach in the vicinity of the skeleton wreck of the old galleon and fall to digging systematically, each on his own mining claim.

It was while this treasure-hunting diversion was holding the center of the stage that a thing I had been anticipating came to pass. Van Dyck suddenly broke over the host-and-guest barriers and read the riot act to Holly Barclay. I happened to be within earshot at the cataclysmic moment--it was one of the rare moments when Madeleine wasn't dancing attendance upon the sham invalid--and what Van Dyck said to Barclay was quite enough, I thought, to kill any possible chance he might have had as a suitor, with a father who stood ready to purchase immunity from just punishment at the price of his daughter's happiness.

"You are acting like a spoiled child, Barclay; that is the plain English of it," was Bonteck's blunt charge. "You are not sick, and if you were, it would be no excuse for the way you are tying your daughter down. Hereafter there will be a new deal. Madeleine must have some time every day for exercise and recreation."

"She won't take it," retorted the malingerer.

"She will if you tell her to; and you are going to insist upon it."

"I won't be bullied by you, Bonteck Van Dyck! You haven't anything to say--after the way you've let us in for this hellish nightmare. What business is it of yours if Madge chooses to make things a little less unbearable for me?"

"I am making it my business, and what I say goes as it lies. You turn Madeleine loose for her bit of freedom mornings and evenings. If you don't, I shall tell her what I know about her cousin's fortune, and what you have done with it."

Barclay crumpled up like a man hit in the stomach by a soft-nosed bullet, and the faded pink in his cheeks turned to a sickly copper yellow.

"Don't!" he gasped. "For God's sake, don't do that, Van Dyck! She may go--I'll make her go. I--I'm a sick man, I tell you, and you're trying to kill me! Go away and let me alone!"

Van Dyck came out of the palm clump where Barclay's hammock was swung--and found me eavesdropping.

"That was a piker's trick--listening in on me, Dick," he remonstrated half-impatiently. But, after all, I think he was glad he had a witness to Barclay's promise.

As may be imagined, Madeleine got her freedom, or some measure of it, immediately. It was Alicia Van Tromp who told me that a miracle had been wrought.

"I think Mr. Holly Barclay must be near his end," she said, with fine scorn. "He is insisting that Madeleine go for a walk. Wouldn't that shock you?"

When Madeleine made her appearance, I looked to see Bonteck monopolize her, as he had earned the right to do; but what he did was to thrust me into the breach.

"You heard what I said to Holly Barclay and you know why I said it," was the way he put it up to me. "Madeleine hasn't been out of shouting distance of her father's hammock half a dozen times since the night we were marooned. Trot her all around the shop and make her think of something different. I'll square things for you with Conetta."

"You are about three years too late to square me with Conetta," I said sourly. "Have you anything else up your sleeve?"

"Several things; but I'm not going to show them to you just now. Be a good sport and help me out. I'd do as much for you, any day; in fact, I've done a good bit more as it is, if you only knew it. Here she comes; don't let Ingerson get in ahead of you. Take her around the south beach and come back the other way. Jump for it, you crabbed old woman-hater! It isn't every day in the week that you have such a privilege jammed down your throat."

It was no very difficult task--the capturing of Madeleine. She fell in promptly and amiably with my suggestion that we go on an exploring tramp around the beach line of the island, and I took her the roundabout way, as Bonteck had directed, to make her release last as long as possible.

I don't recall what we talked about at first, only I know that it was all perfectly innocuous. We had common ground enough--the people we both knew at home, a summer fortnight on the North Shore when she was a debutante and we were fellow guests in the same house group, a winter tour in California when we had both chanced to be members of the same party. But inevitably, and in spite of all I could do to turn it aside, the talk eventually drifted around to the present with its more than dubious possibilities.

"Conetta tells me that you were once ship-wrecked on this same bit of coral, Dick," was the way she switched from the North Shore house party to Pirates' Hope. "Doesn't it seem a most remarkable coincidence that you should have the misfortune to have to repeat that experience?"

"Compared with the other experience, this is a vacation pleasure camp," I said, trying to keep the serious aspect of things in the background. "We came ashore in a hurricane, the six of us who were not drowned, and had to live on cocoanuts and raw fish. We hadn't even the makings of a fire."

"How dreadful it must have been!" she exclaimed. "I should think that the memory of that terrible time would color every minute of the day for you now, with all the reminders there must be."

"Not a bit of it," I denied cheerfully. "The mill doesn't grind with the water that has passed,' you know. And, besides, the *Mary Jane's* survivors were taken off in due time--which we may take as an earnest that we shall be picked up, sooner or later."

We had reached the extreme eastern point of the islet by this time, and she stopped and faced me.

"Are you really believing that, Dick?" she asked, with a little trembling of the pretty lips that she could not wholly control, though a blind man might have seen that she was trying to, hard enough.

"Of course I am."

"I'm afraid you wouldn't admit it to me if you weren't. You see, I can't forget that those others stayed here and starved--long ago, you know--the crew of the *Santa Lucia*."

"You have been listening to Bonteck's ghost stories," I jested. "You mustn't take them for matters of fact."

"But there *is* a wreck," she insisted; "I mean besides the one on the reef opposite our camp."

"Oh, yes; there is a bare suggestion of an older wreck," I said. "We'll go and have a look at it, if you like. It's on the north beach, and we can go back that way. Would you care to see it?"

She nodded, and we strolled on in sober silence for another half-mile. I was afraid I was not making much of a success of the job of keeping her spirits up, and was beginning to wish very heartily that I had made Bonteck do his own jollying. Just why she should be looking upon the blue side of things at last, after she had been the one to do most of the cheering in the past, I couldn't imagine at first, but a bit later the solution--or a possible solution--came to me. Perhaps the invalid, knowing that he was going to lose some of his hold upon her through Van Dyck's insistence upon more freedom for her, had been pressing the Ingerson claim still harder.

The wreck of the galleon--if, indeed, the few bits of barnacled timber and rusting ironwork could, by any stretch of imagination, be dated back to a period so remote as that of the conquest of Peru--was in the bight of a little bay, well sheltered by the tallest of the palms, which effectually screened it from our camp end of the island. It wanted possibly half an hour of sunset when we came upon the few dumb relics, and the shadows of the palms were making weird traceries upon the white sand of the beach.

Assuming that the largest of the charred and blackened "bones" was the stem of the ancient wreck, it was to be inferred that the ship had entered the lagoon bay through the seaward opening in the outer reef, had been beached

bows on, and had so lain and burned, or rotted. Assuming, again, that the vessel had really been one of the old, high-bowed galleons, it was apparent that the beaching had been done with considerable force; a drive so hard that the bowsprit of the ship must have been thrust like a huge pointing finger into the jungle thicketing, which, at this point, ran well down to the edge of the lagoon.

It was Van Dyck who made this hypothetical platting of the beaching of the vessel for us; Bonteck himself, who had slipped ghost-like out of the palm shadows to join us while we were trying to trace the skeleton outline of the ship's timbering in the obliterating sands.

"I've been all over this ground before," he explained, and for once in a way he seemed to have thrown off the burden, whatever it was, that had been weighing him down. "More than that, I've waded around here when the tide was out and made good on some of the guesses."

"Are you counting upon finding the lost treasure?" I joked; and he took me up promptly.

"Why not? Stranger things than that have happened, haven't they?"

"You don't really believe that part of the story, do you, Bonteck?" said Madeleine, with an amused smile.

"All or none," he answered cheerfully. "And, again, I say, why not? Don't you want to take a few shares in the Great Galleon Treasure Company, Unlimited?"

I thought it a happy circumstance that she could meet him playfully in the open field of badinage.

"Of course I do," she returned. "If I had a spade, I'd dig somewhere. Only I shouldn't know where to dig."

"Suppose we figure out the probabilities," Bonteck suggested, and if his enthusiasm wasn't real, it was an exceedingly good imitation. "The first requirement, of course, is to take the old story at its face value. Just imagine Sir Francis Drake's *Pasha*, or it might have been the *Swan*, out yonder on the other side of the reef, pouring hot shot into the poor, old, stranded *Santa Lucia* here on the beach. The Spaniards would take the treasure out over the bows, because that would be the only sheltered place, don't you see? Does that suggest anything?"

I think I have already said that Miss Barclay's gift, or rather one of them, was an acutely responsive mentality; or if I haven't, I meant to. She was standing with Van Dyck upon the exact spot the Spaniards--real or mythical--must have stood to be out of cannon-shot reach in unloading the treasure. Without a moment's hesitation she took up the thread of Bonteck's imaginings.

"If they started from here they would run for the nearest woods, wouldn't they?--keeping their ship between them and the English cannons. That is what I should have done." And then, purely in a spirit of keeping up the fiction, I am sure: "Let us follow them and see where they went."

Bonteck agreed at once. "Come on," he said; and the three of us set out to cross the island in a diagonal line, looking back from time to time to keep the fancied direction of the Spaniards retreating from their burning ship.

It was in a little open space in the midst of a palm and palmetto thicket that we paused.

"This is the place," Madeleine announced calmly. "Meaning to hide our treasure chest, we wouldn't go all the way across to the other beach. We'd hurry and scrape away the leaves and things here in the thickest part of the woods, and dig a hole, and----"

"Well?" said Bonteck, with what seemed a certain breathless eagerness; "Go on and pick out your place. We'll dig for you--Preble and I."

"You haven't anything to dig with," she laughed, and then the laugh died, and I saw her eyes widen and her lip begin to tremble. But in an instant she was laughing again.

"I believe I had almost hypnotized myself," she confessed, with a little grimace of self-consciousness. "Do you see that white stone over there under the vines? The thought came to me like a flash, '*That stone was put there to mark the spot!*' You have been making it all too uncannily real, Bonteck."

Van Dyck crossed the little open space and pulled away a mass of trailing vines so that we could examine the stone. It was a fragment of white coral the size, and approximately the shape, of a ship's capstan.

"It's a bit odd, anyway," Bonteck commented, still apparently in the grip of the curious eagerness. "There are no loose stones anywhere else on the island, so far as I know, excepting the small pieces we used in building our camp fireplace. You'd say this is a chunk of the outer reef, wouldn't you, Dick?"

"Why--yes, possibly," I answered. "But in that case it must have been quarried and carried ashore in some way, and----"

Bonteck straightened up and turned quickly to Madeleine.

"Suppose we try to be serious for a minute or so, if we can," he offered, with what appeared to me to be forced soberness. "There is about one chance in a hundred million that there really was a buried treasure. That hundred millionth chance is yours, Madeleine. Neither Dick nor I would have noticed this piece of coral hidden under the vines if you hadn't pointed it out. Shall we turn it over for you?"

"I should never forgive you if you didn't," she laughed back.

"All right. But it must be distinctly understood that if there should happen to be a gold mine under it, the treasure is all yours. Do you agree to that?"

"Of course it will be mine," she answered in cheerful mockery. "I'll take Dick, here, for my witness. He will testify that it was I who first saw the stone--won't you, Dick? But we must make haste. It is growing dark, and I must go back to father."

We heaved at the coral boulder, Bonteck and I, and rolled it aside out of its bed in the soft, sandy soil. I was about to say that we couldn't dig very far with only our bare hands for tools, when Bonteck produced a huge clasp-knife of the kind that sailors carry.

"Where shall we dig--right where the stone lay?" he asked, with a queer grin.

"Right exactly where the stone lay," said the young woman, charmingly precise and mandatory.

We went down on our knees and fell to work as soberly as if the entire thing were not a poor flimsy bit of comedy designed to push the growing anxieties and fear tremblings a trifle farther into the background. Bonteck loosened the friable soil with the blade of his big knife, and I scooped it out, dog-fashion, with my hands. In a few minutes we had a hole knee-deep, and as we went on enlarging it, I saw, or thought I saw, a strange transformation taking place in Van Dyck. The playful manner had fallen away from him like a cast-off garment. His jaw was set and he was breathing hard. And when he took his turns in the little pit he dug like a madman.

It was not until after we had dug down to the pure white sand of the subsoil that he gave over and turned to Madeleine with a look in his eyes that mirrored, or seemed to mirror, a shock of half-paralyzing astoundment. I had never suspected him of having any histrionic ability, but if he were not really shocked, he was certainly giving a faultless rendering of a man completely dazed.

"It's--it's gone!" he exclaimed mechanically. "You've been robbed, Madeleine; it was yours--all yours, by the right of discovery--and--and it's gone!"

"What sheer nonsense!" she retorted lightly. "You are the one who is hypnotized now, Bonteck." And then, carrying out the little comedy to its proper curtain: "Of course, it is very singular that we shouldn't find the hidden treasure; singular, and dreadfully disappointing--after one has worked one's imagination up to the point of believing anything and everything. But we've had our laugh out of it, and that is worth while, isn't it? Now we must really be getting back to the others. It will be dark before long, and we mustn't keep Mrs. Van Tromp's dinner waiting."

Van Dyck was standing at the edge of the hole, still figuring as one helplessly dumfounded--and I wondered why he persisted in throwing himself so extravagantly into the part-playing. While Madeleine was speaking, I stooped to pass some of the sand of the pit bottom through my fingers. It was almost as fine as flour, and quite as white, but upon closer inspection I saw that it was flecked in spots with bits of black humus--humus like that formed by well-rotted wood.

"Hold on a minute," I said, seized suddenly with a notion that was to the full as absurd as that which had led us to follow the imagined trail of the Spaniards retreating from their burning ship; and catching up Van Dyck's dropped clasp-knife I stepped into the shallow hole we had dug.

There is no twilight to speak of in the tropics, and the sunset glow was fading rapidly, but there was still light enough to show the place in the pit bottom where the bits of black humus were thickest. At sight of them I became, in my turn, a foolish madman, postulating a frantic gopher with a time limit set in which he may hope to outdig the scratching dogs in his burrow. But there was at least a saving grain of method in my madness. Every fresh stab of the knife brought up more of the rotted wood, and presently the blade struck something hard and unyielding.

"Hold your breath, you two," I gasped, and groping hastily in the loosened sand with my hands I found the hard

thing that the knife blade had struck; found and unearthed it and straightened up to lay it at Madeleine's feet.

It was a rudely cast ingot of dull-colored metal, and its weight, in proportion to its size, was sufficient proof of its quality. It was unmistakably a billet of gold.

XI

FINDERS KEEPERS

FOR the next few minutes after the discovery of the bar of gold I think no one of the three of us was wholly sane. Van Dyck and I fell over each other in our eagerness to find out if there were more of them, and as we dug deep in the treasure grave Madeleine knelt at the edge of it and was to the full as daft as either of us.

Digging and groping by turns, we flung out bar after bar of the precious metal until there was a heap of forty of them piled up in the little glade. Forty was the exact number. When it was complete we found that we had penetrated to the under-layer of humus which told us that we had come to the rotted bottom of the chest in which the treasure had been buried.

I think Madeleine was the first to break the spell of breathless silence that had fallen upon us while we were digging and dog-scratching in the soft sand.

"It can't be true! I can't believe it!" she said, over and over again. "We are dreaming; we *must* be dreaming--all of us!"

Bonteck had hoisted himself out of the pit and was poising one of the gold bars in his hands.

"It is a gloriously substantial dream, Madeleine, dear," he said gravely, ignoring me as if I were deaf and dumb and blind, or altogether of no account. "For a rough guess, I should say that these bars will weigh thirty-five or forty pounds apiece, if not more--say a quarter of a million, in round numbers, for the lot. It isn't a fortune, dear, but it will serve to--to buy you----"

She broke in with a frantic little cry of protest.

"But it isn't mine, Bonteck! It's--it's----"

It was at this crisis that Van Dyck deigned to take notice of me as being present and able to answer to my name.

"She says it isn't hers, Preble. Tell her; make her understand."

"It is most unquestionably yours, Madeleine," I assured her. "You will remember that Bonteck told you there was one chance in a hundred million. That chance has won out, and it has fallen to you, incredible as it may seem. By all the laws of the treasure seekers, the find is yours."

"But it must have belonged to some one, at some time!" she objected, honest to the core.

I nodded. "It really belonged to the poor Peruvians from whom the Spaniards looted it. We are three or four centuries too late to restore it to the unfortunate Incas. I'm afraid you'll have to take it and keep it for your own."

"Of course she will keep it!" Bonteck thrust in. "The only question is, what shall be done with it now?"

At this we held a hurried consultation over the disposition of the discovery, with Madeleine insisting that we two ought at least to share the miraculous treasure with her.

"Dick hates money, and I have too much of it, as it is," was the manner in which Bonteck disposed of the sharing suggestion; and then we decided hastily upon two reasonable immediacies; we would rebury the gold, replace the coral boulder, and leave things as nearly as might be as we had found them. And for the second reasonable conclusion it was agreed that we should say nothing to any of the other castaways at present. It could do no good to tell them; and, as Bonteck sagely argued, it might do a good bit of harm by stirring up things at a time when we all needed to sit tight in the boat.

We were working by starlight by the time we got the hole filled up and the chunk of coral rolled back into place, and we could hardly see well enough to be certain that we had removed all traces of our late activities. Hoping that we had, and promising ourselves that we would return in daylight to make sure, we set out upon the shortest way back to the

camp, which was along the north beach.

Madeleine hadn't said anything more about the ownership of the treasure while we were reinterring it, but now she began again.

"I hope you're not sweeping me off my feet--you two," she said. "I still can't make myself believe that I have any better right to that gold than you have--or as much."

"Of course you have," Bonteck insisted. "Didn't you point out the stone to us, I'd like to know?"

"But I should never have been there to point it out if you hadn't shown the way," she asserted.

"We needn't split hairs over that part of it," I put in. "And your argument doesn't hold, at that. It was your suggestion that we follow the trail, or the imaginary trail, from the old wreck to the--also imaginary--place where the Spaniards would be likely to hide their gold. Don't you remember?"

"Oh," she laughed; "if I'm to be held accountable for every silly thing I say----"

Once more Bonteck went over the equities patiently and painstakingly. We, he and I, were only bystanders. In no possible viewing of the circumstances could either of us lay claim to any essential part in the miraculous discovery. Waxing eloquently argumentative, he made the establishment of her right and title to the gold fill up the entire time of our return, and if he didn't succeed in fully convincing her, he was at least able to talk her down and silence her.

At the camp under the palms at the western extremity of our kingdom we found wild excitement in the saddle, and our delayed return passed unremarked. Just at sunset, Billy Grisdale and Edith Van Tromp, who had been on watch at the western signal fire, had seen the smoke of a steamer. They had lost the hopeful sight in the gathering dusk, and had raced in to spread the good news; racing back again almost immediately, with a snatched supper in their hands, to build the signal fire higher.

With this announcement to upset monotonous routine, the meal, which, for the sake of preserving the most foolish of the civilized conventions, we were still calling "dinner," was late, and it was eaten by the more sanguine as the children of Israel ate their first Passover, in haste and with staff in hand. Both Billy and Edith had been hopefully positive that the ship they had seen was headed toward the island, and the bare prospect of an early rescue was enough to key excitement to the unnerving pitch.

But as time passed and nothing happened, the inevitable reaction set in, and I think we all sank deeper into the pit of depression for the sudden awakening of hope. While Annette and Alicia and Beatrice Van Tromp were clearing away the remains of the belated meal, Grey drew me aside.

"You've kept your head better than any of us, Preble," he began, "and there is a thing that ought to be threshed out before it gets any older. They are saying now that Bonteck is either crazy in his head, or else he is the greatest villain unhung."

"Who is saying it?" I demanded.

"I don't know where it started, but with Ingerson and the major and Barclay to reckon with, it wouldn't be very hard to trace it back to its source. The charge is that Van Dyck has been robbing the commissary--spiriting the provisions away a little at a time and hiding them out."

I knew that this was true, so far as the liquors were concerned, but I kept my mouth shut about that.

"What motive is assigned?" I asked.

"It is only hinted at, but the hint is gruesome enough, the Lord knows. They say we are coming to the end; to a time when there will be nothing left but a survival of the strongest. And they say, also, that if Bonteck isn't a bit off his head, he is cold-bloodedly fixing things so that he will be able to outlive the remainder of us."

I thrust an arm through Grey's and led him off up the beach in the direction of the bay of the Spaniards.

"You're not trying to tell me that you believe any such hideous rot as that, are you?" I exploded, after we had left the camp well to the rear.

"God knows, I don't want to believe it, Preble; I pointedly don't believe the villainy charge. But the other hint--that Bonteck may be losing his grip on himself: we've all noticed it; you must have noticed it. And it is scaring the women no end. It is bad enough to have Ingerson around, licking his lips and wolfing every drop of liquor he can get his hands on; to have Barclay whining, and Miss Gilmore showing her claws, and the major grabbing for a little more than

his share when he thinks nobody is looking. I have been trying hard to keep Annette from seeing and hearing. She has a perfectly childish horror of crazy people, Preble, and I--and we----" he broke down and choked over the thing that he was afraid to say, and I tightened my grip on his arm.

"Brace up!" I broke out harshly. "We don't have to say die until we're dead! You've got to brace up for Annette's sake. If she sees you crumbling it'll be all up with her--you know that much. Past that, you kill off this idiotic blether about Van Dyck every time you hear it. It's rot--the wildest tommyrot! Bonteck has his load to carry, and it's a good bit heavier than yours--or than mine, for that matter. He isn't losing his mind, and he hasn't been raiding the commissary. Say those two things over to yourself and to Annette until they sound real to you!"

Grey pulled his arm free, and I could fancy him swallowing hard once or twice.

"I want to be a man, in--in your sense of the word, Preble," he blurted out. "I used to be, I think, before--before Annette came and snuggled down into the empty place in my heart and made me see that it was up to me to carry the full cup of her sweet life without spilling a drop of it. But now--now when I look into her eyes and see the awful thing lying at the back of them--the thing that she's trying every minute of the day to keep me from seeing----"

He got this far before he choked up again, and now I couldn't be savage with him--which was what he was most needing.

"I know," I said, with a far keener sympathy than he suspected, for I, too, was seeing things in a pair of slate-blue eyes--eyes that were braver than Annette Grey's. "But we mustn't let down, John; we can't let down, you and I. When the pinches come, it's the man's privilege to buck up and carry the double load. That is one of the things we were made for." Then I tried to turn him aside from the most intimate of the threatenings. "About this smoke trail that the children saw: could they really tell which way it was heading?"

He shook his head.

"I am afraid not. They didn't see the ship; only the smoke. It was just at dusk, you know, and they wouldn't have seen anything at all but for the sunset glow in the west. It was quite dark when they came running back to the camp, and they were both so excited they couldn't talk straight."

"But they did see a smoke?"

"I don't know. No doubt they thought they did. But we've all been straining our eyes and stirring up the little hope blazes until I think none of us can be really certain of anything any more. I guess there wasn't any ship."

"We needn't be too sure of that," I qualified. "There was a ship of some sort on the southern offing no longer ago than last Friday." And I told him what Conetta and I had seen.

"And you never told us!" he said reproachfully.

"It was only a disappointment, as it turned out, and sharing disappointments doesn't make them any lighter. But you may tell Annette, if you think it will help."

"It will help; I'll go back to camp and do it now. Are you coming along?"

At first I thought I would. Then the remembrance of what Grey had told me--about Van Dyck's newest trouble--came to oppress me, asking for solitude and some better chance of clarifying itself.

"I think I'll stay here and smoke a pipe," I said; and so we parted.

The pipe smoking had progressed no farther than the lighting of the match when I saw some one coming along the beach. I thought it was Grey returning to say something that he had forgotten to say, but when Billy Grisdale's dog came to sniff in friendly fashion at me, I knew that the approaching figure must be Billy.

"Jack Grey told me where I'd be likely to find you," said the infant, coming up to cast himself down upon the sand at my side. "Don't happen to have another pinch of tobacco in your inside pocket, do you?"

I had, and when his need was supplied he rolled a cigarette in a bit of brown paper saved from some of the provision wrappings and lighted it at the glowing dottle of my pipe.

"Tough old world, isn't it?" he mourned, stretching himself out luxuriously with his hands locked under his head. "Edie and I thought we were sittin' on top of it when we saw that smoke trail just after sunset, but it was only a false alarm."

"You are sure you saw a smoke?"

"Oh, yes; there was no doubt about that. We could see it as long as we could see anything. But I guess we just joshed ourselves into thinking that it was coming our way." He sat up to nurse his knees and was silent for a little time. When he began again it was to say: "You know these seas better than any of us; is there any chance at all that we'll ever be taken off? . . . Lie down, Tige, old boy, and take it easy. There's nothing to bite in these diggings--more's the pity."

I answered Billy's question cheerfully as a duty incumbent upon me, and I fancied he took the forced optimism for exactly what it was worth. While I was expatiating upon the law of lucky chances, the bull pup was refusing to lie down and take it easy; he was standing stiffly with his crooked forelegs braced and his cropped ears cocked as if at the approach of an enemy.

"What is the matter with the dog, Billy?" I asked, and as I spoke, we both thought we saw the answer in the lagoon at our feet. A triangular black fin split the mirror-like surface for a brief instant, and a twist of some huge under-sea body turned the darkling water into lambent phosphorescent flames. It was not the first shark we had seen, but they seldom penetrated this far into the lagoon.

"Ah!" said Billy, stroking down the rising hackles on the dog's back, "there's a quick way out of it for you, little doggie, when the clock strikes thirteen. One jump, and you'll never know what hurt you. You won't jump, eh? You're foolish, in your brain, old boy. It'll be much easier than starving to death."

"Still in the doldrums, Billy?" I asked.

"Who wouldn't be? But I didn't chase out here to swap glooms with you, Uncle Dick. I wanted to ask you if you believe in this wild tale of the Spaniards' buried treasure."

"I'll believe anything that will help to pass the time," I replied evasively.

"Huh!" he said; "that is what you might call the retort meaningless. Supposing there *was* a treasure, and supposing you should stumble across it: would it be yours?"

"Why not?"

"I didn't know. I was just asking for information. You wouldn't feel obliged to chop it up into eighteen separate pieces and pass it around--like a watermelon at a picnic?"

"Why should I?"

"Oh, just on general principles, I thought maybe; all for one and one for all, and that sort."

With the miraculous discovery of the day--and Madeleine's rights--fresh in mind, it seemed a moment in which to tread carefully.

"Finders are keepers, the world over, Billy," I said. "I am a poor man, and I should probably hog the treasure if I should find it."

"That's better," he returned. "We're all growing so desperately inhuman that a fellow can't tell where to draw the line any more. If I find the Spaniards' gold, you needn't expect me to whack up with you. I'm going to put my feet in the trough and keep 'em there. Come on, old doggie; let's go and hunt us a hole to burrow in. There's another day coming, or if there isn't, we shan't have anything more to worry about."

He got up to go back to the camp, whistling to the dog as he moved off. For the second time the bull pup braced himself, showing his teeth and growling a bit, and this time there was no disturbance in the lagoon to account for it. But Billy whistled again and the dog started to follow his master, looking back from time to time, as if he went reluctantly; and once more I wondered what he saw or heard or smelled.

As it fell out, the answer to this wondering query did not keep me waiting. Billy Grisdale's shadowy figure had barely disappeared in the down-shore distance when another and much more substantial one broke out of the jungle just behind me, and I got upon my feet to find Ingerson confronting me.

"What's all this talk about things being buried?" he demanded morosely.

"Listening, were you?" said I, taking small pains to keep the contempt out of my voice.

He threw himself down on the sand and sat with his arms resting on his knees and his hands locked together.

"I'm in hell, Preble," he muttered. Then he unclasped his hands and held one of them up. "Look at that."

Dark as it was I could see the upheld hand shaking like a leaf in the wind.

"What is the matter with you?" I asked.

"You know well enough; I'm over the edge. Van Dyck's killing me by inches. He wants to kill me."

"Liquor, you mean?"

His answer was a groan. "I haven't had one good drink in three days--not enough to make one good drink. It's got me, Preble. I didn't know. I've always had it when I wanted it. If you've got a heart in you, you'll show me where he's hiding the stuff. I'll go mad if you don't."

I wanted to tell him that it would be small loss to the rest of us if he should, but I didn't. As a person who is strictly the architect of his own misery, a drink maniac may command little commiseration, but his sufferings are none the less real, for all that. Sitting there on the sands, with the fires of the drunkard's Gehenna burning inside of him, Ingerson was a pitiable object. Still, remembering some of the brutal things that had been charged up to his account, and not less the cold-blooded bargain he was seeking to drive with Holly Barclay, I didn't waste much sympathy upon him.

"It is a good time in which to show that you are a human being, and not a beast, Ingerson," I said. "Thus far, you've been merely a clog on the wheels, and the day is coming, if, indeed, it isn't already here, when those of us who are men will have to remember that there are nine helpless women on this island whose wants must be supplied before ours are."

He looked up at me. "You mean that the food's going--or gone?"

"Yes."

He was silent for a moment, and then he laughed. It was the cracked laugh of a man on the brink.

"Eighteen mouths to fill, and nothing to fill 'em with. You've said it, Preble; I'm nothing but a dead weight in the boat--a bump on a log. I'll remove one of the hungry mouths," and before I had the slightest idea of what he meant, he sprang up and hurled himself into the lagoon.

Thinking that the plunge was only the mad impulse of a half-crazed drunkard denied, and hoping that a salt-water soaking would bring him to his senses, I made no move at first. But when I saw him deliberately wade out over his depth and strike out with strong swimming strokes for the reef over which the ground swell was breaking, I remembered the black fin Grisdale and I had seen and shouted a warning.

"Come back here, you fool!" I called. "There's a man-eater in there! Come back, I say!"

I don't suppose he heard me; if he did, he paid no attention. I confess, with decent shame, that I hesitated when it became evident that he meant to carry out his threat of effacing himself. His life was of little benefit, to himself or to others, and if he lived, it would only be to add the care of a madman to our other calamities. I have been glad a thousand times since that this was merely a passing thought. The real motivating impulse came from the sight of a V-shaped ripple racing diagonally across the lagoon to intercept the swimmer; a ripple plainly discernible on the starlit surface of the reef-bound inlet. It was the shark again.

What happened after that will remain a nightmare to me as long as memory serves. I was stripping my coat and kicking off my shoes when Van Dyck came bursting out of the wood behind me.

"Who is that out there?" he gasped.

"Ingerson--he's gone off his head!"

Without another word Van Dyck ran down to the shore and took the water in a clean dive. When he came up he was within arm's reach of the dipsomaniac. There was a fierce grapple and both men went under. My heart was in my mouth. I made sure the shark had taken one or the other of them. But the end was not yet. As I waded out armpit deep, splashing and making all the noise I could in the hope of scaring the great fish, two heads bobbed up a few yards away, and I saw that Bonteck had either choked or drowned the would-be suicide into submission and was swimming in with him.

A few quick strokes gave me my chance to help, and together we dragged Ingerson ashore. He was half-drowned and was otherwise little more than a bedraggled wreck of a man. While we were working over him, Van Dyck explained--briefly. Edith Van Tromp had told him that she had seen Ingerson creeping into the wood on all fours, with a knife in his hand, and he--Bonteck--had followed. All day he had been suspecting that Ingerson was on the edge of delirium.

"You'll have to give him some of the hair of the dog that bit him, or we'll have a frantic maniac in our midst," I said. "Is there any liquor left?"

"A little. Stay with him and I'll go and get it."

He was gone only a few minutes, and by the time he came back, Ingerson was able to sit up. We fed him brandy in small doses, and as the fiery stuff got in its work some degree of sanity returned. Apparently he knew quite well what he had tried to do, and was surlily regretful that the attempt had failed.

"You made a bonehead play, Van Dyck," he shivered. "I was trying to do a decent thing to wind up with, and you blocked it. You'd better have let me alone."

Van Dyck did not reply, and the drink maniac went on monotonously:

"I wanted to wind it up. Old John B.'s got me. I didn't believe it, but the last three days have shown me where I was heading in. As long as you can keep me half lit up . . . but you can't do that forever."

"No," said Bonteck gravely; "this is the last bottle."

Ingerson's head had fallen forward upon his breast.

"One more--little nip, and then--perhaps--I--can--go--to--sleep," he mumbled; and at this we gave him the sleeping potion and in another half-minute he was dead to the world.

Hard-hearted as it may seem, we made short work of disposing of him. We were a long quarter of a mile from the camp, and, short of carrying him, there was no way to get him there. So we merely dragged his limp and sodden bulk up to a little open space under the trees and left it.

"I'm beginning to think he was more than half right about the bonehead play," said Van Dyck sourly as he carefully hid the last of the brandy bottles. "It is only a question of a little time--and his swigging of the last thimbleful of the stuff--when we'll have to hog-tie him in self-defense. Let's do a sentry-go around to the far end of things. We may as well dry out tramping as any other way."

And it was not until he said this that I realized that we, too, were as sodden as the limp figure we had hauled up under the palms.

XII

BONTECK UNLOADS

WALKING briskly to give our soaked clothes a chance to drip and dry out a bit, Van Dyck and I passed around the bay of the ancient wreck and in due course of time came to the heel of the sandspit in which the island terminated eastward. Here we found our signal rag hanging motionless on its tree mast, but the fire at the foot of the tree had gone out, and as our matches were wet we could not rekindle it.

I proposed going back to camp for more matches, but Bonteck said no, that it was hardly worth while and, pointing to a hazy gray mist bank in the east which was slowly rising to blot out the stars in that quarter of the heavens, he added: "That cloud means weather; most likely the kind that would put the fire out if we should make one. If you're not too chilly, sit down and put your back to a tree. There's a thing that needs to be hammered out between us, Dick, before we get any farther along."

I found a place where the sand was dry and warm, and sat down, and he squatted beside me. I wanted to smoke, and was absent-minded enough to fill my pipe with damp tobacco before I remembered that there were no matches. As to the chilliness, even the wet clothes merely gave the effect of a steam bath. Within the half-hour the night had grown oppressively hot and the dead air was like that of an oven.

"Go ahead with your hammering," I said, adding: "There are several little matters that need explaining--from my point of view."

"It's coming to you--and to the others," he returned promptly. "I've been standing it off from day to day, hoping that the explanations might be made after the fact, instead of in the thick of it. But I've about reached the end of my rope. Mrs. Van Tromp told me after dinner this evening that she could serve possibly half a dozen more meals for the

eighteen of us."

"Six meals; two days. We should have gone on reduced rations long ago. We've been wasting like drunken sailors."

"I know it. But I kept putting that off, too. Hoping against hope, I guess you'd call it. You know what a scare it would have thrown into everybody if the food scarcity had been made public."

"Quite so. But the scare will have to come now, and the suddenness of it won't make it any lighter."

"That is one of the things that is grinding me, but only one. I've been carrying a pretty heavy back-load, Dick, and the time has come when I've got to shift some of it--if I'm to keep from going the way Ingerson did a little while ago. But first, a word about that treasure find we made a few hours back; you'll stand by me in that, won't you?"

"In the matter of convincing Madeleine of the justice of taking the treasure for her own? Certainly."

"Thanks. I thought I could count upon your help there. It is a godsend to her, Dick. Don't you see that it is?"

"I see that it will enable her to pay her father out of his theft debt, and by that means to purchase her own freedom," I rejoined. Then I added: "But I can't surround the miraculous part of it, Bonteck. In fact, I'm afraid I shall have to see and handle the gold again before I can be sure I'm not dreaming--as Madeleine said we all three were. There are too many impossibilities."

He was silent for a full minute before he said: "Yes, there are impossibilities--a good few of them. And yet there are not so many as there appeared to be." Another pause, and then: "Dick, I've had the shock of my life."

"I can believe it," I said; "so had I. But just what do you mean?"

Once more he seemed to be trying to shape things in his mind so that they should issue in some sort of orderly array.

"I'll tell you presently: that is why I wanted to get you by yourself. But there is something else that has to be told first. As I say, I've put it off as long as I can. You will want to tie a stone around my neck and heave me into the sea when you've heard what I have to say, and I shan't blame you. As the thing has turned out, I'm a cold-blooded assassin--no less."

"Open confession is good for the soul," I commented, but even as I spoke, all the surmises and half-suspensions that had been troubling me for days and weeks came tumbling in to make a mental chaos where there should have been calm judgment and a fair weighing of motives.

"To begin at the beginning, then," he went on doggedly. "So far as I knew at the time, there was no mutiny on board the *Andromeda*. It was a plant from start to finish. I had two objects in view. The first and craziest was the notion that I handed you that night at dinner in New Orleans--the notion of cutting out a little bunch of people from the world--my world--and making them pull off their masks. It was a barbarous idea; a crudely savage one, if you like; only I couldn't see that side of it. I meant to make it a sort of unexpected picnic, providing carefully against all of the real hardships, but at the same time letting the shock do what it might towards the unmasking."

"I am trying to give you what credit I can for the carefully planned ameliorations," I said. "But that doesn't excuse your appallingly selfish motive. Go on. It was all prearranged with Goff, I take it?"

"Thoughtfully prearranged. And the motive wasn't wholly selfish, as you will find out a little farther along. Goff was to steer for this island, the longitude and latitude of which, as I told you, I had obtained from the captain of the tramp steamer that rescued you and the other survivors of the *Mary Jane*, and at the critical moment there was to be a fake mutiny and a real marooning. It was by my instructions that Goff didn't appear in the marooning mix-up. I wanted him to be able to show a clean bill of health when the play was over. He was to pick his men for the mutiny demonstration and the marooning job, leaving the marooned ones to infer that he, and the handful of Americans in the engine-room and fire-hold, had been overpowered."

Again I said, "Go on," and tried to hold judgment in suspense until after the evidence should all be in.

"We were to be left here for three weeks, and at the end of that period the yacht was to come back and take us off; Goff with a sailor's yarn of how he had finally got the better of the rebellion and resumed his command."

"Good--excellent good!" I applauded cynically. "And the three weeks were up just an even fortnight ago yesterday."

"That is why I had to tell you!" he burst out. "It is killing me by inches, Dick! Something has gone wrong;

something must have gone frightfully wrong. I was only stalling when I led you to believe that I didn't know Goff, personally; I do know him; I have known him for years, and I'd wager my life that he is as true as steel. I began to be scared when I found that the little black-eyed devil of an under-steward, Lequat, had been picked to play the part of the heavy villain. I couldn't imagine--I can't yet imagine--why Goff should have chosen him."

Again a silence came and sat between us. While Bonteck had been talking, the night had grown still hotter and more stifling. As yet, the stars were burning in a clear sky overhead, but there was a gray, shadowy blur in the east behind which a late moon was struggling to rise. The blur, cloud-bank or a gathering fog, had been growing and extending by almost imperceptible degrees as we sat staring afar at it. In any latitude it would have presaged a change of weather; in that of our island it might well be the forerunner of a tropical storm. Still, there was no breath of air stirring, and the surface of the inclosed lagoon was like that of burnished metal. And the heat, as I have said, was terrific.

"You once told me a tale about a certain fabulous sum of money that had been shipped in the *Andromeda*," I said at length. "Was that another of your romantic little inventions?"

"No; I suppose I shall have to confess that part of it, as well," he returned, more than half shamefacedly, I thought. "You know the criminal trap Holly Barclay has set for himself by squandering young Vancourt's fortune, and how he was purposing to get out of the trap. It is precisely as I told you when we spoke of it before; he is ready to sell Madeleine to the highest bidder. That is a pretty brutal way to put it, but stripped of all the civilized masqueradings that is exactly what it amounts to. And he had already given the option to Hobart Ingerson; I know it--knew it before I left New York. Do you get that?"

"Yes."

"I nearly went wild trying to think up some scheme that would break the Ingerson combination and at the same time pass muster with Madeleine. She loves me, Dick; she has admitted it; and if this miserable money tangle were out of the way, she'd marry me. But she wouldn't let me buy her freedom; she said if she had to be sold like a slave on the auction block, it certainly wouldn't be to the man she loved. God bless her sweet soul! I don't blame her for that. Do you?"

"Not in the least. But you found a way to whip the devil round the stump?"

"The maddest way you ever heard of--a perfectly idiotic way, you will say; and this winter cruise in the yacht was the chief move in it. I had to have Madeleine in the party, and, of course, I couldn't have her without her father. Including him meant including Ingerson. It says itself that Barclay, with the threat of a prison sentence hanging over him, wouldn't be willing to lose sight of his one best bet."

"I know," I nodded; "know more than you think I do, perhaps. Get on with your story."

"Reading a story is what put the notion into my head, in the beginning. In an old book of the Elizabethan voyages and discoveries I came across this tale of a burned galleon and a treasure that was never found. What I wanted to do was to put enough money into Madeleine's hands--money that she would believe was unquestionably her own--to square up her father's crooked accounts. This 'Treasure Island' business seemed to offer the means. About that time I ran across Captain Svenson, the commander of your rescue ship, and besides giving me the latitude and longitude of this island, he told me that he believed it to be the 'Lost Island' of the old English privateers, and the same which was known later, in the buccaneers' time, as 'Pirates' Hope.' Also, he told me that you had told him of the existence of the old wreck. Don't let me bore you with too much detail."

"I am too greatly infuriated to be bored. What is the rest of it?"

"Mere romantic flubdub, you'll say. I bought from the subtreasury a quarter of a million dollars in gold bars--and had a devil of a time cooking up a reasonable excuse for the purchase, as you would imagine. These bars I had remelted and cast into rough ingots of about forty pounds each. As a matter of secrecy, and to make them easily portable, each of the ingots was packed in a box by itself, the boxes were marked 'Ammunition,' and it was as ammunition that the stuff was secretly put aboard the *Andromeda* at her North River anchorage."

"Sure!" I derided. "When ostriches do a much less naive thing we call them silly birds. I'd be willing to bet largely that any number of New York crooks knew what was in your cartridge boxes long before you ever got them overside in the *Andromeda*. What next?"

"Next, I cleared the yacht for Havana, having first made arrangements to have the winter-cruise party meet me in New Orleans some three weeks later. I'll admit now that I was a bit shaky about some part of my crew. I had told Goff that I didn't want too much intelligence aboard, and after we put to sea it struck me that he had rather overdone the thing. We had a few Provincetown Portuguese who were all right, but the lot Goff picked up in New York--foreigners to a man--didn't look very good to me; nothing especially desperate, you know, but with the gold on board it seemed up

to me to keep a weather eye open."

"Some glimmerings of common sense now and then: you're to be congratulated," I said.

"Rub it in; I've got it coming to me. Holding that cautious notion in mind, I made the southward voyage look as much like a pleasure jaunt as possible, touching at Havana, again at Port au Prince, and a little later at Kingston. From Jamaica we shot across to South American waters, and at Curacao I gave the bulk of the crew shore leave for two days. Then, with the bunch stripped down to Goff, the engine- and fire-room squads, and two or three of the Portuguese, we made a fly-by-night run to this island. You've got my notion by this time, haven't you?"

"Partly; but go on."

"We made land about two o'clock in the morning, rounded this point of the island, and dropped anchor just off the inlet opening to Spaniards' Bay. With all hands off duty for the night, Goff and I got the electric launch overside and landed the gold--which was some job for just the two of us; something over fifteen hundred pounds in the lot. But, as I say, we got it ashore, lugged it piecemeal to the little inland glade, and there, by the light of a ship's lantern, we buried it, taking the precaution to mark the place with that chunk of coral."

"Um," said I. "So the chunk of coral was there, waiting for you, was it? Didn't it occur to you then to wonder how it got there?"

"It didn't. I'll confess I was pretty well wrought up. A dark, deep-laid plot--even one that you have framed up yourself--gets hold of you at the climax, and all I thought of at the time was the need for getting the job finished without letting anybody but Goff into the secret of it."

"You had taken Goff into your confidence?"

"To some extent, of course; I had to. He knew we were burying a small fortune, but he didn't know, and doesn't yet know, what my object was. After we had buried the gold, we filled the boxes with sand so they wouldn't advertise too plainly the fact that they'd been tampered with, nailed them up, ferried them aboard, and stowed them in the forehold in the place from which we had taken them."

I chuckled. The whole thing was so childishly romantic that it sounded like a tale lifted bodily from the pages of a dime thriller. Moreover, it was so absurdly out of character with the Van Dyck I knew, or thought I had been knowing. Yet I fancy the wildly romantic vein lies but shallowly buried even in the soberest of us; and in Bonteck's case the incredulities were put out of court by the fact itself: he had actually done the incredible thing.

"It is all plain enough now," I said; "all but the silly childishness of the entire transaction. You were meaning to sow the seed by telling the old Spanish galleon fairy tale to the assembled company, taking a chance of inducing Madeleine to join in the treasure hunt--as you did this afternoon, most successfully, as I must admit."

"Yes; but hold on. We buried the gold and marked the place with the chunk of coral, as I have said; and that was the end of it until this afternoon. For the past fortnight I've been manoeuvring to get you and Madeleine together and away from the others, so that I could work the rabbit's foot of the old galleon story upon her, with you for a witness. When the chance came, it worked out just as I'd planned to have it--up to a certain point. Madeleine saw the stone, and she is persuaded she saw it first. We rolled it aside and dug the hole. It was after we had got down about two feet that my shock came along and hit me. I don't mind admitting that I nearly had a full-blown case of heart failure. Dick, my gold was gone!"

"Ha!" I exclaimed; "so that was what was the matter with you, was it? What is the answer? Did Goff come back after you'd gone to bed on the night of the funeral and disinter the corpse?"

Van Dyck shook his head. "He is one of the few men in this world whom I would trust to the limit, Richard. I can't believe it of him."

"Yet the deductions point plainly in his direction," I ventured. "Your gold is gone, you say, and he was the only person besides yourself who knew where to look for it. Past that, the yacht is gone, and it doesn't come back to take us off. How do you explain these two small inconsequences?"

"I can't explain them. There is only one explanation that I can think of--and that is merely a raw guess. There is a bare possibility that the mutiny was real instead of a fake. Lequat's part in it makes it look a bit that way. If you've got his identity right, I'm certain he didn't ship with us at New York, and equally certain that I saw him on shore in Havana. As you'd imagine, I've been trying mighty hard not to accept that solution of the thing. If a bunch of real pirates have captured the yacht, we stand a pretty poor chance of ever seeing it again."

While he was speaking, the first few precursor whiffs of wind came out of the rising cloud bank in the east. With the moon and a full half of the stars blotted out, the darkness had increased until the only thing visible to seaward was the white line of surf curling over the outer reef. I wasn't accepting Bonteck's belief in Goff's impeccability entirely at its face value. A quarter of a million dollars, in a form that couldn't possibly be traced--namely, in unmarked gold bars--was a pretty big temptation to any man.

"Are you quite sure that the gold we dug up wasn't your own hoard, merely buried a bit deeper than you thought it was?" I asked.

"Altogether sure," was the prompt reply. "The bars are not quite the same shape, and they are rougher and look immeasurably older. No; unbelievable as it may seem, the hundred-millionth chance shook itself out of the box at the first throw. It was the galleon's gold that we found."

"But wait a minute," I said. "Were the two lots buried under the same stone?"

"Why not?" he queried. "Why shouldn't they be? Goff and I found the stone there and rolled it aside and dug a shallow hole under it. When we were through, we rolled it back. If we had gone a little deeper we would have found what we three found this afternoon. The one unaccountable thing is the disappearance of my plant. It's gone; there is no question about that."

"What do you care for a quarter of a million dollars, so long as Madeleine has been put in the way of purchasing her freedom?" I mocked. "I don't imagine you are going to quarrel with the sheerly miraculous part of it. The thing that is worrying me most, just now, is the fear that the miracle won't go on miracling. Madeleine's gold bars won't do her much good if we've all got to stay on this cursed island and starve to death. And that brings us down to the threadbare old seam again. You say we have only six full meals left; if we all go on short commons at once we may live a week longer before we have to fall back upon the shell-fish and cocoanuts."

"Yes," he returned gloomily, "that is what it is coming to." Then: "What ought I to do, Dick?--go and tell the others what I have told you and let them burn me at the stake? It's about what I deserve."

His manner of saying this carried me swiftly back to an older time, reincarnating for me the Bonteck Van Dyck who had been my college chum; generous, large-hearted, always quick to admit himself in the wrong when he was in the wrong. Even with the knowledge that Conetta must suffer with the rest of us, I could not flay him as he deserved.

"You are not all bad, Bonteck," I remarked. "Billy Grisdale and Edie owe you something, and I'm beginning to wonder if I'm not in your debt, too. You had a purpose in including Conetta and her aunt, and Jerry Dupuyster, didn't you?"

"Of course I had. It seemed a thousand pities that you and Conetta couldn't get together on some sort of a living basis."

"It happens to be too late to do me any good; Dupuyster has already asked her," I said. "Just the same, I'm grateful for the intention; so grateful that I'm not going to be the one to tie you to the stake when the others pass sentence upon you. But all this is dodging the main question. What are we going to do? We men, or at least the six of us who call ourselves men, can't stand by and let the other twelve simply curl up and die when the food is gone."

"I haven't any plan," he replied. "As I said a while back, I've just been hanging on and hoping against hope. There is still a chance, you know. The yacht's engines may have broken down. Goff may have had to put in somewhere--at some one of the European-owned islands--and is having difficulty in getting permission to sail. That might easily happen, since he is only a sailing-master and has no written authority to show. Taking that view of it, any one of a dozen things might have got in the way to keep him from reaching us at the appointed time."

"True enough. But that hope is based upon the supposition that your original plan is still in the saddle. It ignores the other alternative--that the mutiny may have been a real one. Also, it ignores the disappearance of the quarter million--your quarter million--which, taken by itself, has a pretty dubious look. I know you don't care anything about the money part of it, now that Madeleine has been provided for by a miracle; but the evanishment of your gold bars would seem to have a very pointed bearing upon our present situation. I can't take your trust in Goff at par. If he didn't come back here and get that gold an hour or so after it was buried, he did the next best thing--which was to come ashore and move the landmark."

"Yes; but, man alive! don't you see what that presupposes? You are assuming that in moving the chunk of coral he placed it exactly over the other mess of gold bars. I grant you that such a thing might happen, but you know well enough that it wouldn't happen--that there are a thousand chances to one against its happening."

I had to admit that my second hypothesis was too lame to have a leg to stand on, though it was the more hopeful one of the two. If Goff hadn't resurrected the lately buried quarter million--if he had only moved the marking stone--with due and careful measurements so that he could find the place again--there was some chance of his coming back to the island--after we were all safely starved to death. But these speculations weren't getting us anywhere, and I said so.

"We're talking in circles," I complained. "All the gold there is lying under that nubbin of coral, added to the truck-load you've lost and can't find, wouldn't buy a single meal for this crowd of ours after the provisions are gone. Let's get to work and do something. There is enough timber left in the wreck of the *Mary Jane* to build a raft, and we have an axe--if Jerry hasn't lost it while he was chopping firewood. You have the latitude and longitude of this prison of ours. How far is it to somewhere--anywhere?"

Ván Dyck did not reply at once. The wind was coming in little catpaws now, and the curious haze, which was by this time obscuring the entire heavens, was shot through with a sort of ghostly half light that was neither lightning nor a reflection from the darkling sea. When Ván Dyck spoke, it was not in answer to my question about the latitude and longitude.

"Hurricane conditions, I should say; wouldn't you?" he said, getting upon his feet. "If they are, we'd better be hiking back to the other end of the island. Our camp is too near the beach to be safe, even if the wind should come straight out of the east. What do you think about it? You know more about tropical storms than I do."

I was about to reply that a man might live half a life-time in the tropics and still have much to learn about weather conditions, when he suddenly reached down and gripped my arm.

"Look!" he jerked out. "No, not there--right here--close in--just outside of the reef!"

I looked and saw what he saw. A short quarter of a mile to the southeastward, with no lights showing and with her slowly turning engines making no sound that we could hear, a ship, ghostly white and shadowy in the curious light, was creeping, phantom-like, toward the south shore of the island. It was the *Andromeda*.

XIII

THE WIND AND THE WAVES ROARING

MOST naturally, the reappearance of the yacht, at a moment when we had practically worked our way around to the conclusion that it was extremely doubtful if we should ever see her again, quickly put the reasoned deductions to flight. But a second glance threw all the hopeful machinery violently into the reverse. The *Andromeda's* stealthy approach with all lights hidden, and the evident intention on the part of whoever was in command to make land on the side of the island farthest removed from the place of our debarkation, gave no promise of rescue.

"The gold!" I exclaimed; and the two words collided with Ván Dyck's: "They are coming back after it!"

"But hold on," I interjected. "*Your* gold is gone, and they don't know--can't know--anything about the Spanish treasure. If it's buried treasure they're coming after, somebody on board the yacht has the wrong tip, to a dead moral certainty."

Ván Dyck made a gesture like a man groping in the dark.

"There were the sand-filled boxes," he offered. "They've opened them. They know that the gold has been unshipped somewhere, and I suppose it wasn't impossible for them to find out that the yacht made a flying trip to this island after the greater part of the crew had been given shore leave at Willemstadt."

"You needn't go so far afield for an explanation," I countered. "Goff knew where the gold was unshipped; and, by the same token, he is probably the only man aboard of the yacht who knows the latitude and longitude of Pirates' Hope. None of the others could have found the way back here."

"But a few minutes ago you were accusing Goff of making away with the gold on the night of its burial," was the quick retort.

"Wait," I interposed. "I said he did one of two things: dug your gold up and took it aboard after you were asleep, or else he came ashore and moved that block of coral. Evidently the latter half of the guess was the correct one."

At this, he began to give ground a little.

"You may be right. Still, I can't believe it of Goff. There is a chance that, notwithstanding my thinning out of the crew at Willemstadt, we still had a traitor aboard. In that case we may have been spied upon when we landed the gold--Goff and I. I'm still hanging to the belief that there was a real mutiny, and in that case Goff may have been given a choice between steering them back here or walking the plank."

This purely academic discussion of the whys and wherefores went on while the *Andromeda* was edging nearer and nearer to the outer reef barrier, still as silently as a ghost ship, and still without showing a sign of life on deck or bridge, so far as we could make out. Within a stone's throw of the reef she slowed to a stand, and not until then did we hear the low rumbling of her engines as they were reversed to check her headway.

Since the yacht's approach had been from the eastward, she lay broadside on to the island. We could see the electric motor launch hanging in its davit tackle on the starboard side, but there was no move made to lower it.

"They are not using any steam winches to-night," was Van Dyck's muttered comment upon this. "Too much noise. Listen!"

There was a splash, apparently on the port side of the vessel, faint sounds as of oars feathering in muffled rowlocks, and a little later the yacht's yawl crept out around the sharp stem of the *Andromeda* and headed for a narrow inlet through the reef. There were seven or eight men in the small boat; four at the oars, one in the bow and either two or three aft.

At sight of this landing party Bonteck came alive with gratifying promptness.

"Whether your guess is the right one or not, Dick, there is one thing certain: If we let those fellows go to digging around in our bullion patch, they will find what we found, and Madeleine will lose out, after all. We can't let it stand that way. What do you say?"

I had whipped out my pocket-knife and was cutting a club, or trying to, though the sapling mahogany, or whatever it was I was hacking at, was tougher than a leather whipstock.

"I'm not thinking so much about the gold," I said. "It's up to us to capture this yawl crew first, and the *Andromeda* afterward. Get yourself a weapon of some sort--quick!"

"Of course," he agreed at once, feeling in his pocket for the big clasp-knife which he had used for a digging tool a few hours earlier. "Something of that kind is what I meant. Shall we rush 'em when they beach the yawl? Or had we better wait a bit and see what they mean to do?"

In our excitement I think neither of us saw the absurdity of two men armed only with clubs proposing to attack seven or eight who were probably provided with firearms.

"We'd better wait," I said; but we made good in the matter of time saving by hurrying through the wood to post ourselves handily in a palmetto thicket on the southward-fronting beach edge near the place toward which the yawl, now entering the lagoon, was headed.

The dash through the wood from our observation point at the heel of the eastern sandspit seemed to me the hottest sprint I had ever made. Once more the breeze had died out, and with little or no air stirring in the open, in the forest the atmosphere was absolutely lifeless. I don't know how near the running dash came to winding Van Dyck, but when we reached the palmetto thicket the perspiration was pouring out of me in trickling streams, and I was fairly gasping for breath. There was a half-paralyzing portent in the stillness and the terrible heat. It was as if subterranean fires had been kindled under the island, and that curious back-lighting of the haze by the rising moon seemed now to have a faintly lurid glow as if it were catching the reflection of the unseen fires.

"Heavens--but this is awful!" Van Dyck muttered under his breath--from which I argued that he was suffering no whit less from the heat than I was. "If we get the weather that this is promising to give us----"

"Hush!" I whispered.

The yawl, pulled strongly by its four oarsmen, was sweeping up to the beach, skimming the surface of the lagoon like some gigantic water bug. But a moment later we found that we had miscalculated the landing place. After coming within a pebble's toss of the shore--to be the better hidden by the palm shadows, as we supposed--the helmsman swung the yawl parallel to the beach with a low-toned word to his oarsmen, and the boat drifted slowly past our hiding place, as if its crew might be scanning the forest fringe for some determining landmark.

"Seven of them," said Van Dyck, with his lips at my ear. "At least one of them will stay by the yawl when they land. That will cut the odds down a bit, though I shouldn't mind if they'd divide up a little evenner."

I did not reply. My eyes were smarting painfully from the sweat which was running down into them, and I was trying to get clear vision enough to enable me to distinguish between the figures in the slowly drifting boat. Though I couldn't make sure, I thought that the man at the yawl's tiller was the ex-steward, Lequat.

A landing was made a little way down the beach from us, in a small indentation too shallow to be called a bay. Noiselessly the yawl's oars were unshipped, and then we heard the gentle grating of the boat's keel upon the sand. In the debarking it became apparent that Bonteck had considerably underrated the caution of the invaders. Three of the men stayed by the yawl, leaving only four for whatever landward expedition was toward. Oddly enough, as we thought, the four did not make directly for the glade where the gold had been hidden. Instead, they moved off down the beach, marching silently in single file and keeping well within the shadow of the wood.

It was Van Dyck who flung a guess at their intention.

"They are going to take a look-in at our camp, first--to get the lay of the land and to make sure that they won't be interrupted," he hazarded, adding: "Which simplifies matters somewhat. The farther they get away from their boat and the yacht, the easier it will be for us to clap an extinguisher upon them without giving the alarm. Let's run for it and head them off!"

It seemed easy enough to make a quick detour through the forest to a point at which we could lie in wait for the marching four, and it was not until after we had begun it that we realized how dark it was under the trees, and how much the darkness was going to cut our speed. A few minutes of this woodland race proved enough for both of us. "Head for the beach and we'll run them down in the open," was Van Dyck's modifying order, after we had stumbled and fallen half a dozen times and got ourselves well torn and stabbed by the little bayonet palms that grew thickly among the larger trees; and this we did, issuing from the wood a hundred yards or so beyond the beached yawl, and possibly a like distance behind the men we were trying to overtake.

To chase the four men openly from that point was to give the alarm in both directions at once; in other words, to invite a front and rear attack that we couldn't hope to repel with our primitive weapons. So we fell back into the wood, changing our plan again and deciding to wait until the four were out of sight, when we could turn and fall upon the three at the boat and stand some chance of overcoming them and possessing ourselves of whatever arms they might have.

But even this alternative was to be denied us. While we halted, breathing hard from the hot struggle with the impeding jungle, Van Dyck said, "Listen!" again. A far to the eastward there was a sound like the flapping of a thousand wings; a low drumming that seemed to fill the dead air with jarring vibrations and to play upon the senses with the maddening insistence of a single musical note too long sustained.

Before we had time to realize what the ominous warning portended, a pistol shot cracked from the *Andromeda's* bridge, and for a brief instant the blinding glare of the searchlight swept the island beach.

"Calling them in," I said. "Whatever they're minded to do, the storm is going to beat them to it." And that the shot and flash were signals summoning the boat's crew to come aboard was quickly made apparent. The expeditionary four wheeled and came running back along the beach, while the three boat guards were tumbling hastily into the yawl and shipping the oars.

Van Dyck gripped his club. "We mustn't let them get away, or get together again!" he rapped out. "Wait until I give the word!"--and as the four runners were about to pass our hiding place--"Now!"

What I did had to be done on the spur of the moment. At the climaxing instant, I flung my arms around him and dragged him down and held him helpless; at which it was only natural that he should fall to cursing me like a fishwife.

"You fool!" I panted, when I had the breath to spare. "Let them go! They'll come back. Don't you hear that wind coming? The yacht will be lost if she hangs on outside of that reef five minutes longer!"

As I let him get up, a hurtling volley of great raindrops tore through the foliage over our heads, and a blast, carrying with it the dank, unwholesome breath of an upheaved watery underworld, swept across the surface of the lagoon. Like mad-men the racing four hurled themselves into the waiting yawl, the boat shoved off, and with the men at the oars pulling with much more energy than skill, a frantic dash was made for the passage through the reef.

It bade fair to be a shrewd case of touch and go; an open question as to whether or not the yawl could reach the yacht before the yacht would have to claw off the island in sheer self-preservation. Dark as it had grown, we could see the black smoke of freshly fueled fires pouring from the *Andromeda's* funnels to be caught up and whirled away to leeward, and above the shrieking of the blast we could hear the trampling chant of her powerful engines. Whoever was in command was proving himself a daring captain. With a Caribbean hurricane fairly upon him, and a jagged reef lying

within a cable's length, he was backing and filling and holding his ground stubbornly to give the yawl, tossing now like a cockleshell on a heaving sea which was already surging over the reef, time to reach him.

Ván Dyck burst out in an ecstasy of rage.

"Damn him!" he yelled, apostrophizing the unknown manoeuvrer on the *Andromeda's* bridge, "he'll put the yacht on the rocks, and that'll be the end of all of us!"

It certainly looked that way. More rain was coming, not in huge drops, as at first, but in a fine, mist-like spray, driving horizontally and drenching instantly everything it touched. Though the rising moon was completely blotted out by the rain and the high cloud wrack, there was still light enough in the open to enable us to see the *Andromeda* and the yawl. The returning boat's crew seemed fully alive to the need for haste; the men at the oars were splashing mightily and digging deep. But enthusiasm, even the enthusiasm of fear, is but a poor substitute for mariner skill. The little boat had safely negotiated the dangerous reef passage and was half-way out to the yacht when an oar broke, and it could have been only the cleverest dexterity on the part of the helmsman that kept the yawl from falling into the trough of the rising seas and capsizing when the man at the broken oar tumbled over backward and so crippled for the moment the remainder of the yawl's motive power.

But the small accident settled matters definitely for the yacht's captain, whoever he was. As if the snapping ash had been the signal for which he was waiting--and a convincing proof that it was no use for him to wait any longer--he called for full speed ahead, jammed his helm hard down, and with a lurch to port so abrupt that it seemed as if it must surely put her upon her beam ends, the *Andromeda* fled, vanishing like a white wraith in the spume and smother to leeward, and leaving the luckless landing party to do what it pleased, or could, toward saving itself.

What the boat's steersman did--most naturally--was to try to make land again. By some means he got the disabled yawl around without swamping it and headed it for the narrow reef passage which was now all but hidden by the tumbling seas. Badly handicapped as he was by the loss of one of the four oars, it still seemed as if he might make the inlet. Steered as fine as a racing shell rounding the turning buoy, the light little craft leaped for the opening. But at the balancing instant, when another tug at the oars might have sent it through into the comparatively calmer waters of the lagoon, the yawl was caught on the lift of a billow, flung aside like a bit of driftwood, and dropped with a crash of splintering timbers on the rocks.

Under the conditions--a tropical hurricane coming on apace, seas dashing over a half-submerged coral reef, and their boat reduced to kindling wood--all seven of the mutineers, pirates, gold-robbers, or whatever they were, should have been swept away and drowned as we looked. At first we thought that was what had happened--was necessarily bound to happen. And it apparently did happen to two of the seven. For a moment later, when we saw bobbing heads dotting the heaving swells in the lagoon, we could count but five, and there were only five sodden figures to come crawling out a bit later, one after another, upon the beach. Ván Dyck stooped and picked up his club, which he had dropped in the excitement of watching the struggles of the swimmers.

"Dick, it's murder, and in cold blood . . . but we can't let those men run loose on the island. We'll be starving presently, and so will they. Are you with me?"

I suppose he took my answer for granted, for he started to run toward the group of wearied swimmers, and I ran with him. As he had said, it was a good bit like murder. Two of the exhausted ones were too far gone to make any attempt at resistance; they merely rolled over on their faces on the sand, spreading their arms wide in token of surrender.

But the three others, with Lequat to head them, did their best. Pistols cracked, and in the fray I got a kick, delivered after the best manner of the French foot-boxer, that nearly knocked the breath out of me. But we were fresh, and the three were practically in the last ditch of exhaustion when we fell upon them. So long as the pistols were fired without aim, there could be but one issue to the hand-to-hand battle. When it was over, the three fighting men were groveling with the others, two of them with cracked heads and the other with a crippled wrist to his firing hand.

Ván Dyck was as ruthless in victory as he had been in the attack.

"Search them!" he ordered, and like a pair of highwaymen we went through the pockets of the vanquished boat's crew. Three pistols, two of them modern automatics, and one an old-fashioned Navy weapon, a couple of murderous knives, and a few cartridges comprised the loot; these, and a coil of light line which one of the men had wound around his body--for what object we didn't inquire. But the rope came in play handily. With it, while the increasing gale tore savagely at us, we bound the captives hand and foot, and dragged them one by one up into the wood; and the transfer was not made any too quickly, at that, for by now the great seas were leaping the barrier reef to come rushing down the lagoon upon the unprotected beach.

It seemed horribly cruel to leave five men, three of them pretty sorely wounded, to lie bound and helpless under the palms and wholly at the mercy of the storm, but self-preservation knows no law. Van Dyck put the constraining necessity tersely when he said, shouting to make himself heard above the din and clamor of the elements: "That's all we can do here, and we're needed at the other end of things. This gale will be ripping our camp up by the roots."

Together we turned our backs upon the prisoners and started toward our own end of the island. The beach was by this time quite impassable. Huge seas were leaping the reef to hurl themselves in thunder crashings far up into the fringing wood. So we were forced to strike off diagonally inland, feeling our way blindly from tree to tree, and judging the direction only by keeping the wind at our backs. Even so, we were unable to hold anything like a straight course. Once we came out upon the south beach, and were well battered and bruised and all but drowned before we could claw back to the partial shelter of the jungle. Farther on we were lost again, and this time we stumbled out upon the north beach somewhere between the bay of the Spanish wreck and our camp. Over this lagoon frontage, like that on the south shore, the sea was running in huge billows, clearing the outer barrier as if it were not there, and the pounding crashes seemed to shake the small island to its foundations.

As was to be expected, we found a most pitiable state of affairs at the camp when we finally won through. The fire had been drowned in the first downpour of the rain, and the small clearing was in murky darkness. Two of the tents had been blown down, and the third, into which the women were crowded, was straining at the peg ropes. Worse still, there was no longer any beach, with its stretch of sand, to fence off the sea. The conditions as we had found them farther to the eastward were repeated at the camp site, only they were worse, if anything. The great seas, rolling down the lagoon at a sharp angle with the shore line, were flinging their spray high over the small clearing, each upsweeping surge giving us notice that its follower was likely to engulf us.

It was in such a crisis as this that Van Dyck showed at his best as a man and a leader. Before I had had time to wipe the salt spray out of my eyes he had gathered the available men of the party and was energetically at work moving the camp back into the most sheltered of the inland glades. By heroic battlings, in which even Holly Barclay and the major bore a part, we got the two dismantled tents set up in the new location. It was in the transferring of the women that I became a deserter. Miss Mehitable Gilmore, with the dragoness outer shell all cracked and broken to reveal a very human and distracted old woman beneath it, was calling piteously for Conetta.

"Oh, Richard Preble--find her--find her!" she gasped. "She's gone and she'll be drowned--I know she'll be drowned!"

A hurried question or two elicited the alarming facts. Billy Grisdale and Edith Van Tromp had not come in from their post at the western signal point, and Conetta had flown to warn them. That was enough for me. With a blunt word to Van Dyck, I deserted.

It was only a short quarter of a mile to the western extremity of the island, and I covered it in a stumbling rush, with the wind knocking me down and forcing me to scramble on hands and knees when it got a fair sweep at me. Reaching the point where we had built our fire and flown our distress signal from the lopped palm, nothing was recognizable in the darkness, but as nearly as I could make out, the tree was gone and the breakers were running man-head deep over the place where the fire had been. I had a bad minute or two until I had shouted and groped around and found the three missing ones crouching in the shelter of the nearest jungle growth. It had been horribly easy to fancy them blown into the sea from the bare sandspit.

Billy was doing his best, as any one who knew him would have predicted. He had wattled the bushes together behind the two women, and had stripped off his coat to add it to the shelter. Nevertheless, he made no secret of his relief when he heard my shout at his ear.

"By Jove," he choked; "misery likes company, you know. Cuddle down here, Uncle Dick, and tell us we're only dreaming when we think we're soaked to the skin. A little more and I believe it would really make up its mind to rain! What's the show for getting back to camp? I couldn't do it with two of 'em--tried it and we all came near being washed away."

"No show at all at present; we'll have to wait a bit," I said; and then I took my part in the sheltering. In the dash from the dismantled camp I had caught up a square of canvas that had served as part of a tent fly, and with Grisdale's help, it was rigged as a sort of rain break to windward.

"I knew you'd come," said Conetta quite calmly, when there was nothing more to do or to be done, and the four of us were cowering under the canvas. And then, with the calmness somewhat shaken: "The others? Are they all alive?"

"Alive and unhurt, so far as I could tell in the dark," I hastened to say. "They are moving the camp back into the wood. Ingerson was the only one who was missing."

"What has become of him?"

I didn't tell her that Van Dyck and I had left him asleep under the trees on the north shore of the island some two hours earlier. It didn't seem at all necessary to harrow her with the story of Ingerson's miring in the drink demoniac's morass.

"I don't know just what has become of him," I said, which was strictly true as to the bare fact. "He'll doubtless turn up all right in the morning."

"You say they are moving the camp. Will it be safer in the wood?"

"There was no choice. The seas are breaking over the other place by now."

"Poor Aunt Mehitable!" she said brokenly. "At the very first lull we must go back to her, Dick."

"There is no special hurry," I offered. "She is all right, and she sent me out to find you; begged me to go."

"She sent you?"

"Yes; me, and not Jerry Dupuyster."

There was silence for a little time; such silence as the shrieks of the hurricane and the crashing of the seas permitted. Then she said drearily: "We can't go back and begin all over again, you and I, Richard. It's too late, now."

Most naturally, I could take this declaration only in one sense. She had admitted that Jerry had asked her to marry him, and her saying that it was too late was merely an indirect way of telling me that she was promised to him. And that thought set me boiling inwardly again. For in the hubbub of camp moving Jerry had been doing his impractical best to shelter Beatrice Van Tromp; this when he must have known that Conetta was somewhere out in the storm.

"I shall have a good-sized bone to pick with Jerry, if we ever get back to normal again," I said, and because I didn't take the trouble to try to whisper the threat, Edie Van Tromp cut in.

"Stop it, you two!" she commanded. "I can't hear what you're saying, but I know you are quarreling."

Billy Grisdale groaned. "If I only had my mandolin!" he lamented. "Get down, Tige"--this to the bull pup who was trying to climb into his master's lap for better protection from the storm. And then to me: "How long do these little summer sprinkles last, Uncle Dick?"

I declined to commit myself. It didn't strike me as a Christian thing to do to make the women more miserable by telling them that the storm might last for days, and that our best hope was for a cessation of the pouring rain floods.

As it turned out, in this one respect we were favored. After about an hour the rain was coming only in driving squalls and the thick darkness was a little broken. Overhead the moon showed faintly through the masses of cloud wrack hurling themselves westward on the high crest of the gale, and there was a pallid promise of a clearing sky.

But with the ceasing of the downpour the wind increased to hurricane fury, and the pounding of the seas upon the reef and upon the island itself was like a succession of earthquake shocks. As far as our limited range of vision could reach, the sea was heaving and tossing in mountain-like billows with valleys between in which the tallest ship would have been hidden, and it was plainly evident that a new danger was threatening. Our island was low and flat; in its highest spots it was scarcely more than eight or ten feet above the normal sea level. If the gale should blow long enough and hard enough, it could be only a question of time until the catapulting seas would break down the jungle barriers and sweep the island from end to end.

"Time for us to move!" Grisdale sang out, as a particularly vicious "seventh wave" broke just behind us and reached for our shelter spot in its tumultuous torrenting across the sands; and we took the hint.

"You two fight for yourselves," I called back, and the battle with the pouring gale was begun.

It was a battle royal. For every foot of the quarter mile we had to fight desperately. Even in the wood it was impossible at times to stand against the wind, and again and again we had to fling ourselves prone, clinging to whatever hold offered itself. And at every step the palm fronds above our heads were crackling and snapping like whips, and the air was full of flying missiles.

We held together for the better part of the time, Grisdale and Edie locking arms and facing the blasts in the fresh strength of youth and health, and taking their buffetings with a laugh. So battling and creeping by turns, we came at last to the breathless home stretch, and I was unspeakably relieved to find the white tents still standing intact in the glade which Van Dyck had chosen for their latest pitching place.

"Keep your good nerve just a few minutes longer," I said to Conetta, who was clinging to me with a grip that I think no hurricane blast could have broken. "We are almost there."

I had a glimpse in the starlight of her face upturned to mine, and saw her lips move as if in reply. But what she was saying I did not hear. For at that moment one of the flying missiles--it was a broken tree-top, they told me afterward--came between and blotted me out.

XIV

HAND TO MOUTH

THE blow from the broken tree-top must have been a fairly forceful one. When I began to get acquainted with current affairs again, I was lying in a hammock swung between two trees, the gale had blown itself out, and the sun was shining.

At a little distance I could see the tents of the new camp, but there seemed to be nobody stirring. Overhead the bedraggled fronds of the palms were waving in a gentle breeze aftermath of the great storm, and the thunder of the surf on the reef told me that the sea had not yet fully subsided.

I moved a bit and put a leg over the hammock's edge, meaning to get up, but at that, Van Dyck materialized from somewhere and put the leg back again.

"No hurry about turning out, old man," he said gently. "How are you feeling by now?"

I took stock of myself and answered accordingly.

"Head feeling as big as a bushel basket, but I'm otherwise normal, I guess. What happened to me?"

He told me about the crack on the head from the falling tree-top. "You were knocked out by the blow, and when you came to, you were wandering a bit in your mind and talked too much. It was making it rather awkward for Conetta--the things you were saying--so I took the liberty of giving you a small sleeping-shot with the emergency needle."

"Thanks," I yawned. "The next thing to being able to do a good turn for yourself is to have a kind friend at your elbow to do it for you. I feel as though I had slept the clock around. What makes it so quiet?"

"Nobody at home," he answered evasively. "Professor Sanford has formed a class in natural science, and it is out doing field stunts."

"Otherwise?" I queried.

"Otherwise foraging for breakfast. It has come, Dick. We didn't get action swiftly enough last night to save the few provisions there were left in the commissary, and the seas made a clean sweep. Tell me a few of the natural-history things that you and the other survivors of the *Mary Jane* must have learned while you were trying to keep from starving to death after your shipwreck."

I closed my eyes and took the needful plunge into the dismal memories.

"There were always the cocoanuts, of course--and I've never been able to abide the taste of one since. Then there is, or was, a kind of oyster, too big to be eatable unless you were powerfully hungry. We got them by wading in the lagoon shallows. There are plenty of crabs, as you know; they would probably be good if they were cooked. But we of the *Mary Jane* had no fire. The lagoon is full of fish; some good for food, and some deadly. You try them and if you survive they are all right. If you don't survive, they are poisonous."

"How did you catch the fish?" Van Dyck wanted to know.

"We didn't catch many of them. A diet of raw fish doesn't appeal very strongly unless one is nearer starvation than we could be while the cocoanuts lasted."

"No edible roots?"

"None that we ever discovered; and, anyway, they wouldn't have been edible raw. But, say; we're missing something. How about those trussed-up pirates? Won't the professor's natural-science class stumble upon them and have a shock?"

At this question Van Dyck looked a trifle foolish.

"I thought we tied those fellows securely enough last night," he offered. "Didn't you?"

"I did, indeed. Are you trying to tell me that they've picked the locks?"

"They are not where we left them; that is one sure thing. I went out there early this morning, meaning to make them talk and tell me what's what on the *Andromeda*. They had disappeared."

"They are loose on the island?" I gasped.

"That would be the natural inference, you'd say. But I couldn't find any trace of them--haven't yet found any."

"Then the *Andromeda* must have come back to take them off."

Van Dyck's eyes narrowed.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that it is impossible. But the seas are still running pretty high, and if the yacht's people were able to make a landing with either of the power launches before dawn, they are better sailormen than I've been giving them credit for being."

"They'd come back for their men if it were humanly possible," I ventured, "and they might have good hopes of being able to find them alive. The wreck of the yawl happened after the yacht had disappeared, you remember. But if they did come back, how about the treasure trove? Would they go away again without digging up your plantation? But perhaps they did dig it up?"

He shook his head.

"No; that is the first thing I thought of when the five men turned up missing. The block of coral is just where we left it. Nothing has been disturbed."

"But if that is what the landing party came for last night----"

"I know; it's a mystery, but in the heart of it lies our best hope, I believe. They meant to dig when they made that landing last night. I found a shovel this morning. In their hurry to get away, the yawl crew left it on the beach and the seas had washed it up under the trees."

"Whereabouts is the hope?" I inquired.

"It is all guess-work," he admitted. "Assuming that they came last night to dig--and didn't dig--and assuming again that they came back in the dark hour before dawn, and still didn't dig, it is a fair inference that we haven't seen the last of the *Andromeda*--or isn't it?"

"I don't know," I said. "The plot has grown much too complicated for me. Meanwhile, I suppose we ought to be thankful that we haven't five additional mouths to fill--with nothing to fill them with. You wouldn't have let those five pirates starve, would you, Bonteck?"

The look that came into his eyes was handsomely gloomy.

"I meant to come just as near doing it as I could, and get by without serving a sentence for manslaughter." And with that, he pulled his cap over his eyes and walked away, coming back presently with a still gloomier look in his eyes.

"It's hell, Dick," he broke out grittingly. "I've got to tell these people of ours what's been done to them. It is the least I can do now. There is starvation just ahead of us; and from what we saw last night, it is perfectly plain that if the *Andromeda* comes back, it won't be for the purpose of taking us off."

"Not to take us off, perhaps, but the other motive--the motive that brought her here last night--still exists. If she came to dig up your buried 'ammunition' which has so mysteriously disappeared, she will come again. You may depend upon that."

"Just the same, I've got to tell them," he said doggedly, going back to the conscientious part of it; adding: "And I'd much rather be shot. It was such an asinine thing, even as I had it shaped up in the beginning. How can I ever make it appear to them as it appeared to me?--as a harmless little practical joke, with no particular sting in its tail? In the light of what has happened, I can never hope to make it look that way; not even to you or to Madeleine, I'm afraid."

I rose upon an elbow.

"Why not wait a little longer?" I argued. "The *Andromeda* will surely turn up again, and when she does, it will be up

to us to recapture her at all hazards. When that is done, you can tell the others, if you still think it necessary."

"But I owe it to you, at least, to tell them now."

"Why to me, especially?"

"For Conetta's sake."

"I'll answer for Conetta."

He sat down on the biscuit box, where he had been sitting when I came awake, and put his back against a tree.

"I'm a wholesale murderer, Dick; that is about what it comes to!" he groaned. "I have brought the woman I'd die for down into this devil's sea to starve her to death. I know you'll say that I meant it all the other way about, and so I did. But in this world it is only results that count. I'm a bloody assassin."

I tried sitting up in the hammock, and found that it could be done. Then I tried standing, and found that this, too, was possible.

"Supposing we go and join the breakfast chase," I suggested, meaning to interpose a saving distraction; and we did it.

This was the beginning of the fourth act--the most disheartening fourth act--in our gladsome little Caribbean comedy which was turning out so tragically. For a day or two we were able to make light of the sudden change of diet, and even of its scantiness, and to extract some sort of forced fun out of the oyster dredging and the crabbing; also, out of our not too successful attempts to vary the menu by fishing, with bent hat-pins for hooks, in the crystal-clear waters of the lagoon. But in a short while the laugh came less readily, and the eyes of some--of the younger women, at least--grew strained from much staring at dazzling, but empty, horizons, and filled easily with tears.

Yet, on the whole, the revelation of inner egos brought about by this face-to-face fronting of a desperate extremity was not disappointing. Stripped now of all the maskings of make-believe, we saw one another as we were, and much that had been hidden was found to be heart-mellowing and even inspiring when it was dragged out into the unsparing light of a common disaster.

The courage of the women, in particular, was the finest thing imaginable. There were nine of them starving heroically with us, and they were doing it with a measure of cheer that was beyond all praise. Even Miss Mehitable refused to figure as an exception. "We must be good losers," she said to Conetta and me one evening when we were trying to tempt her with a bit of broiled fish without seasoning. And she did not resent it when Alicia Van Tromp, thrusting a laughing face in at the open tent flap, called her "a dear, dead-game old sport."

For the men there is less to be said; partly because it is a man's job to endure hardness anyway, and partly because three of our nine were not living up to their privileges. Ingerson was doing a little better, to be sure; for one thing, he was no longer thrusting himself upon Madeleine. During the night of the hurricane he had lain out in all the fury of it, and possibly the pouring deluge had washed some of the brute out of him. At all events, he was less obnoxious, holding himself aloof in a half-surly way, and seeming--or so we hoped--to be fighting a morose battle with his appetite. Once, when I spoke of his changed attitude to Conetta, she quoted Scripture at me: "This kind goeth not out but by fasting and prayer." I doubt if he is praying much, but he is certainly fasting.

Major Terwilliger, on the other hand, grew even more contemptible as the pinch nipped the harder. Ranging the island for edible things, as we all did, he discovered a wild mango in bearing, and though the fruit would have been a grateful boon to all as a change, he kept the discovery to himself for two whole days before Billy Grisdale, who was trailing him, made him give up and share what was left on the tree. Holly Barclay had given up his pretense of illness and was less exacting than before; but he was still utterly useless in any practical way.

During this interval, in which we were maintaining night and day watches and patrolling the beaches, Bonteck was still holding his peace as I had counseled him to, though I could see that his load was growing heavier day by day. As to the events of the hurricane night, it was by agreement that no mention of the *Andromeda's* visit had been made to the others. This was Bonteck's idea. Since nothing had come of the yacht's return and our adventure with the five men who had so mysteriously disappeared, he argued that no good could result from spreading the news; that the news couldn't well be spread without adding explanations which I, myself, had advised him to withhold.

It was a week, or perhaps a day or so more than that, after the night of alarms that Van Dyck took me aside and showed me a piece of light rope such as is used for signal halliards on board ship; a piece, I said, but I should have said two short pieces tied together in a hard knot.

"Do you recognize it?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Of course, I couldn't swear to it," he said, "but it looks like a bit of the flag halliards from the yacht. In other words, a bit of the rope with which we tied the five pirates."

"Well?" I queried.

"I forgot to say that when I went to look for those fellows the next morning, I didn't find any of these rope lashings. They didn't leave even that much of a trace of themselves when they made off."

"Well?" I said again.

"I suppose you are pretty well convinced by this time that the *Andromeda* came back and took them off, and so am I. Taking that view of it, you'll know what it means when I tell you that I found this piece of knotted rope in the bushes a few yards from our camp--lost out of somebody's pocket, for a guess."

Truly, I did know. It meant that the *Andromeda* had come a second time, and that, in addition to rescuing the survivors of the yawl's crew, the rescuing party had crept up upon us; had been near enough to massacre the lot of us as we slept after the strenuous exertions of the forepart of the night.

"Um," said I; "why didn't they kill us all off while the killing was good? Perhaps you can answer me that."

"There may have been reasons. Possibly the landing party--the second one--wasn't big enough to attempt it with safety. Besides, what was the use of their troubling themselves when the lapse of a little time would take the job off their hands?"

Here was a ready explanation for all that had happened, or hadn't happened, since the night of the storm. The mutineers were merely giving us time to starve to death. Their spying expedition had doubtless shown them that our stores were gone, and they could easily argue that in a few days we, too, would be gone--at least gone past the point at which we could interfere with anything they wished to do on the island.

It was on a crabbing expedition when, as it chanced, I was paired with the youngest of the Van Tromp trio, that Edith asked a question which I knew must be trembling continually upon the lips of every woman in our forlorn company.

"How long can it last, Uncle Dick? How long can we live on just cocoanuts and hope, after the horrid great oysters are all gone, and these creepy, leggy crabs have grown too cunning to let us catch them?"

"We must try not to dwell upon that," I told her. "Our problem is to live from day to day."

"But there will come a day," she asserted. "I can see it in Billy's eyes, when I can get him to look at me."

"Ouch!" I said, purposely letting a crab nip my finger for the sake of making a diversion. But the tribe to which Miss Edith belongs rejoices in its ability to cling, limpet-like, to a matter in hand.

"The Caribs were cannibals, weren't they?--in the long ago?" she went on. "Are we coming to that, Richard Preble? If we should, Billy and I will draw straws. We're both young and tender, you know."

"Hush!" I commanded; "that isn't a pretty joke." And later that same day, when I was able to get hold of Billy Grisdale, I read the riot act to him.

"You want to rub the O-Lord-pity-us look out of your eyes, young man, and put a little more ginger into your conversation with Edie," I suggested. "She is beginning to see things in the back part of your brain, and that isn't good for little girl Crusoes."

"Take it to yourself!" he retorted spitefully. "I saw you looking at Conetta not fifteen minutes ago with a scare in your eyes big enough to set an innocent bystander's teeth on edge."

"I'll reform," I promised, "and so must you, Billy. Take Bonteck for your model; not me."

"Bonteck's got something up his sleeve," he said morosely. "He's been going through the bunch for weapons. Think of it--nine men of us here three thousand miles out of reach of a policeman, and not so much as one poor little potato-popgun among us."

This was a mistake on Billy's part, of course. We still had the three pistols taken from the men we had waylaid on the night of the storm, but of these no mention had been made to Billy or any of the others, since to speak of them would

have called for the story of the night's adventures--a story which Van Dyck and I were still keeping to ourselves.

But Billy's remark about the inquiry for weapons was news of a sort. Had Van Dyck caught a fresh glimpse of the *Andromeda's* smoke plume on the horizon he was always sweeping with the field-glass?

"Bonteck wasn't trying to disarm anybody, was he?" I asked.

"Oh, no. He talked sort of vaguely about a scrap of some kind, and being prepared for it; wanted to know if the professor and Grey and Dupuyster and I would put ourselves under orders, and do what he might tell us to, sight unseen. Said maybe he'd be able to explain more fully a little later on."

I thought I saw what was in Van Dyck's mind. His secret was gnawing the life out of him, and, sooner or later, it would have to come out. I knew well enough that he was not hesitating from any cowardly motive; it was rather because I had urged him to wait, holding out the hope that a more auspicious time for the telling of the plot would come--or at least that a less auspicious time than this starvation period could hardly come.

In the waiting interval, and as in some sense still our host and leader, he had been obliged to busy himself with something, and apart from the daily effort to make the hardships less grinding upon all of us, and the women in particular, he had organized the six of us men who were willing into four-hour watches of two men each to patrol the two beaches, urging our daily decreasing food supply as a reason for the increased vigilance, and insisting that we must not allow the smallest chance of discovery to escape us. If a ship were sighted in the night, the two watchers making the discovery were to arouse the other four instantly, and without giving a general alarm.

Though he had not confided it to me in detail, his plan was obvious enough. He was still expecting another return of the *Andromeda*, and was determined to make a desperate effort to regain possession of the yacht when the chance should offer. For this attempt, hazardous as it would surely prove to be, he could count definitely upon only six of our nine. Barclay was certainly out of it, and the major's age exempted him. Ingerson was a doubtful quantity--very doubtful from my point of view--and I questioned if Van Dyck would call upon him or make him a party to any plan that might be determined upon when the time for action should arrive. Still, outnumbered as we must be, a recapture of the yacht appeared to be our only hope. We might all starve a thousand times over before any chance ship should sight our isolated island; sight it and approach near enough to make out our distress signals.

Just how much or how little Van Dyck would confess to the others, if a time should come when he would no longer be able to keep silence, was a question that was puzzling me. To tell the assembled castaways that there had probably been a real mutiny where only a sham one was intended would cut no figure as news, since sixteen of our eighteen already believed it to have been real. That being the case, the only encouraging thing to be revealed was the burial of the golden hoard, and the reasonable hope it gave us that the *Andromeda* would come back, sooner or later, in order to search for it.

As to this, however, I was quite confident that Bonteck would never go so far as to tell the others about the gold planting. That he would publish the bald truth about his generous and lover-like little plot, the object of which was to enable Madeleine Barclay to buy her freedom of choice in matters matrimonial, was simply unthinkable. And if the gold-burying episode were to be left out of his confession, in what other manner could he account to the others for his belief that the yacht would eventually return?

As it came about, the answers to all these questioning reflections were already marshaling themselves for a descent upon us at the moment when I was undertaking to show Billy Grisdale that a man's eyes should be kept decently shuttered when his brain is conjuring up pictures of the terrible things that may happen to the loved one.

On this same evening Professor Sanford and I were paired to take the first watch for the patrolling of the beach, and at eight o'clock we set out from the camp in the glade, leaving the other members of our Crusoe company sitting around the dying embers of the cooking fire. Following the regular sentry-go routine, Sanford and I parted at the camp; he was to take the south beach and I the north, and we were to meet at the sandspit in which the island terminated to the eastward. As I tramped along upon my solitary watch round I was sorer than ever for Van Dyck. All that day he had been going about like a man with a dozen murders on his conscience, and it was plain to be seen that each added day--days in which he was obliged to see some of us actually going hungry because we hadn't been able to gather enough to satisfy eighteen normal and healthy appetites--was crowding him nearer to the brink of the humiliating confession chasm. From advising him not to tell, I was coming around to the opposite point of view and wishing that I hadn't tried to stop him. As matters stood, he was like a man facing a deferred surgical operation. It was true, the operation might prove fatal; but there were opportunities for the dying of any number of anticipatory deaths during the interval of suspense.

Skirting the northern edge of the island without seeing anything to mar the mirror-like surface of the starlit sea, I was

first at the sandspit rendezvous by a good half-hour. Since there was no reason for haste, and the sandy cape commanded a wide view of the watery waste in all directions save one, I filled my pipe with the final shakings of my last sack of tobacco, and after poking in the ashes of the neglected signal fire and finding no live coals among them, I lighted the pipe with one of the few precious matches we were hoarding, and sat down on the sands to wait. In due course of time the professor appeared, a dark figure trudging along aimlessly; and when he came nearer I saw that he had his hands clasped behind him and was walking with his head down like a person buried in the deepest thought--the very antitype of an alert coast guardsman on the watch for a sail. When he descried me he came over and sat down beside me, still thoughtfully abstracted.

"I was beginning to wonder what had become of you, Professor," I said, merely to start things going.

"Yes; I was detained. Mr. Van Dyck called me back shortly after you left," he explained half-absently. Then he opened up: "Mr. Preble, I have been listening to a most astounding--er--confession, I suppose you might call it. I wonder if you know what it is?"

"I do," I answered shortly. "Van Dyck has been telling you that a harmless little comedy planned by him to break the monotony of our cruise has turned into a potential tragedy, with all the attendant hardships and horrors."

"You are quite right. He was very manly about it, and he blames himself unsparingly. It was an exceedingly difficult thing for him to do--to tell us of it. He realized fully that the present conditions must make any explanation seem wretchedly inadequate."

"They do," I agreed, and then I asked the one burning question: "The others, Professor Sanford? How did they take it?"

"A-a-hem-hem--h'm; each after his or her kind, Mr. Preble. The women are pretty generally sympathetic. They see only the immense responsibility which Mr. Van Dyck freely acknowledges, and are very humanly and generously sorry for him. I wish I might say as much for the men. Grey and young Grisdale are both loyal, though it was plainly evident that Grey had to fight for his loyalty, since the unhappy outcome involves his wife. Ingerson talked and acted like a surly ruffian, as you would imagine; and Major Terwilliger's language was scarcely less reprehensible. Dupuyster played the man. He rebuked his uncle quite sharply and went across to grip Van Dyck's hand and to say what a manly fellow might say in the circumstances. And Miss Van Tromp--the second Miss Van Tromp--went with him."

"Of course," I said crustily--and made another mark on the score that I meant to settle with one Gerald Dupuyster if we should ever attain to a time when personal scores could be audited and settled. Then I reminded the professor that he had omitted Mr. Holly Barclay.

"I wish to continue omitting him," was the reply, and the professor's tone was a measure of his disgust. "Let it be sufficient to say that he made his daughter blush for very shame with his puerile accusations. He even went so far as to intimate that Mr. Van Dyck was not telling the truth; that the entire affair was a deep-laid plot designed to involve Miss Madeleine in some way."

"That was to be expected--from Holly Barclay," I said. "But you are omitting one more: Professor Abner Sanford, Ph. D."

I was relighting my pipe with another of the precious matches, and in the momentary flare the professor's plain-song face revealed itself. There was a half-quizzical smile wrinkling at the corners of the quiet gray eyes.

"Mrs. Sanford and I are Mr. Van Dyck's guests," he qualified. "But, apart from that, I was content to wait and hear what might develop further. As it appears, Mr. Van Dyck has not entirely lost hope. If there were a real mutiny--and, indeed, there seems little doubt of that--Van Dyck still has confidence in the resourcefulness of Goff, the sailing-master. He insists that, sooner or later, the *Andromeda* will return."

In the little interval of silence that followed I was turning the professor's story over thoughtfully in my mind. There had evidently been no mention made of the gold-burying episode. Van Dyck had dodged it very cleverly, it seemed, letting it be understood that his hope of the yacht's return was based upon the loyalty, in the last resort, of Elijah Goff. It was better that way. So long as the hope had been definitely held out to the others, there was no need of terrifying the women by telling them that if we should be lucky enough to regain our ship it would be by hard knocks and a rather forlorn-hope fight against overwhelming odds as to numbers and arms.

"There is still one vote outstanding, Mr. Preble--your own," said the professor, breaking into my reverie.

"You have already taken that for granted," I returned. "If Bonteck had confided in me before the fact--which I assure you he did not--I should certainly have vetoed his plan for a fortnight's picnic on this God-forsaken bit of coral in the

middle of nowhere. Yet, as his nearest friend, I can understand, perhaps better than any one else, why he was impelled to do it. Also, I can understand that he had no reason whatever to foresee the remotest possibility of any such tragic turn as things have taken."

"Of course, of course; I think we shall all understand that after we have duly weighed and considered." The professor had locked his fingers over his knees and was regarding me thoughtfully. "Do you know," he went on, quite as if the main problems had been worked out and definitely wiped from the blackboard, "do you know, I am sometimes a little regretful that I didn't learn to smoke tobacco in my younger days? You gentlemen of the pipe and cigar seem to get so much comfort out of it."

"It is never too late to mend--or mar," I told him; and with that we got up to resume our respective sentry beats by which, under the established routine, each of us would return to the camp end of the island by the route over which the other had come.

When we parted it was with the agreement to meet again at the western extremity of the island, and I ventured to call my watchmate's attention to the fact that a lookout's duty was to look out.

"Why, bless me!--of course it is," he laughed. "Now that you mention it, I remember that I wasn't very faithful on the way over here. I'll reform, Mr. Preble, I will, truly." And he went on his way around the north beach toward the bay of the galleon wreck.

It is probably a rare thing for a crisis in the affairs of a group of nearly a score of people to turn upon so trivial a matter as the tobacco habit. There was still an unburned dottle in my pipe, and I could not think of wasting it. If I had not stopped and felt in my pockets for my one remaining match while the professor was still a trudging shadow on the white sands of the northern beach, the crisis might have come and gone undiscovered by any soul of our eighteen.

For, just as I had found the match and was in the act of striking it, the ghost-like bulk of a ship loomed silently in the starlight a short half-mile to the eastward; a ship headed directly for the island and showing no lights. It was the *Andromeda* again.

XV

THE MERRY WAR

PUTTING the unlighted match carefully away in my pocket, I made a quick dash down the north beach to overtake the professor.

I told him what I had seen, and he exclaimed, "Dear me--you don't say so!" much as if I had rushed up to assure him that the exact value of *pi* in the circle-squaring problem had finally been ascertained. And then, quite placidly: "What do we do next, Mr. Preble?"

I didn't want to tell him that, in all probability, the *Andromeda* mutineers were merely coming back to dig for gold. That was still Van Dyck's personal secret. But it was not difficult to convince him that the yacht's errand was not friendly to us.

"They are creeping up quietly, at the wrong end of the island, and with no lights showing," I pointed out. "Which means that they are not coming to take us off. If you will stay here and keep in touch with them while I run back to camp and give the alarm----"

"Certainly," he agreed. Then: "I'm not to show myself?"

"By no manner of means. Don't let them see you or hear you, but keep them in sight if you can do it without exposing yourself. I shan't be gone any longer than I can help."

It was the better part of a mile down the beach to a point opposite the glade where our camp was pitched, and the night was warm; but I took small thought for either the distance or the heat. At the camp everybody but Van Dyck had turned in; at least, none of the others was in sight. Bonteck was sitting beside the expiring embers of the bit of cooking fire, with his head in his hands and his gaze fixed upon the patch of white ashes with its center spot of red coals.

I came up behind him, touched his shoulder, and hastily whispered the news: "The *Andromeda* is clawing up to the other end of the island just as she did before--at half speed, and with no lights showing."

"Thank God she is back at last!" he muttered, starting up quickly. "It falls in at the right minute, Dick. I was just saying to myself that I'd go dippy if I couldn't fight somebody or something. Turn out the squad, as quietly as you can."

Moving cautiously so as not to awaken any of the non-combatants, I aroused Grey, Dupuyster and Billy Grisdale and told them what was to the fore. Van Dyck herded us quickly out of the camp circle, and on the beach he groped under the palmettos and uncovered our scanty arsenal; the three pistols and the two knives we had taken from our former captives. If our lately awakened recruits were surprised at the appearance of the weapons they said nothing, nor was there any comment made when, out of the same hiding place, Bonteck drew a half-dozen stout, serviceable clubs and distributed them as he had the more modern weapons.

"Now then, if you are all ready," he said, giving the word. "Set the pace, Dick, and we'll try to keep up with you." And a moment later we were running silently in single file along the north beach toward the eastern-point lookout where I had posted Sanford.

In making me the pace-setter, Bonteck builded more wisely than he knew--more wisely than any of us knew at the time. Having just completed a mile dash at the best speed I could compass, I was fain to set an easy dog-trot for the return, so we were all comparatively fresh when we reached the scene of action and found the professor.

Our lookout's report was brief and to the point. The *Andromeda* had steamed up silently and was lying off the south shore at no great distance from us, and as yet there was no movement aboard; at least, the professor said he hadn't been able to see anything stirring on her decks. But Van Dyck, making a hasty reconnaissance, came back with better information.

"They are lowering the electric launch by hand," he announced. Then he outlined the situation for us in a few brittle words. "You all understand, I take it, that they have not come back--secretly, this way--to rescue us. We may ignore their real object for the present and come to the immediate necessities. If we get possession of the yacht, we shall doubtless have to fight for it."

"Just say when and how," Billy Grisdale cut in tersely, trying the strength of his club over his knee.

Van Dyck sketched his plan rapidly, and it was evident that he had worked out the details in advance, basing his conclusions upon what he and I had seen on the night of the storm.

"They will land a party in the launch, and our first move will be to capture every man of that landing party, dead or alive, and without making any noise. So don't use the firearms. If their boat's crew doesn't return within a reasonable time, they'll send again to find out what has become of it. When they do that, we'll repeat, and by eating them up a little at a time--but you get the idea, I'm sure." And to me: "Dick, will you take the command? You are better qualified than any of the rest of us."

"You are doing very well, yourself," I told him. "Show us the way and we'll stay with you."

"All right," he agreed briefly. "I think we all understand that this is likely to be our last chance, so far as the yacht is concerned. There are nine women up at the other end of the island who will, in all human probability, starve to death if we bungle this thing and let the *Andromeda* get away from us. Keep that in mind when you hit, and hit hard!"

Since the choice of position was one of the few advantages we should have in the coming struggle, we picked our way silently across the point to the wood fringe from which Van Dyck and I had witnessed the earlier landing. Judging from the little we could see in the starlight, the mutineers were making hard work of the job of clearing away the electric launch without the aid of the steam winch. In spite of Mr. Edison's continued and most ingenious efforts to find a substitute for the lead in them, storage batteries are still heavy contrivances; and at the end of it the weighty little tender got away from the men at the davit tackles and dropped into the sea with a resounding slap that might have been heard half-way around the island.

For a minute or two the small boat lay chafing against the side of the yacht, and there was no attempt made to man it; from which we inferred that the mutineers were waiting to ascertain if the crash of the sudden launching had given the alarm. In view of the fact that the invaders had every reason to believe that we were all either dead or dying from starvation by this time, it struck me that they were excessively cautious, and I spoke of this to Van Dyck.

"That is the 'spiggotty' of it," he commented in low tones. "Lequat's name is French, but I'd be willing to bet that he and his backers are of the mongrel breed--dock-rats who will fight only when they're cornered."

"Will they be well armed, do you think?" I asked.

"Heaven knows. Every man that Goff picked up in New York may have been a walking arsenal, for all I know to the

contrary. As for the yacht itself, there were only a few sport guns in the cabins, as you saw for yourself."

Whether they were over-cautious, or only prudently careful, the intending invaders waited fully ten minutes, I should say, before making another move. But at last, silhouetting themselves as black shadows against the white paint of the *Andromeda's* side, a boat's crew came over the rail, dropping man by man into the launch. We counted the shadowy figures slipping over the yacht's side. As in the yawl's crew, there were seven; a man apiece for us, and one extra, for good measure.

"I'll take that odd man," Billy Grisdale whispered in my ear. "I can't go back to Edie with less than two scalps at my belt, you know."

"Shut up!" I hissed. "They'll hear you, and then you won't get even one."

The launch got under way at once and presently came skimming through the gap in the reef, the narrowness of which had proved the undoing of the yawl on the night of the hurricane. The electrically driven boat made no sound other than the purring murmur of its motor and the soft, ripping sheer of the sharp cutwater as it turned a tiny bow wave. Once within the lagoon, the launch was steered straight for the beach. This time, as it appeared, there was to be no shilly-shallying.

A landing was made within a few yards of our covert. Six of the men got out when the tender's prow slid up on the sand, and the remaining man rummaged under the thwarts and heaved a pick and a shovel ashore. Then a curious thing happened. Without a word uttered, the six men on the sands became suddenly involved in a fierce and mysterious struggle. Twice one of the six broke away, only to be instantly caught and dragged back by the others; and it was not until the brief battle was over, and five of the men were shoving the sixth ahead of them into the wood, that Van Dyck found the answer and passed the word to the rest of us.

"That's Goff, and they're making him show them the way! Come on!"

We followed, and there was no need for any great amount of caution on our part. The men ahead of us were trampling through the jungle undergrowth with little heed for the noise they made, and we were close upon them when they halted in the small open space marked by the lump of coral. Since it was well-nigh pitch dark in the tree-shadowed glade, a light of some sort was a necessity, and one of the men knelt to kindle the wick of a ship's lantern. The sputtering flare of the match illuminated a striking tableau for us. Lequat, hatless, and with a red bandanna bound around his head in true buccaneer fashion, stood aside, leaning upon the bared blade of a huge weapon, half sabre and half machete. Two of the others held Goff pinioned by his arms, and the odd man had the pick and shovel.

Van Dyck held us back until the lantern was fairly alight and the kneeling man was about to rise. Then, at his whispered "*Now!*" we rushed the silent group.

It is a worn saying that a man knows no more of a battle than that small portion of it which may fall to his share. My share in the sharp struggle which followed was simple enough. Out of the confused tangle of legs and arms and writhing bodies I dragged my man, one of Goff's pinioners whom I had picked out in the brief flare of the lantern-lighting match. That, and a quieting tap from the butt of the big Navy pistol which had fallen to me in the distribution of weapons, was all there was to it. Before I could get in again, the fight was over, and Van Dyck was stooping to put a match to the wick of the ship's lantern which had been kicked aside and had gone out in the scuffling battle.

The scene revealed by the renewed lantern light was not without its element of grim humor. Our victory had been sweepingly complete, and the small open space was strewn with the prone figures of the vanquished. Van Dyck had been thoughtful enough to bring a coil of light tent rope with him from our camp, and Grey and Grisdale were already at work like trained thief-takers binding and gagging the captives. Over in the edge of the glade the professor was trying mercifully to replace the dislocated shoulder of a small man who was groaning and squirming under him, and begging in broken English to be spared; the patient pleading while the amateur surgeon was assuring him blandly that the disabled arm would be pulled out by the roots if he raised his voice above a whisper.

It was Elijah Goff, fully reinstated now as a victim of circumstances like ourselves, who went to the professor's assistance.

"Lemme sit on his head while you yank, Professor," he said with dry humor. "I'm owin' that tarnation little rat suthin' fr the way he's been keelhaulin' me." And thereupon we saw that the professor's capture was the ex-steward, Lequat, whose formidable weapon the mild-mannered old scholar had actually broken off short at the hilt with the same shrewd bludgeon stroke that had crippled the ex-steward's sword arm.

After our five prisoners were safely trussed up and silenced with primitive gags made of knotted rope, we wasted no more time upon them. The man left with the boat remained to be secured, and his removal from the scene was a bit of

routine. He had come ashore to stand by the bow of the beached launch, and apparently he mistook us for his own people returning. Anyway, he made scarcely a show of resistance when we surrounded him, and Billy Grisdale garroted him with the bit of knotted rope which was presently forced between his teeth to keep him quiet while we bound and dragged him back into the wood to the general rendezvous.

The launch's manning thus disposed of, we held a sober council of war, with Goff on the witness stand. The old skipper told his story briefly, and in the main it accorded fairly well with Van Dyck's prefigurings. The mutiny and seizure of the yacht had been real enough, and the conspirators had chosen the moment when the sham uprising was to have been staged; namely, the evening when Edie Van Tromp's cry of "Land-o-o-o!" had announced the *Andromeda's* approach to the island. Goff had been overpowered on the bridge, and the Americans, Haskell, Quinby and the others, had been imprisoned in the engine-room and fire hold, where, so Goff told us, they were still confined. The skipper could not say how many members of the crew proper were in the conspiracy, but those who were not had doubtless been overawed by threats of violence; given the choice between obedience and submission, and walking the plank.

"All I know is it ain't a sailormen's crowd," said the grizzled old Gloucesterman in summing up. "It's mostly cooks and cabin stewards, and that kind of riff-raff, with that fat Frenchman, Bassinette, at the head of 'em. Near as I could figger, they're revolutionaries o' some sort. They got an idee there was big money some'ere's aboard, and I call'late they've dum near tore the insides out o' the yacht lookin' for it."

"Bassinette, the *chef*?" Van Dyck queried. "Then this fellow Lequat wasn't the ringleader?"

"No more 'n I be," said Goff. "He's nothin' but an understrapper, carryin' out orders. But he's a navigator--of a sort."

"Where has the yacht been all this time?" It was Grey who wanted to know.

"Been mostly standin' off and on over to the Central American coast, unloadin' a cargo of guns and ammunition that was picked up off the Isle o' Pines," was the calm reply. "When they got through with that, Bassinette told me he was comin' back here to take you folks off. I mistrusted he was lyin' like a whitehead about what he was comin' for, but it looked 's if any chance was better 'n none, so I give him his bearin's, which I suspicion Lequat wa'n't sailorman enough to figger out fr himself. There was bad weather brewin' when we got here, and they had to cut and run fr it afore a gale o' wind."

"Did they try to land at all?" Billy Grisdale asked.

"Couldn't prove nothin' by me," said Goff, and I got the idea he was trying to fight off from the question. "They had me locked up in one o' the cabins."

At this, Grey broke in again.

"You say you mistrusted that these fellows were not coming back to take us off, Captain Goff: what were they coming for, then? And what were they planning to do back here in the wood with a pick and shovel just now when we closed in on them?"

I saw Van Dyck's hand shoot out to grip the sailing-master's arm. If it were a warning, the old skipper was quick to act upon it.

"There's an old yarn about a buried gold-mine some'eres in these waters," he drawled. "I guess putty near everybody's heard it, fust 'r last. Shouldn't wonder if Bassinette and his crowd think they've got a pointer on it. Maybe they thought that was what we was headin' here for. Wouldn't supprise me a mite."

The explanation was certainly an ingenious one, and it fully proved the justice of Van Dyck's trust in the old fisherman skipper. But the questioner was still unsatisfied. In his proper environment, as I have said, Mr. John Grey figured as an able young lawyer, and when he could forget Annette and his new-found happiness long enough, the lawyer gifts came easily to the front.

"What made them bring you ashore, Captain Goff?" he asked shrewdly.

But Goff proved to be far too old a bird to be caught napping.

"Maybe they was call'latin' to have me do the diggin'," he returned with a sly chuckle. "Wouldn't put it a mite beyond 'em."

It was Van Dyck who brought the talk back to things present and pressing.

"We know definitely now what we are up against," he said. "How many of the men are in this with Bassinette,

Captain 'Lige?'"

"They kep' me too close to tell. Maybe half of 'em, 'r maybe more. And another thing--they've got guns and pistols, plenty of 'em."

Some earnest of this we had had in the taking of the prisoners in the glade. They were all armed, but the weapons were for the most part out of date; pistols and knives, one repeating rifle of an old model, a pair of brass knuckles, a wicked looking "life-preserver"--a short leather club, lead-loaded in the striking end. But we found only a scattering score or so of cartridges for the firearms.

These weapons we now shared impartially among ourselves, and when the professor volunteered to go back in the wood and stand guard over the prisoners, Van Dyck suggested that it was time we were making a reconnaissance in force in the enemy's direction, the war council having been held at a point about half-way between the glade and the beach. Nobody could say certainly what move the mutineers on the yacht would make next, and in spite of Goff's assurances to the contrary, Van Dyck was afraid they might take the alarm and run away, abandoning the launch's crew to whatever fate had befallen it.

"Not much danger o' that," Goff insisted; and after Grisdale, Grey and Dupuyster had been posted in the forest fringe with instructions to keep a sharp lookout for renewed activities upon the *Andromeda*, Van Dyck drew Goff and me aside and went straight to the heart of things.

"Mr. Preble and I were here on the beach that night when the yacht came up and then had to make a run for it, Captain 'Lige," he began. "Didn't you know they sent a boat's crew ashore that night?"

Goff nodded. "Didn't know how much 'r how little you wanted t'other folks to know. Had me locked up in a cabin on the starb'd side and I saw the yawl get off--and saw that it didn't get back. Maybe you can tell me what happened to that boat-load o' scamps?"

Van Dyck told our part in the happenings briefly, and the old Banksman chuckled delightedly.

"Good stroke o' business--catchin' 'em that way when they was all fagged out with swimmin',"--adding vindictively: "only you ought to 've knocked every single one on 'em in the head, when you had 'em. As it was----"

"Yes," said Van Dyck; "as it was?----"

"As it was, we clawed back here just afore day the next mornin', and with the seas putty near rollin' the yacht's rail under, Bassinette made out to get ashore with the gasoline launch when it was just about as much as any man's life was worth to try it. He fetched back five o' the seven men that went ashore in the yawl. You said two of 'em was drowned, didn't you?"

"They were," said I.

"This man Bassinette," Van Dyck broke in. "He is the cook you picked up in New York. Did you know anything about him when you shipped him?"

Goff shook his head. "Somethin' kind o' queer about that big lummux," he averred. "If I didn't know better, I'd 'most be willin' to go into court and swear he isn't the man I shipped in New York. Looks as much like him as two peas, but that's all. If we'd been anywheres to get rid o' him and pick up his double----"

"Wait," I interposed. "We laid up for a day at Gracias a Dios with a disabled propeller shaft. Didn't some of the men have shore leave that day?"

"By gravy, I b'lieve you've hit it, Mr. Preble!" Goff exclaimed. "It was after we left Gracias that I took to noticin' that Bassinette seemed sort o' different, somehow; didn't grin same as he used to when I'd stick my head into his galley. And he was consider'ble thick with a bunch o' them outlandishmen we picked up in New York ha'bor. Look 's if we'd all ought to be bored fr the hollow-horn, Mr. Van Dyck!"

It was beginning to look that way to me, too, but Van Dyck didn't push the inquiry any further.

"We can let that part of it rest for the present," he said, and at his suggestion we joined the other three in the ambush at the beach edge.

Up to this time there had been no further sign of life on board the yacht. Though there were no premonitory symptoms of a storm brewing, the night was oppressively warm and there was hardly a breath of air stirring. Nevertheless, there is always some little movement in the sea, and during the interval which had elapsed since the launch party had left her, the *Andromeda* had drifted a bit nearer in and was now fairly opposite the narrow reef inlet,

and not more than a short cable's length outside of it.

"If we could only contrive some means of making them come to anchor," Van Dyck muttered. "A bit of breeze would turn the trick, but there is no promise of that."

"He'd be too foxy to anchor, even if 'twas blowin' half a gale," was Goff's reply to this. "What I say is to take the launch and board him. There's six of us, and we've got the tools, such as they are. I cal'late if we could fight our way to the engine-room hatch and let Haskell and his gang out----"

"I am afraid to risk the boarding," Van Dyck admitted. "Not for ourselves, but for the women who will be left if we shouldn't succeed. There are good glasses on board, and those fellows probably know how to use them. If it were only a little darker, so that we might stand some chance of getting out to them before they could recognize us--but they'd be sure to, and put steam to the yacht."

I guess the suspense was getting on our nerves. I am sure it was on mine. The very silence was oppressive, and it seemed as if the lapping of the little waves on the sands and the rise and fall of the gentle swell on the reef were hushed. Then, too, the white yacht in the near offing grew more and more like a ghost ship as we strained our eyes watching her for some sign of life. It was Dupuyster who broke the spell.

"I say, Bonteck, old dear, don't you know, I'm the only original human fish, when it comes to swimmin'," he whispered. "Toss me the sharpest knife in the lot, and I'll toddle out there and anchor the *Andromeda* for you--dashed if I don't."

Of course, there was a low-toned chorus of protest. Sharks occasionally came into the lagoon, as we all knew, and since ships usually have a following of them in tropical waters, there would certainly be one or more of the man-eaters in the deeper water beyond the reef. Also, admitting that a swimmer could reach the *Andromeda* without having a leg or an arm bitten off on the way, there were mechanical difficulties to be overcome. The anchors were catted at the bows of the yacht, with the slack of the cables taken in, and the anchor flukes themselves triced up in heavy hempen slings in man-o'-war style. It would be a man's job to cut the slings with anything short of a sharp axe.

Our arguments nugatory were hurried but thorough. If Dupuyster should live to reach the yacht and climb aboard, he would certainly be discovered from the bridge before he could cut the lashings to free an anchor. And, admitting that the thing could be done, what would be gained? What was to prevent the mutineers from throwing the steam winch into gear and heaving the anchor up again?

While we were expostulating, Jerry--not the carefully Anglicized clubman we had known, but a most surprisingly red-blooded reincarnation of him--was calmly preparing to get himself shark-bitten.

"I say, by Jove, you chappies had better hedge on some of those bets you're making," he drawled. "If Uncle Jimmie were here, he'd take you, don't you know. Find me that knife, and a couple of the biggest pistol cartridges. That's all I want."

Provided with his simple armament, Jerry, stripped to the buff, and with the knife and the cartridges secured in an impromptu belt made of his discarded undershirt, wormed his way down to the beach and took the water under the bilge of the stranded launch as silently as a fish. When he came up from the long dive we could trace him by the faint phosphorescence showing now and then in the ripples of his wake.

It was a horrible strain, watching him as he worked his way across the lagoon to the inlet through the reef. Every instant we were expecting to see the disturbance which would mark the lunge and back-roll of an attacking man-eater, and I could not help wondering which of the two women, Conetta or Beatrice Van Tromp, would reproach us the more bitterly for letting him go to his death.

We lost trace of him after his faintly luminous trail disappeared at the gap in the reef. Just then the windless calm was broken by a mere breath of air stirring out of the southeast, and the *Andromeda*, still a dead hulk swinging gently to the slow heave and dip of the scarcely perceptible swell, was now drifting landward by more than the measured inchings; she had decreased her earliest distance by considerably more than half. It could be only a matter of minutes before whoever was in command would have to give her sternway with the engines to keep her from going on the reef, in which case Dupuyster would have taken his life in his hand for nothing. A half-dozen backward turns of the big twin screws would take the yacht out of his reach, and would probably take her out of soundings so that a dropped anchor would find no bottom.

Van Dyck whispered all this to me while we were holding our breath and making our eyes water in the effort to get another glimpse of the swimmer's trail.

"He'll never make it--never in this world!" Van Dyck concluded in the stifled whisper. "We were criminal fools for letting him try it. It's sheer suicide, and we all knew it!"

"I have forgiven him," I said grimly.

"Forgiven him? For what?"

"For playing fast and loose with Conetta. He has asked her, you know, and she has said 'Yes.' And in spite of that, he has been making open love to Beatrice Van Tromp ever since we were put ashore here."

"Don't make a damned jealous idiot of yourself!" was the hot retort. "If you weren't bat-blind in both eyes----"

The interruption was the thunderous racket we had by this time given up all hope of hearing. With a mighty splash and a deafening clamor from the paying-out cable, the *Andromeda's* starboard anchor let go, and from the shortness of the uproar we knew that it had taken ground upon the outer ledges of the reef. Following the rattling clamor, we heard the pad-pad of running men, and were able to guess that the slack discipline of the mutineers had been responsible for a deserted forward deck. There was a barked-out order in a foreign tongue from the bridge, a hissing of steam, and the power capstan was promptly set in motion to break the anchor out of its hold.

At the second or third turn of the capstan something happened; a snapping explosion up forward, and a prolonged hammering and grinding, as if the steam hoisting machinery were patiently and painstakingly wrecking itself. In the midst of this new turmoil we saw a slender white figure shoot over the yacht's bow in a headlong dive, and heard the crackling spatter of a pistol fusillade opened upon the diver from the bridge.

"We'll hang the last living man of them if they got him!" Van Dyck declared vindictively, when the velvety silence of the tropical night had settled down again, and we had looked earnestly but in vain for some sign of the diver from the yacht's bows. Then he turned to Grey: "Jack, you'd better drop out and run back to camp. It is hardly possible that the women are sleeping through all this war noise. You'll know what to say. Tell them to keep together and to make no noise. They're out of the danger zone, and we'll make it our business to try to prevent the scrapping from drifting down to that end of the island. Don't say anything about Jerry. We won't give him up until we have to. That's all; but hurry back. We'll probably be needing you by the time you've made the round trip."

Grey slipped off silently, doubling the sandspit point of the island in order to have the unmenaced north beach for his speedway. After he was gone there was a terrible wait for the four of us left crouching in the shadow of the palms. For what seemed like an age there was no sign of our forlorn-hope swimmer. As nearly as we could judge from the noises on board the yacht, the mutineers were trying to repair the disabled capstan. Apparently it didn't suit them to be tied by the leg and unable to run away.

"Let me have that old rifle, Billy," said Van Dyck; this after the capstan noises had been located. Lying flat, Bonteck aimed as well as he could in the uncertain light, and we distinctly heard the clang of the bullet as it penetrated the metal bulwarks of the yacht's stem. The single shot did the business, and we heard no more hammerings at the crippled machinery.

Beyond this, we waited again while the minutes dragged on, leaden-winged, slowly but surely extinguishing the hope that Dupuyster had escaped. But, after hope was quite dead in the four hearts of us, and a hot thirst for vengeance was beginning to take its place, we saw Jerry in our own edge of the lagoon, swimming slowly and rolling from side to side with his stroke, like a man utterly spent.

I think all four of us dashed wildly into the shallows to drag him out and rush him to cover in the jungle edge. He was gasping for breath, and even in the poor light we could see a long red splash on one thigh; a cut from which the blood was still oozing. Van Dyck stripped his own shirt to bandage the wound, and the reincarnated one protested manfully.

"Bally lot of trouble you're takin' over a scratch," he gurgled. "Bleedin' will stop of its own accord when it gets ready. But if any gentleman should--er--happen to have a drop of cognac about him----"

Grisdale hadn't, and I hadn't, and I was pretty sure Van Dyck hadn't. But at a three-handed chorus of "Sorry, old man," Elijah Goff, the one dyed-in-the-wool teetotaler of the *Andromeda's* company, produced a pocket flask, and Dupuyster took a single swallow from it; swallowed, choked a bit over whatever fiery liquor it was, and then told us his story while we were giving him a rough-handed rub-down and helping him into his clothes.

"No, the swim wasn't anything, but I had a perishin' lot of trouble climbin' aboard the old tub. After that, it was easy; all I had to do was to cut a lot of the rope things you told me about and stand clear, what?"

"But the capstan?" Billy Grisdale wanted to know. "How the dickens did you contrive to put that out of

commission?"

"Dynamited it, old dear; stuck the two bally pistol cartridges into the cogwheels, don't you know, and hoped they'd do their bit when the wheels began to turn. If you'll believe me, the shop was fairly dizzy with bits of iron and things when they put the steam on. I didn't wait to see the third act. His Jaglets was waitin' for me, and I took a header to get a fair start of him, don't you see."

"A shark!" gasped Billy.

"You've named him. The perishin' beggar had followed me all the way out to the yacht and couldn't quite make up his mind to try it on. But comin' back he got his nerve screwed up, by Jove. It was under the edge of the reef, and when he turned for the snap I stuck the bloomin' knife into him and left it there."

"But--but he bit you in the leg!" said Billy, and I knew he was swelling up like the frog in the fable with a huge access of hero-worship.

"Chuck it, Billy," said the shark fighter good-naturedly, and for once in a way the British accent was lacking. "Let's say that I scratched the leg climbin' over the reef. It'll sound better."

Just then Grey came back, having cut across the island from the north beach by way of the glade where the prisoners had been left. His report was reassuring. The women, and two of the men, the major and Holly Barclay, had been awakened by the firing, but there was no panic--proof positive that we had finally vanquished the greater part of the civilized conventions. Ingerson was still asleep, and Grey suspected that he had found the last of the brandy bottles, the one which Van Dyck had been jealously hoarding against an emergency. Grey admitted that he had lied freely to the non-combatants, particularly in assuring his wife and Conetta, Madeleine and Beatrice Van Tromp and Edie, that none of us was taking any chance of getting hurt. He had repeated Van Dyck's instructions, and they had promised not to scatter, and to stay under cover--such cover as the wood afforded. Finishing up, Grey spoke of the professor and his guard-mounting over the six pirates.

"He has the lantern between his knees, and I found him dissecting some leaves he had picked up, and poring over that little pocket Botany of his," he chuckled. "He didn't see me at all until I came up and said 'Scat!' to him."

This part of the report was rather disconcerting. With the professor engrossed in his favorite study, anything might happen in the way of a jail delivery, and I said as much.

"Go and see about it, Dick," was Van Dyck's order, and I was about to obey when Billy Grisdale gripped my arm and pointed toward the yacht. On the deck of the *Andromeda*, where everything had been quiet since the firing of the shot which had driven the capstan repairers from their job, a dimly defined group of toilers were hoisting some heavy object to the roof of the raised deck house. I couldn't make out what they were doing, but Bonteck's eyes were better than mine.

"Duck and scatter!" he commanded sharply. "It's the little signal gun, and they're training it on us!"

We had dodged and run nimbly to right and left before the little brass signal piece belched fire and sent a volley of nondescript missiles hurtling into the scrub palmettos under which we had been crouching. What the desperate chief cook of the *Andromeda* hoped to accomplish by this haphazard bombardment of the jungle which, so far as he knew, sheltered a half-dozen of his own men as well as whatever enemy he thought he was firing at, was a mystery unexplained until after our scattered force was reassembled safely out of range.

But we were made to understand quickly enough. Under cover of the cannon fire, the electric launch slid out from its landing place upon the placid waters of the lagoon, cut a swift half-circle and headed for the open sea and the yacht. While we were watching and waiting, some one of the mutineers had emulated Dupuyster's daring example, and had swum ashore to steal the launch, thus putting an end to any notion we may have had of fighting the little war to a conclusion on the *Andromeda's* deck.

XVI

A MARATHON AND AN ULTIMATUM

CALLING this bold cutting-out of the electric launch the close of the first bout, we were obliged to admit that the enemy had taken a hard fall out of us at the finish. As matters now stood, the advantage was with the mutineers. To be

sure, we had six of their men, including their first mate and navigator, safely laid by the heels; and Jerry Dupuyster's plucky adventure had tied up the yacht, temporarily, at least. But without a boat we could not press the fighting, and the six hostages were more likely to prove a burden than a forfeit with which to bargain. Bassinette, or whoever it was who was commanding the mutineers, would know that he was dealing with men who would neither starve nor slay their prisoners; though he should have known, and doubtless did know, that we ourselves were by this time in dire straits for food. And as to the tethering anchor chain, they would surely be a witless lot aboard of the *Andromeda* if they should not remember that they could compel Haskell and his mechanician assistants to cut the cable.

It soon developed, however, that the amateur pirates were not thinking of running away. Shortly after the electric launch had whisked to safety under the stern of the yacht, it appeared again with a new crew to man it. At first we thought the militant chief cook was going to attempt a sortie and a rescue of the prisoners, but he had a better scheme than that, as we were presently to learn. Keeping outside of the enclosing reef, he sent the launch slowly westward, holding it far enough out to be beyond pistol range, but paralleling the reef as if seeking for another inlet. Elijah Goff hazarded a guess at his intention.

"You folks 've got a camp o' some sort, hain't ye?" he asked; and when Van Dyck gave the expected affirmative: "I guess maybe he's spyin' 'round to find that camp. He cal'lates that'll be your weak spot, if you've got one."

That was enough to set us swiftly in motion, of course, and by hastening we kept abreast of the launch all the way along the south side of the island, though with no little difficulty, since, under the fair certainty that the boat's crew had firearms, we dared not show ourselves on the beach. At the western end of the island Grey cut across to carry word to the women, while the rest of us fought with the jungle and so kept the launch in sight all the way around the point.

Doubling the western reef ledge, the reconnoitering boat party proceeded to pass the northern shore of the island in review; and again we kept the pace, watching each inlet through the reef narrowly as the launch approached it, and hoping, rather than fearing, that the mutineers would turn in and attempt a landing and so bring matters to a crisis. It was grueling work keeping abreast of the motor-driven tender, and by the time we had made the complete circuit of the island, we were wringing wet with perspiration, and spent with running.

It was not until after a second circuit of the island was begun, with the launch still dribbling along outside of the reef, that we came to the full knowledge of what the mutineer chief was doing. He assumed that we would be following him and keeping him in sight, and he meant to run us to death; in other words, to keep us running until we could run no more. He doubtless knew, or guessed, that our camp was at the opposite end of the island from the treasure plantation, and that we couldn't guard both at the same time.

The second lap of the Marathon was a sheer fight for life, or, rather, for the breath to sustain life. If we could have kept to the beach without drawing the fire of the launch it would not have been so bad, but a single attempt to do this brought a flash and crack from the sea, and we had to dive to cover again. By the time we reached the camp end of the island this second time, Grey was reeling and tripping like a drunken man, and Van Dyck ordered him out of the running ranks.

"Stay by the women!" was the gasped-out command, and thereupon we lost Grey.

The completion of the second lap practically finished the five of us who were still in the race. When we came in sight of the *Andromeda* we were staggering and stumbling and caroming helplessly against the trees and other obstacles. Unless we should be given a breathing space we all knew that the game was up, so far as we were concerned; but happily the breath-catching interval was given us. Reaching the inlet opposite the yacht, the mutineers steered the motor-driven tender boldly through it and headed for the island beach. The chief was evidently taking it for granted that he had worn us out and left us behind, and was making a quick dash to gain possession of the island.

Van Dyck kept his head, in spite of the maddening fatigue that was fairly killing every man of us.

"Down!" he panted hoarsely. "Get ready and hold your fire until you can see their faces--then let 'em have it!"

At the most, we wouldn't have had to wait more than a minute or so; but Billy Grisdale was too young and too excited to wait. While the launch was still so far out as to make a shot a mere guess hazard in the starlight, Billy pulled the trigger of the pistol which had fallen to him in the distribution of the captured weapons, and the mischief was done. Of course, we all banged away at the crack of Billy's pistol, but there was every reason to believe that the volley went wide of the mark. In a twinkling the tender's motor was reversed, and there was a wild scramble aboard of her to get the emergency oars out to help her around. In the thick of it Van Dyck took a long-distance chance with the old-model rifle. There was a shrill scream and a flash of blue-and-green electric fire from the boat's motor to follow the shot, and the power went off. Goff's chuckle was like the creaking of a rusty door-hinge.

"I call'te they won't run the legs off'n us any more with *that* push boat," he said; and since the launch's crew paddled hurriedly out to the *Andromeda* with the motor still dead, the prophecy seemed to be in the way of fulfilling itself.

Shortly after the last man had disappeared over the yacht's rail, the empty launch, apparently towed from the deck above, also disappeared around the stern of the *Andromeda*, by which we inferred that the mutineers had some notion of trying to repair it, or at least of determining to what extent its motor was crippled. Pending another move, we waited again, and were glad enough of a chance to lie quiet and have a breathing spell.

While we were resting, Grey came up, pluckily refusing to be left out of the forefront of things. As before, he had skirted the northern beach and had crossed through the treasure glade to come up behind us as we lay watching the yacht. Sanford, he reported, was still holding the lantern upon the pages of his Botany book, and was only mildly curious to know what all the running and racing and shooting portended.

At "Camp Hurricane," as Edie Van Tromp had named our storm-driven refuge, there was plenty of excitement, and quite naturally a good bit of alarm. Of the three men who might be said to be posing as "home guards," only one, Major Terwilliger, Grey told us, had offered to join the fighting force. Barclay was again playing sick, and Ingerson was sleeping, log-like, through it all.

"I took it upon myself to turn the major down," said Grey. "He is too old to keep the pace we've been setting, so I told him to stay by the women, and left my pistol with him to chirk him up a bit. But I doubt if he'd put up much of a fight, for all his military title."

"Ow, I say, old dear; you're off, there," Jerry put in quickly. "Uncle Jimmie will fight like a dashed old billy goat if he's pushed to it, don't you know!" And we were obliged to take Jerry's word for it.

After the disappearance of the electric launch around the stern of the *Andromeda* there were no sounds for a time; nothing that would enable us to guess what the mutineers' next move would be. But later there came a creaking of tackles, and the clanking of a steam winch--one of the smaller winches operating the boat falls.

"Taking the tender aboard for repairs," I suggested; but Van Dyck said they were more likely lowering the long-boat, which was also motor-driven with a small gasoline engine for its propelling power.

"How about it, Captain 'Lige?" he queried; and the sailing-master confirmed the guess, saying:

"That's about the way of it. That con-dummed Frenchman is layin' off to give us another chance to play ring-around-the-rosy with him."

Billy Grisdale had kept quiet for five full minutes, which was little less than miraculous.

"Say," he broke in, "I've been hearing something like a file or a saw going out there on the yacht ever since the scrimmage was called off. Listen!"

We did listen, and the sound was unmistakable. Van Dyck clicked the lever of the repeating rifle and sent a shot whistling over the *Andromeda's* bow. There was a clatter as of hastily dropped tools and the filing noise ceased.

"It'll begin again, just as soon as he's toled us away from here," Goff predicted. "He's got to gnaw himself loose from that anchor, and he knows it."

Van Dyck took the hint.

"We are going to keep as much as we've got," he declared. And then to Grey: "How well do you shoot, Jack?"

"Couldn't hit the side of a barn, not even if it were painted white," confessed the rising young lawyer.

It was at this conjuncture that Jerry Dupuyster surprised us again.

"Me for the bally old pot-shotting. I'm fairly good at the birds, don't you know. Took the blue ribbon over the field at Lord Erpin'am's last fall--what? Give me the gun, and say when and where."

Bonteck passed the rifle over to the reincarnated club idler.

"You heard what Goff said. That infernal French sea cook will begin to run us again as soon as he gets the long-boat over the side. When that happens, you stay here and keep your ear out for that anchor-chain filing. If it begins again, aim a little high and invite them to quit."

"I'm on," said Dupuyster. "But I'm dashed if I know why you want me to hold high on the perishers."

"For the simple reason that they may be forcing Haskell or Quinby to do the work, and we don't want to kill any of our friends," was Bonteck's explanation.

While he was speaking we heard the first broken sputterings of the long-boat's gasoline engine, and a little later the boat itself slid out like a white shadow past the *Andromeda's* stem, and a third circumnavigation of the island was begun. Van Dyck stood up, tightened his belt and groaned. "We're in for another ride on the merry-go-round!" he lamented. "Fall in, you fellows."

We fell in, and the word was well-chosen. Lying by for the half-hour or so after doing the double Marathon had stiffened every weary leg muscle. Cursing the mutineers for the lack, or seeming lack, of originality which was leading them to repeat an expedient that had failed, we ran on, taking to the beach now, and risking a volley from the long-boat for the sake of having a better running track.

So running, and keeping cannily abreast of the white shadow in the offing, we had covered possibly half of the distance to the western end of the island when the crack of a rifle from the rear, followed instantly by a scattering fusillade, halted us abruptly.

The rifle was replying spitefully to the fusillade as Van Dyck, who had been leading the race, wheeled, spread his arms and herded us into the back track.

"They've played it on us!" he yelled. "There's only one man in that long-boat, and the others are trying to put something over on Jerry!"

They were; and the trick had almost succeeded when we reached the strip of beach that Dupuyster was defending. The crippled electric launch, propelled by oars, and carrying possibly a dozen men, was half-way across the lagoon, heading straight for the beach, and coming on regardless of Jerry's rifle. Above the din of battle we could hear the shrill, squeaky voice of the fat cook encouraging his men. "Pull on ze oar, *mes braves! Sacre tonnerre!* eet is but wan man dat shoot ze gon!"

But when we came up there were five more to shoot, and instant and utter demoralization fell upon the attacking force. Shrieks of surrender in half a dozen different languages rent the still night air, and in a mad endeavor to turn the boat an oar was lost overboard.

If our situation had not been so critically desperate, there was enough of the comic-opera element in the frantic attempt to retreat to have brought down the house. As it was, Van Dyck stopped the firing and shouted to the mutineers to come ashore and surrender. Some of the men were evidently sick of their bargain and wanted to quit, but the squeaky cries of the chief robber dominated the tumult, and under a renewal of our bombardment the launch was got around and headed back to the yacht with much splashing and hard swearing. Also, when the goal of safety was reached, we could make out dimly that the accommodation ladder was let down, and that two or three members of the boat's crew had to be helped aboard.

A few minutes after this, we had audible proof of the correctness of Van Dyck's guess about the long-boat and the ingenious ruse to draw us off. The gasoline craft was coming back, as we could determine by the increasing loudness of its exhaust. Following its return to the yacht we were given another little breathing spell, and John Grey's quality of professional curiosity had an opportunity to show itself again.

"I can't understand for the life of me why these fellows should come back here and fight us so desperately for a chance to get ashore," he protested. "You can't make me believe that they're doing it on the strength of a silly yarn that is three hundred years old."

"What do you think about it, Captain 'Lige?" said Bonteck, ungenerously handing the tangle over to Goff.

"I wouldn't put it a mite apast 'em," was the skipper's guarded reply. "There was a good deal o' talk among the men about buried gold-mines and such on the way down from New Orleans. I ain't no gre't hand at the foreign lingoos, myself, but I picked up a word or two here and there."

"I don't more than half believe it, just the same," Grey persisted. "I tell you, these fellows are not fighting for the bare chance of proving or disproving that old story about the *Santa Lucia's* buried treasure. They've got inside information of some sort, and I'll bet on it."

"Maybe they have," said Goff, in a tone which said plainly that the matter was one not worth worrying about.

Grey got upon his feet.

"We have six of these pirates back here in the woods: why can't we make them talk and tell us what they are trying

to do?"

At this, Van Dyck took a hand.

"They would lie about it, as a matter of course," he interjected. "Besides, their particular object doesn't make any vital difference to us. They are here, and our present business is to see to it that they don't get away again--with the yacht."

Grey sat down again, grumbling.

"I don't see that we are getting ahead very fast," he complained. "What in Sam Hill do you suppose they're waiting for now?"

The answer to Grey's impatient query was at that moment coming around the *Andromeda's* stern. It was the disabled electric launch again this time with only one man in it, and he was sculling it with an oar over the stern, slowly working his way toward the gap in the reef. When it came a bit nearer we could see that the loom of a broken oar had been rigged as a mast in the bow, with a white flag of some sort dangling from it.

"A parley," I said; and Goff grunted acquiescence. But Jerry Dupuyster worked the lever of his rifle to reload.

"Don't shoot, Jerry," Bonteck cautioned in low tones; whereat the emancipated idler chuckled.

"Couldn't if I wanted to, by Jove; the bally cartridges are all gone, what?"

The huge lump of a man in the stern of the launch stopped sculling when he was within easy calling distance of the shore, and the boat lost way.

"Ahoy ze island!" he hailed, in a voice ridiculously out of proportion to his barrel-girthed bigness.

"Get to work with that oar and come ashore!" was Van Dyck's brusque command, to which he added: "We've got you covered."

"*Non, non!* it ees ze flag of ze truce!" shrilled the voice. And then the fat cook handed out an argument that was much more binding: "Vè haf ze enchineers in ze hold shut up, and eef you shoot wiz ze gon, zey will be keel!"

"Talk it out, then," said Van Dyck. "What do you want?"

"Vè make ze proposal--w'at you call ze proposition. It ees zat you vill all go to ze ozzier end of zis island, *immediatement*. W'en you do zat, ve leave you ze long-boat to go 'way, w'erever you like to go. W'at you do wiz Lequat and hees mens?"

"Lequat and his men are where you won't find them in a hurry," was Bonteck's answer. "As to your demand that we go away and let you steal the yacht again, there's nothing doing."

"*Sacre bleu!* It ees ze--w'at you call heem?--ze ooltimatum. W'en ees come daylight, ve put ze leetle cannon on ze long boat and keel all--*oui!*"

At this savage pronouncement we held a whispered consultation, the fat pirate sitting back in the stern sheets of the launch and calmly lighting a cigarette. Could we, dare we, take the risk of a daylight bombardment, even though the single piece of artillery were only the yacht's little brass muzzle-loading signal piece, with such iron scraps as the mutineers might be able to find or manufacture for the missiles? It was a dubious question. Though our island was nearly if not quite a mile in length, its greatest width did not exceed four or five hundred yards, and the little gun would easily put it under a cross-fire from either side.

"Have they powder?" I asked of Goff.

"Tain't likely they haven't--with them a-handlin' all that war stuff from the Isle o' Pines."

"But nothing that would answer for grape-shot?"

"Pots and kittles in the galley, and a hammer to smash 'em with," said the old Gloucesterman. "That's good enough, I call'te."

"Speak up, all of you," said Van Dyck. "Shall I try to drive a bargain with him for the long-boat? If he gives us enough gasoline, we might be able to make Willemstadt, on the island of Curacao--with fair weather and a smooth sea. That is the nearest inhabited land, but it is something over a hundred-and-fifty-mile run."

Grey was the first to "speak up."

"I have more at stake than any of you," he said, thereby showing that the married lover may be stone blind to all things extraneous to his own particular and private little Eden. "Just the same, I say, fight it out."

"Here, too," echoed Billy Grisdale; and Jerry Dupuyster also came up promptly in his carefully acquired accent: "Ow, I say! we can't knuckle down to a lot of bally cooks and sailormen, what?"

"And you, Preble?" queried Van Dyck, turning to me.

I refused to vote, merely saying: "You know I'm with you, either way."

It was Goff's turn, but instead of taking it, he leaned over to whisper hoarsely: "Make him talk some, Mr. Van Dyck; tell him to work his proposition off ag'in, and say it slow. That boat's a-driftin' in, and if it comes a leetle mite nearer----"

Van Dyck stood up and called to the maker of ultimatums.

"State your proposal again, and let us have it in detail. Will you leave a supply of gasoline in the long-boat? Will you give us provisions, and a compass and sextant?"

The fat *chef* flung his cigarette away and we heard the little hiss of the spark as the water quenched it.

"Ze proposal ees zis: zat you take your fran's and go back to ze ladees. Again I h-ask you w'at you done wiz Monsieur Lequat and hees men?"

"They are here."

"*Bien!* You vill all go back to ze camp and ze ladees. You vill leave ze prisonaire; *aussi*, you will leave ze Captain Goff wiz ze rope tie on hees hand and on hees feets. To-morrow you come back on zis place, and you vill find ze longboat wiz ze gasoline, ze provisionments, *et* ze compass *et* ze sextant, to make ze voyage to La Guaira, to Curacao, to anywhere you like to gone. *Voila!* dat ees all."

Again we took hasty counsel among ourselves, and whatever design Goff had been nursing in asking Van Dyck to prolong the parley was frustrated by another turn of the launch's drift. The boat was now edging farther out from the beach. One and all we were for refusing the detailed terms point blank, if for no other reason than that we were required to leave one of our number bound and at the mercy of the mutineers; one and all, I say, but Goff himself said nothing.

"We can't consider the proposal in its entirety for a minute," said John Grey, voicing the sentiments of at least five of us. But now Goff cut in.

"You're my owner, Mr. Van Dyck: if I could have a little over-haulin' of things with you----"

Van Dyck promptly went aside with the skipper. They didn't go so far but what we could hear their voices--though not the words--and Goff seemed to be doing all the talking, and to be doing it very earnestly. But when they came back, as they did very shortly, it was Bonteck who told us the outcome.

"Captain Goff has explained to me that the mutineers are obliged to make the terms include his surrender. Lequat is only a rule-of-thumb navigator, and if they don't have Goff they are likely to make a mess of themselves and of the yacht. For the sake of those whom we must consider first of all--the women--he is willing to take his chance again as a prisoner. If I thought there was any doubt about this fat devil carrying out his threat to bombard the island, I'd say 'No,' and fight for it. But we must remember that he can hardly fail to get some of us with the gun, or, if he shouldn't do that, he can keep us away from our water supply until we all die of thirst."

Grey raised the only question that seemed to be worth considering.

"We shall have only this scoundrel's word for it that the long-boat and provisions will be left for us," he objected.

Van Dyck put the suggestion aside hastily; rather too hastily, I fancied.

"We are obliged to take some chances, of course. Goff, here, will insist upon the fulfilment of the treaty terms. If they are not fulfilled to the letter, he will put the *Andromeda* on the reef and take the consequences." Then he called once more to the man in the boat: "One word with you before we close this deal. This is piracy on the high seas. I suppose you know what that means when you are caught--as you will be, sooner or later?"

We could see a big arm waving in airy bravado.

"Eet is not'ing, Monsieur Van Dyck. I blow it away--*pouf!* In Santa Cruz you vill h-ask ze gr-r-eat liberador w'at he shall tell you about 'Gustave Le Gros.' W'en you shall h-ask heem zat, you shall know it ees not'ing."

"All right," Bonteck returned. "We'll fall back and leave the prisoners. Captain Goff will be with them, and he will surrender when you come ashore. But he will not be bound, and he will be armed, so you can govern yourself accordingly."

The fat man waved an arm again and took up his sculling oar, raising no objection to the single modification of the ultimatum--that relating to the way Goff should be left. We waited until we saw the disabled launch creep out through the gash in the reef. Then we fell back upon the professor, who was still reading quietly by the miserable light of the ship's lantern.

In a few words we explained the new situation, and the mild-eyed rider of an engrossing hobby got up and carefully dusted his trousers.

"You gentlemen were on the ground, and you doubtless knew what was best to be done," he said in gentle resignation. "Shall we go back to the ladies?"

We left Elijah Goff to watch over the trussed-up figures in the little open glade and set out upon our retreat, taking the northern beach for our route. Just before we came opposite the camp at the farther end of the island, we heard the renewed sputterings and poppings of the gasoline engine in the long-boat. The amateur pirates were landing, this time without let or hindrance.

XVII

CAPTAIN ELIJAH SCORES

REACHING the camp under the palms we found a "state of affairs," as Conetta phrased it. The small fire had been kindled--not for any needed warmth, to be sure, but solely for the heartening effect of it, I imagined--and the women were huddled about it in various attitudes of more or less hysterical suspense, for which there was undeniably sufficient excuse, heaven knows.

There were sobs and gaspings of relief when we came in with our original number undiminished; and I let the others answer the inevitable outburst of eager and anxious questions and drew Conetta out of the fire circle to tell her briefly what had transpired, and what we had failed to do.

"And those horrid men are actually on the island with us now--at this very moment?" she breathed, the slate-blue eyes dilating. "What are they here for? What are they doing?"

"They have come to get the boat-load that we captured; the six that Goff brought ashore," I evaded, still trying to keep Bonteck's foolish secret intact.

"Then they will go away again?"

"That is one comfort; and very soon, I should say."

"But I don't understand. If they are not going to take us in the *Andromeda*, why have they come back to the island?"

I hated to go on prevaricating to her, but until Bonteck should give me leave, I was not at liberty to tell her the whole truth.

"Suppose we give them the credit of being at least partly human," I suggested. "Possibly they couldn't find it in their hearts to let us stay here and famish slowly. You mustn't forget that they've promised to leave us the long-boat and some eatables."

I could see well enough that she wasn't satisfied with that answer. She was far too clear-headed to take any such niggardly part for the whole.

"You're not making it very plausible," she said. "How far is it to where we're going in the long-boat?"

"Oh, it's quite some little distance," I replied, as easily as I could. "But with the sea as calm as it is now----"

"It may not stay calm," she broke in; and then: "You say Captain Elijah was with you. Where is he now?"

"He--er--he had to let himself be taken again, you know. The pirates insisted upon that. They have no real navigator

in their outfit. That is probably the reason why they didn't put him ashore with us in the beginning."

"Then Bonteck was right? Captain Elijah wasn't one of them?"

"No, indeed. I'm frank to say I did him an injustice. He was overpowered and made a prisoner, along with Haskell and Quinby and the other Americans."

"But why did that first six that you had the fight with bring the captain ashore with them?"

Again I had to evade. "Goff didn't tell us that."

She was silent for a moment. Then I got it hot and heavy.

"Dick Preble, do you mean to stand there with a face like a Hindoo idol and tell me that six of you made a bargain with that wretched French cook to give old Uncle Elijah up?"

"It was Goff's own proposal," I hastened to say, "and he insisted upon it--wouldn't have it any other way. Let us hope that he knew what he was doing--that he has some plan that may turn out better for us than a voyage in the long-boat." Then I switched forcibly, endeavoring to drag the talk away from the vicinity of Bonteck's secret. Thus far it had been kept hidden through all the various vicissitudes, and I didn't intend to be the first to betray it. "Goff's play was heroic, and all that, but not a bit more so than Jerry Dupuyster's swim out to the yacht. I'm taking back all the insulting things I've been saying about that young man, Conetta, dear. In spite of the frills and the idleness and the English apings, he is a man, a grown man, and altogether worthy of a good woman's love and respect. Now I've said it and I feel better."

She looked up quickly, with that pert little cocking of her head that I had always loved.

"Worthy of *my* love and respect, do you mean?"

I bowed. "Yes; that is what I mean."

"And you want me to marry him?" It was a dreadful thing for her to ask at such a time and in such a place, with the others almost within arm's-reach. But they were all talking at once, and nobody was paying much attention to anybody else.

"You are promised," I reminded her; "and if you can forgive him for chasing around after another woman----"

"Hush!" she commanded, with a sudden retreat into the arms of discreetness. "They will hear you and say things about you--behind your back. What are we to do now--just lie down and go calmly to sleep, forgetting all about these horrid pirates at the other end of our island? I can't quite see us doing that. Can you?"

It was just here that Bonteck cut in, saving me the necessity of answering.

"When you are quite through making Dick jump the hurdles for you," he said to Conetta; and then he explained. We were not to take the mutineers wholly at their word regarding the implied promise not to molest us. The six of us who had been on the firing front were to do picket duty while the others tried to get a little sleep. The professor and Billy were to take the north beach, Jerry Dupuyster and Grey the south, and Bonteck and I were to vibrate between the two beaches, keeping in touch with the shoreward couples on either hand, thus maintaining a guard line all across the island.

It was not until after this rather elaborate picketing plan had been put in train, and Van Dyck and I were cautiously feeling our way toward the agreed-upon frontier half-way down the island, that I ventured to find fault.

"I don't know why you should make six of us unhappy when one or two would be enough," I complained. "You know well enough that our fat cook is asking nothing but to be let alone until he can make off with the loot. He's not going to trouble us any more."

His reply was a cryptic generality.

"I am hoping we are not entirely through with the fat cook, yet, Dick; in fact, I'm almost certain we're not."

"What's gnawing at you now?" I asked sourly.

"Just a suggestion," he answered half-absently, I thought. "We have something at our end of the island that is much more valuable--and desirable--than anything the pirates will find where they are digging now."

The way in which he said it, as much as the thing itself, made my blood run cold.

"The women, you mean?"

"It's only a suggestion," he hastened to say; "a suggestion based upon a name. Let's forget it, if we can."

We had groped our way for another hundred yards before I said: "It's a beautiful muddle! They won't find *your* gold--the whereabouts of which seems to be a lot more mythical than any of the old Spanish sea tales--and they *will* find the tidy little fortune we turned up for Madeleine."

"Of course; they'll be sure to find that," he agreed, still speaking half-absently.

"You talk as if you didn't care," I snapped. "Is Madeleine's dilemma any less sharp pointed now than it was when you cooked up this romantic scheme of yours for helping her?"

"You shouldn't hit a man when he's down, Dick," he replied soberly. "You know how I was planning to play the god-in-the-car to this little bunch of people, and what a chaotic, heart-breaking mess I've made of it. With all sorts of horrors staring us in the face, you can't blame me if I go batty now and then. You'd do it yourself if you were staggering under my load. I'm to blame for all this, Dick; I, and nobody else."

It doesn't do any particular good to rub salt into a wound--even a foolish wound. So I contented myself with asking a sort of routine question:

"Does Madeleine know how she is being robbed?"

"She does. I was obliged to tell her that much."

"How did she take it?"

"Like the angel that she is, Dick. She says the gold doesn't belong to her, any more than it does to anybody else who might dig it up; and that, anyway, it doesn't matter when there are so many more important things at stake."

"She is quite right about that," I agreed. "With a chancy voyage in an open boat ahead of us----"

"We'll never make that voyage, Dick," he said solemnly. "I think you know that as well as I do."

"Why won't we?"

"Because we are never going to be given the chance. You are not confiding enough to believe that this fat devil is going to keep his promise, to us, are you?"

"But, good heavens--you're keeping our promise to him, aren't you?" I burst out.

"To the letter--exactly and precisely to the letter," was his calm reply. "You heard what the Frenchman asked, and what I agreed to. He made three conditions; we were to go back to our camp; he was to be permitted to land in peace; and Goff was to be given up. We have kept faith in all three particulars. But he isn't meaning to keep faith with us at all."

"You mean that he won't leave us the boat?" I gasped.

"Not on your life. Goff told me we couldn't put the slightest dependence in anything he might say; and if I had been inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt over Goff's warning, his own boasting would have turned the scale against him. Did you remark what he said, just as he was leaving?--about Santa Cruz and the liberator?"

I don't know why the fat man's boast hadn't made the proper impression upon me when he shrilled it out at us, or why I had failed to recall the name he had given as that of a Nicaraguan bandit whose cruelty and rapacity had long been a byword in the Central American republics. There must have been a blind spot in my memory at the moment, for the name and ill fame of Gustave the Fat were known even in distant Venezuela.

"That fiend!" I choked. And then: "You never shipped Gustave Le Gros in New York as cook on the *Andromeda*!"

"Oh, no. We shipped the real Bassinette, doubtless. Where and how the change was made--unless our repair stop at Gracias a Dios gave them their chance--I don't know."

"Wait a minute," said I. "Isn't it occurring to you now that the Gracias a Dios stop might have been prearranged? Haskell couldn't account for that propeller shaft running dry, and neither could I, after I had examined it. It had every appearance of having been tampered with; sand or some other abrasive put into it. If such a thing were done, and timed so that we'd have to put in at Gracias----"

"Sure!" he replied. "And the gold--my gold--was probably the main-spring of the whole plot. The secret of it must

have leaked out some way in New York, and it was handed on to this bandit bunch; with Lequat to trail us, first to Havana, and afterwards to New Orleans. But that's all ancient history now. Our original job is still before us, and that is not to let them get away with the yacht and leave us as we were."

We had reached the appointed picket line, and short detours to right and left put us in touch with Dupuyster and Grey on the south beach and Sanford and Billy Grisdale on the north. Grey had scouted ahead a little way, and he told us that the long-boat and the disabled electric launch were lying at the beach at the place which had been our late battle-ground, with two men guarding them. And Grisdale and the professor had a similar report to make concerning the mutineers' vigilance. Billy had also made a forward reconnaissance, and he had seen two sentries pacing back and forth on the sands in the little indentation which we had named "Spaniards' Bay."

Van Dyck made no comment until after we had gone back to our mid-island post in the wood. Then he said abruptly: "How long do you think it will take them to dig up those gold bars and carry them down to the boat, Dick?"

"Why, I don't know; with the number of men they've probably got on the job it oughtn't to take more than half an hour or so," I returned.

"Thirty minutes; it's short--frightfully short," he said, as if he were thinking aloud. Then; "It's this suspense that takes the heart out of a man."

It seemed a little odd that he should lament the shortness of the time in one breath, and in the next give the impression that he wished it were shorter.

"What difference does their speed or slowness make to us?" I asked.

"It is just a chance--just the rawest of all chances," he went on, ignoring my query. "I suppose I ought not to have let it hang upon such a weak thread; but there was no choice--no choice at all."

"If you would describe the thread I might be able to come a little nearer guessing what you are talking about," I retorted.

"Goff has a plan of some sort, but he couldn't take the time to go into details. As I've told you, he warned me that no dependence whatever could be placed upon the Frenchman's promise to leave the long-boat and the provisions. He advised me to accept the terms as they stood, and to make a show of keeping our part of them--as we have. Past that, we were to get in touch again, holding ourselves in readiness for whatever might happen."

"And you don't know what is going to happen?"

"No more than you do. You know how secretive Goff is, and, as I say, our time was short. I can't, for the life of me, see what Goff can possibly do to help out. I don't need to tell you the real reason why Le Gros insisted upon our surrendering him. He is the one man besides myself who knows, or is supposed to know, where my gold bars are buried, and Le Gros meant to make him point out the spot--has probably done so before this time. What Goff hoped to gain by putting himself into their hands, I don't know, but we may be sure that he has some scheme in his clever old head. He told me to watch the beaches, both of them, and to be ready to bunch our fighting half-dozen at any point, and at any minute."

"Well, we're here and we're ready," I said, and the words were scarcely out of my mouth before Grey came over from the southern beach, groping his way blindly in the thicker darkness of the palm shadows.

"Van Dyck--Preble!" he called cautiously, and then he stumbled fairly into our arms. "Something doing," he told us hurriedly. "One of the boats--the smaller one--is adrift and moving down this way. It doesn't seem to have anybody in it."

"But I thought you said a few minutes ago that there were two men guarding the boats," I struck in.

"There were, but they've gone somewhere. Jerry and I supposed they were sitting down in the tree shadows where we couldn't see them, but I guess they must have gone up into the woods with the others. If they were still on the beach they wouldn't let that launch drift away without trying to catch it."

"That drifting boat is probably our cue," said Bonteck, instantly alert. Then to me: "Hurry over to the other shore and get Sanford and Billy, Dick--quick! Strike straight across the island with them, and work your way along the south beach until you find us!"

I established contact with the professor and Billy without any difficulty and transmitted Van Dyck's order. Billy wanted to know what good the disabled electric launch would do us, even if it should drift ashore at some point where

we could capture it, but I couldn't tell him that.

"That's a future," I said. "Our job just now is to obey orders. Come on."

Together the three of us plunged into the wood on a direct line across the island, and in a very few minutes we found Van Dyck, Grey and Jerry Dupuyster crouching in the shadows of the tree fringe on the south shore. Far up the white line of the beach we could see the dark bulk of the long-boat at rest, and in the nearer distance was the electric launch, still drifting down the lagoon toward us.

"What's your guess, Dick?" said Van Dyck, as we came up. "There isn't a particle of current in that lagoon--you know there isn't."

There wasn't, as we had proved many times, and yet the drifting boat was moving steadily in our direction. It was Billy Grisdale's eyes--the youngest pair of the half-dozen--that solved the mystery.

"There's somebody in the boat--paddling," he declared. "Look steadily and you'll see his arm reaching over the side. He's lying down or kneeling so that you can't see anything but the arm."

In a short time we could all see the propelling arm making its rhythmic swing over the side of the boat, and while we looked, the man in the boat sat up and went at his task in more vigorous fashion, beaching the boat presently in a small cove within a stone's throw of our crouching place.

"It's Goff," said Van Dyck, when the paddler stepped out of the launch, and we made a rush for him.

The old skipper had little enough to say for himself, save that he had improved a chance to slip away from the mutineers in the darkness, and had stolen the launch with the idea of getting it into our hands. Questioned by Grey as to how he had been able to get away with the boat without giving the alarm, the sailing-master gave such an evasive reply that I was set to wondering if he hadn't slain the two boat guards out of hand. But as to that, he was too full of his plan for our rescue to go into the particulars of his own adventure.

Briefly, the plan he had evolved turned upon his success in securing one of the boats. For obvious reasons he had picked upon the launch, which the mutineers had towed ashore--probably because there were men left on the *Andromeda* whom they were afraid to trust and they wished to keep in their own hands all means of communication between the yacht and the island.

"Couldn't start the long-boat without that pop-engine makin' a racket that'd wake the dead," he explained; "and, besides, she's up on the sand till it'll take half a dozen men to shove her off. And the way they're out o' their heads, I callated they wouldn't miss the launch--not first off, anyways."

"I suppose they've all gone crazy digging for the Spanish gold," Bonteck said, meaning, as I made sure, to give the captain a lead upon which he was at liberty to enlarge in the hearing of the rest of us.

"'Crazy' ain't a big enough word fr it. You'd think the whole kit and b'ilin' of 'em was just out of a 'sylum. That's how it comes they hain't missed me yet. But we'll have to talk sort o' middlin' fast, I guess. When they do miss me, I shouldn't wonder a mite if there'd be blood on the moon. Now you've got a boat, what you goin' to do, Mr. Van Dyck?"

With a boat, even a disabled one, in our hands we were once more upon a fighting basis. Goff had quickly confirmed Bonteck's assumption that Le Gros hadn't the smallest idea of keeping his word to us about the turning over of the long-boat, so we were justified in declaring war again if we chose. Bonteck's first proposal was to load our fighting squad into the launch, in which we could paddle our way through the nearest reef gap and around to the *Andromeda*, on the chance of taking the yacht by a surprise attack with Haskell and his engine-room and stoke-hold contingent to help us if we could contrive to liberate them.

To this expedient Goff raised a very pertinent objection, which was immediately sustained by all. While we should be fighting to gain possession of the yacht, the women would be left practically undefended on the island--hostages whom Le Gros would immediately seize, and for the restoring of whom--not to mention any worse thing that he might do--he could exact any price he might ask us to pay.

"No, that won't do," said Goff, when we were brought up standing by the insurmountable objection; "lemme get in with my notion. There's three oars in the launch, and a piece of another. By crowdin' the folks up a mite, you can get 'em all in at one load. S'pose you do it, and paddle round outside o' the reef and board the yacht, the whole kit and caboodle of ye. There won't be much fightin' to do. That pirate's got most of his bullies ashore with him. That's why he towed the launch--didn't want to leave it behind fr the shaky ones to get hold of."

Van Dyck drew a long breath.

"That will do, if we're given time. But we shan't have time, Captain 'Lige. Long before we can paddle this dead weight of a tender down to the other end of the island, get our people aboard, and paddle back to the yacht with a load that will put us fairly down to the gunwales, it will be too late. The yacht will be gone."

"Meanin' that these scamps'll get through with their job and beat you to it?" said the old Gloucesterman. "I been figgerin' that it's my job to see that they don't. While you're doin' your little do, I'll tack back to that place up in the woods and see if I can't keep 'em busy at the diggin' fr a while longer. If you folks can make your turn and get things quieted down on the '*Meda*, all you got to do then is to slip that anchor cable quick as you can and put to sea. You're a navigator, Mr. Van Dyck, and you can take her anywhere that I could."

"And leave you behind in the hands of these scoundrels who would burn you at the stake in revenge?" Bonteck exclaimed; a protest that was echoed instantly by every man of us. But the brave old skipper wouldn't listen.

"There has come a time more 'n once afore this when it was a ch'ice between one life and a-many," he said, in his clipped New England drawl. "You folks go ahead and do your part, and I'll do mine."

And before we could stop him he was gone.

XVIII

UNDER A GIBBOUS MOON

BEING thus committed by Goff's capture of the electric launch to what promised to be the most chanceful of all the hazards of that strenuous night, we lost no time in setting about it. With all the good will in the world, the old skipper might not be able to do much for us in the way of delaying the return of the mutineers to the *Andromeda*, and it said itself that our one slender hope of success lay in capturing the yacht while it was, in a certain measure, undefended.

Luckily, the launch's painter was long enough to serve as a tow line, and with five of us towing, and Billy Grisdale steering against the shoreward drag with an oar, we soon had the launch out of the danger zone. Once fairly out of sight of the long-boat and the beach of peril, we ran like flying fugitives, as jealous of the flitting moments as a miser of his gold. To save the utmost number of these precious moments, Van Dyck and Jerry Dupuyster dropped out of the towing rank after we were well down toward the western end of the island and cut across through the wood to arouse the camp, leaving four of us to take the launch around to the point at which the embarkation could be most quickly made.

Having but a comparatively short distance to go after Van Dyck and Jerry left us, we arrived first at the agreed rendezvous, and I went aboard the launch to try to determine how we were going to handle and propel it with eighteen people crowded into its narrow limits. As Goff had said, there were three good oars, and the broken halves of another; but rowing from the thwarts, with the jammed lading we should have, was clearly out of the question. And the alternative--two or three of us standing up to use the oars as paddles--seemed to be quite as clearly impracticable. If the launch would suffice to float eighteen of us, trimming it as carefully as we could and sitting as tight as the shipwrecked sailors in the old song, we could hardly ask more of it.

"Small room for so many of us, Mr. Preble--is that what is troubling you?" asked the professor, standing by while Grey and Billy Grisdale ran up to the camp in the glade to hasten the laggards.

"Little space, and still less tonnage," I said. "I'm doubtful if she will float all of us at once."

"Those useless storage batteries," he pointed out; "they are quite heavy, aren't they? Can't we lighten the boat by taking them out?"

It was a good thought, and I set about acting upon it. But the batteries were built in snugly, and without a wrecking tool of some sort they could not be dislodged. There was a locker under the stern sheets, and rummaging in this for tools, I came upon a leather-cased object which proved to be far more serviceable than any wrecking crow-bar. It was an electric flashlight, and a touch of the switch showed that its batteries were alive and in working order.

"Let's have a look at this driving mechanism before we jettison it," I said; and the professor held the light while I looked to see what Van Dyck's disabling rifle shot had done to the motor.

To my great joy I found that the bullet had not short-circuited the motor, as we supposed; it had merely smashed the switch of the controlling rheostat. Working rapidly while Sanford held the flashlight, I was able to make a temporary

repair that would enable us to utilize the motor, and I was giving the propeller shaft a few trial turns when Van Dyck and Jerry, and Grey and Billy came down to the beach with the hastily gathered ship's company; sixteen of them and the bull pup--for which latter Billy had been shrewd enough to make Edie Van Tromp sponsor and special pleader.

As I had feared we should be, the eighteen of us and the dog were a frightful overload for the small launch, this though Van Dyck had made the fugitives leave every ounce of dead-weight behind in the camp. In addition, there was honest terror to make the hurried embarkation almost a panic. We had no assurance that the mutineer-pirates would take our quiescence for granted; we knew they wouldn't if the loss of the launch should be discovered. Every instant I was half expecting to see the fat bandit and his mongrel crew burst out of the shadowy wood to charge down upon us. In which event, there would be a bloody massacre; it could hardly be less.

Fortunately, the attack did not materialize. In feverish haste we packed the small boat, with beseechings to all and sundry to sit close and sit tight, and even Ingerson, roused only a few minutes earlier from his brutish sleep, helped as he could, planting himself stolidly at the launch's gunwale and lending a hand like a man ashamed. When we were ready to put to sea, and I had shoved off and climbed in cautiously over the stern of the heavily laden boat, it became quickly apparent that the rehabilitation of the motor was the only thing that made the venture even tentatively possible. With the crowding there would have been no slightest chance of using the oars in any manner whatsoever.

I am quite sure that the memory of that perilous boat voyage across the lagoon, out through the nearest break in the reef and along the seaward edge of the barrier coral to the point at which we had our first sight of the *Andromeda* lying a bulking gray shadow in the light of a gibbous moon which was just rising, will stand out clear-cut for every soul of our little ship's company long after all other pictures have grown dim.

Happily for us, the sea was as quiet as an inland lake; the open water hardly less than that of the sheltered lagoon. In passing through the gap in the reef the launch shipped a few bucketfuls, and for the moment I thought we must founder--as we should have if any one of us had stirred or grown panicky. But upon giving the silent little motor a bit more current we weathered the passage, and out beyond, where the gentle swell lifted and subsided evenly, we rode dry again.

It was after we had passed the miniature surf line and were creeping eastward at the best speed I dared give the launch that I whispered to Bonteck, who was crouching with me over the motor controls.

"How much have you told the others?" I asked.

"Nothing more than that we were going aboard the yacht, and that there might be an attempt made to drive us off."

"You could scarcely have said less. Is Goff still holding the treasure hunters, do you think?"

"Something is holding them. We'd be hearing from them if there wasn't."

"If we're lucky enough to reach the yacht without being seen and fired upon, how are we going to get aboard--with this crowd?"

"The accommodation ladder is down."

"I know. But it's on the starboard side--toward the shore. We can't rush it, not if there is any sort of defense--with the moon rising."

"Don't throw chocks under the wheels!" he bit out. "It isn't a thing to be speculated upon; it's a thing to be done!"

Somehow, I felt better after he said that. This was the old Bonteck--the Bonteck I knew best--coming to the front again, with the indomitable spirit that had once made him a leader who never knew when he was beaten--or rather a leader who refused to be beaten. Like all the rest of us, he, too, had suffered his sea-change and was the better and bigger man for it.

Why we were not seen from the deck of the yacht long before we could come within striking distance was a circumstance for which we could not at the moment account. As I have said, the night was crystal clear; clearer, if possible, than at that earlier hour when the *Andromeda* had come creeping up out of the east. Besides, the shrunken moon was now something more than a hand's-breadth above the horizon, and while its light was pale, it was enough to cast long shadows of the motionless vessel far out toward us. Yet there was no stir on the yacht's decks, and no alarm raised as our deeply laden boat stole along the outer edge of the coral reef, giving the rocks only so much margin as would serve to keep the low gunwales out of the back wash of the slight swell breaking over the barrier.

As we drew nearer, with the motor running as silently as a murmur of bat's wings, we saw the reason for our temporary immunity from discovery. The treasure diggers were returning to the island beach with their spoil, or rather

they were coming and going in a double procession, like an endless chain of roustabouts loading a Mississippi River steamboat, and, quite naturally, all eyes on board the yacht would be turned in that direction. A fire had been kindled on the beach to give light for the loading of the gold bars into the long-boat, and its red glow made boat and men and the background jungle stand out with sharp distinctness. Conetta, squeezed in next to Van Dyck, leaned over to whisper: "Are we back in the days of the old buccaneers? Have we been only dreaming that we were living in the twentieth century?"

"What you are seeing is no dream," said Bonteck. "It's the real thing, and you'll probably never look upon its like again." Then to me: "A little more speed if she'll take it, Dick. They are rushing that boat-loading business, and what we do will have to be done swiftly or we'll be too late."

I gave the boat's motor another notch of the electric throttle, and the bat's-wing murmur increased to a low humming. As if drawn by invisible hands the laden launch approached the yacht's bow on the seaward side. The need for haste was pricking me as sharply as it was Van Dyck, but prudent care came first. As matters stood, we were as helpless as a packed pleasure boat. One armed man at the yacht's rail could have held us off, encumbered as we were. Until we could have room in which to spread out a bit we were like a lot of shackled prisoners. So, when the yacht's bulk came between us and the fire-lighted scene on the beach, I switched the power off and let the launch drift by slow inchings until Dupuyster, crouching in the bow, was fending with his hands to keep us from bumping against the side of the *Andromeda*.

So far so good. We had made contact, as the modern militarists say, but what the next move should be, I couldn't imagine. Above, and overhanging us, since our point of contact was under the flaring out-sheer of the yacht's bow, stretched the smooth white wall of the *Andromeda's* body plating, with the bulwarks and rail far beyond the reach of the tallest of us. True, the accommodation ladder had been let down on the starboard side, and was probably still down; but with the moon rising, and the light of the beach fire playing full upon that side of the yacht, it would be simply inviting defeat to try for that.

Fortunately for us, we had an inspired leader, and he knew exactly what he meant to do. Amidships on our side of the yacht the davit falls by which the long-boat had been lowered were still hanging as they had been left when the boat was put overside. Van Dyck passed a whispered word to Dupuyster to hand the launch along toward these hanging tackles, and I held my breath. Quite possibly six of us--counting Ingerson as one of the half-dozen--were young enough and agile enough to climb the tackles one at a time, but I couldn't see the barest chance of carrying out any such manoeuvre as that with the overloaded launch for a take-off.

"What's the notion?" I asked Van Dyck. "We can't board by way of those boat tackles. We shall swamp the launch, as sure as fate!"

"Wait," he whispered back. "You've forgotten the coaling port."

His reminder was entirely justified. But if I had remembered the two square openings, one on either side of the ship, through which the bunkers were filled, I should have dismissed their possibilities at once. The rawest landsman in our company would know that these openings would be closed from the inside--closed and gasketed and bolted to make them water-tight.

"But how----" I began; but Van Dyck interrupted quickly. We were nearing the hanging tackles and he whispered his commands hurriedly. "Here is the port," he said, pointing out the joint lines of the coal opening. "Hand the launch back to it after I'm gone." And, as the boat falls came within reach: "Catch the tackle and steady her, and be ready to trim ship when I take my weight out."

Mechanically I grasped the ropes as we drifted up to them, and with the cat-like agility of a practiced sailor, Van Dyck lifted himself gently out of our cockleshell and went up the dangling tackle to disappear silently over the yacht's rail. His purpose was evident enough now. He was going to try to get below and open the fuel port for us.

Passing the word along to Dupuyster to hand the launch back to the coaling port, I helped as I could with the blade of the broken oar. Motionless presently under the outline of the square opening, we entered upon a period of breathless suspense. Being on the seaward side of things, we could not see how the long-boat loading was progressing, but every moment I was expecting to hear the pop-pop of the gasoline motor which would tell us that the gold robbers were putting off for the yacht.

We could easily visualize the obstacles Bonteck would have to overcome in trying to reach the other side of the bunker port. He must make his way undiscovered to the engine-room hatch--which might or might not be guarded--get into communication with the imprisoned engineers and firemen and direct them to open the port for us. Past that, it was entirely within the possibilities that certain tons of coal might have to be moved before the port could be opened--an

undertaking which would devour still more time, and which could hardly be carried out without giving the alarm to whatever ship's guard the fat pirate had left on board.

Knowing all this, we waited in nerve-racking trepidation, hardly daring to breathe. Once, while we hugged the side of the yacht and held the launch immovable, there were footsteps on the deck above us. Hearing the faint click of a pistol, I knew that Grey or Dupuyster or Billy Gridale was preparing for the worst, and I was in an agony of apprehension lest one of them should fire before this last-resort measure became actually necessary. But the footsteps died away, and nothing happened.

All through this most trying wait, during which we could hear plainly the noises on shore, the shouts and cries, the crackling of the fire, and the men plunging through the bushes and dumping their burdens into the long-boat, the fortitude of the women huddled in our frail craft was heroic. There was never a whisper or a murmur, that I could hear. Only once, Conetta, whose place in the launch, now that Bonteck was gone, was next to mine, reached over and put a cold little hand in mine.

It was Jerry Dupuyster who gave us the first word of encouragement. At the risk of losing his balance and going overboard he had laid an ear against the *Andromeda's* side plating. "They're working on it," was the whispered word that came back to us in the breathless suspense; and a little later the coaling port began to open by cautious inchings to show us a widening breach in the yacht's side.

It may easily say itself that there were thrillings and breath-catchings a-many to go with that desperate midnight unloading of the crowded launch through the bunker opening in the *Andromeda's* side. The coal port was fully man-head high above the water line, and we had no anchorage save our finger holds upon the edge of the opening. How we managed it I hardly know. The women had to be lifted and passed up one by one, and I remember that it took two of us, Ingerson and myself, to get Mrs. Van Tromp hoisted up to the rescuing hands thrust out of the opening. I don't suppose she weighed much above two hundred pounds--no great weight for two able-bodied men to handle--but our insecure footing easily added another two hundred to the effort. While we labored, the increasing shore clamor told us that our time was growing critically short, and in the fiercer spurt of haste that ensued we came within an ace of swamping our frail foothold.

"Quick!" said Bonteck, leaning far out to give me a hand when I was the last man left in the launch. But I had another thing in mind.

"Elijah Goff has set a good example and I'm going to follow it," I whispered hurriedly. "There is a chance that I can get this pushboat back to the beach before the Frenchman finds out that it is gone. If I succeed, you can take him unawares when he comes off to the yacht and have the advantage of a complete surprise. I'll be with you when the clock strikes--if I don't get killed too soon." And I shoved off before he could reach down and grab me, as he tried to do.

With the silent electric drive turning at its slowest speed, I edged the launch seaward, and after a little distance was gained, gave the propeller its full power. In our many patrollings of the beach I had marked an opening through the barrier reef at the extreme eastern end of the island, and through this passage I presently drove the launch, heading it down the lagoon toward the pirates' landing place.

Hugging the shore, I made the approach as cautiously as might be. Everything favored the undertaking. The bonfire had been built a few yards down-beach from the long-boat, and its blaze served to make objects less easily discernible in the wan moonlight outside of the ruddy zone of firelight. The treasure diggers were carrying the last of the precious cargo down from the wood, and Le Gros himself was directing its loading with many gesticulations and a babblement of shrill oaths. Slowly the launch drifted up to the stern of the long-boat and I crawled forward and made the painter fast. The thing was done.

It was done none too soon. There was barely time for me to flatten myself in the bow of the launch before the mutineers began to crowd into the bigger boat. I had only time to make sure that Goff was not among them before the popping engine set up its clamor, and the fat chief flung himself down beside the tiller, so near that I could have reached up and touched him.

"Shove off, then, *mes braves!*" he yelled; and in some confusion we got away and headed for the yacht, the long-boat towing the presumably empty electric launch.

Taking it as a matter of course that Van Dyck and the others, with the help of Haskell and the liberated prisoners, had by this time gained possession of the *Andromeda*, I had an exceedingly bad half-minute when, as the long-boat lost way at the foot of the accommodation ladder, Le Gros got up, stumbled forward, and climbed the ladder to the yacht's deck, unopposed, and, taking his place at the rail, began to screech out his orders to the boat's crew. What had

happened during my brief absence? Had somebody discovered the presence of our boarding party and clapped the hatch down upon it before Van Dyck could lead it out of the bunker hold? It looked very much that way.

Meanwhile, my own situation had suddenly become embarrassing, not to say perilous. I had confidently expected to see the fat villain surrounded and overpowered the moment he set foot on the yacht's deck. Since nothing of the kind had taken place, I knew it could be only a few minutes at the farthest before I should be discovered and either summarily knocked on the head or thrown to the sharks--or both. Yet there was nothing to be done, or if there were, it didn't occur to me, though, as the dullest imagination would prefigure, I was trying mighty hard to make it occur.

While I crouched and cowered in the bottom of the launch, endeavoring to make myself look as much as possible like a heap of cast-off clothes, the unloading of the gold bars was begun, with the fat fiend leaning over the yacht's rail to shrill curses at his men. This time there was no roustabout procession. *Sacre*-ing and swearing like a man possessed, Le Gros got his crew strung out in a long line leading from the accommodation grating up the ladder and forward to some point on the yacht's fore-deck, and along this line the gold ingots were passed from hand to hand. Judging from the internal thunderings that began when the mounting stream of heavy chunks of metal got fairly in motion, I gathered that the fore-hold was to be made to serve as the pirates' strong-room. And still our attacking party, if we had one, made no move.

I was sweating like a patient in the hot room of a Turkish bath when the last of the apparently interminable string of gold bars went up the ladder and the fat bandit gave the order which proved his calculated perfidy, and, incidentally, let me know that my time was come.

"Br-ring dose boat to ze davit and 'oist dem aboard!" he commanded; and then, as if this final order had been the signal for which it had been waiting, pandemonium broke loose on the *Andromeda's* fore-deck. A confused clamor of shots, yells, curses and bludgeon blows rose upon the midnight air, and, hasten as I might and did, the battle was as good as fought and won before I could clamber over the long-boat and dart up the ladder and hurl myself into it.

Upon reaching the deck I saw that I might have spared myself a large share of the anxieties if I had had a little more confidence in Van Dyck's gift of leadership. Like a good general he had been merely waiting for the propitious moment. He had posted his force, which included, besides the engineers and firemen, a good handful of the Provincetown Portuguese who had yielded only to force of numbers when the mutineers took the yacht, at various points of advantage, and choosing the instant when, with its job completed, the long-boat's crew was hurrying forward to man the hand winch and get the anchor up, the yacht's searchlight was turned on and the rush was made. When I got in, the *Andromeda's* fore-deck was--well, not exactly a shambles, perhaps, but something resembling a bull-ring after the banderilleros and picadores and chulos have been tossed hither and yon and butted and horned into cowering submission, with Van Dyck just tackling the fat chief in a whirlwind grapple that brought assailed and assailant to the deck with a crash that was like the fall of a house.

"What have you done with Captain Goff?" bellowed the victor in the grapple, with his knee in the fat one's stomach; and from the gurgling sounds that issued we gathered that the stout-hearted old Gloucesterman had been made to pay a bitter penalty for his loyalty to us.

"'Ee is mak' us to deeg wiz ze peek-axe in ze wr-rong places!" gasped the fat bandit in extenuation.

Van Dyck got up and turned Le Gros over to Haskell and two of the Portuguese, who proceeded to tie him and truss him like an enormous fowl.

Bonteck wheeled upon me.

"Dick, take a couple of our men in the launch and go after the old skipper. If they've killed him, I'm going to be judge, jury and sheriff for this fat devil and every man who stood in with him!" he raged. And I went quickly, taking two of Haskell's men to help.

Fortunately for Le Gros and his accomplices, upon whom I am sure Van Dyck would have wreaked a swift and terrible vengeance, Goff was not dead. So far from it, when we reached the inland glade, where the forgotten ship's lantern still spread its little circle of yellow light, we found the old man on his knees in one of the numerous shallow holes dug by the gold-seekers, clawing the earth with his bare hands like a crazy old marmot. He had been brutally mishandled and was covered with blood, but when we laid hold of him and dragged him out of his burrow, he fought us madly to get back.

"Mr. Van Dyck's gold--it's gone, slick and clean!" he croaked. "I cal'late I've got to find it afore I c'n go aboard."

My two helpers took his mutterings for the ravings of a man who had been beaten and left for dead--as they were in good part--and among us we pacified him and got him down to the launch. Van Dyck was at the foot of the

accommodation ladder when we reached the yacht, so I had a chance to give him a cautionary word.

"Keep the old man quiet until he comes to himself," I warned. "If you don't, he'll publish your little gold-bar plot to the whole ship's company," and I briefed the pathetic little scene we had broken in upon when we found Goff.

"Plucky old duffer!" said Bonteck warmly, when Quinby and his mate had half led and half carried Goff up the ladder. "I've been telling you all along that he was the right sort. But come aboard. We're going to hold a drumhead court-martial and try these amateur pirates right here and now."

"You don't need me for that," I objected. "Let me have a couple of the Portuguese sailormen and I'll take the long-boat and go around to our abandoned camp for the dunnage we left behind."

"Oh, damn the dunnage--let it go!" he broke out impatiently; but he changed his tune when I reminded him that since the abandoned luggage was made up chiefly of the women's steamer trunks, it would be wise for us to salvage it if only in the interests of peace and quietness.

"All right; go to it," he yielded; and after I had picked my crew of two, I took the long-boat and set about the salvaging.

It was a short horse, soon curried. The gasoline boat was fairly speedy, and the run down the lagoon was quickly made. With two huskies to do the portage, little time was lost in stripping the camp of everything that was worth carrying away, and well within the hour we were back at the *Andromeda's* accommodation ladder. Waiting only long enough to see the trunks going overside in a whip tackle that had been rigged for the purpose, I went aboard and found that the sea court had been in session, that the yacht's anchor was catted, and that the stage was set for the final act in the drama of the night of alarms.

"We were waiting for you--or rather for that long-boat," said Van Dyck, after I had climbed to the bridge from which he was directing the luggage bestowal.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Wait and you will see," he replied; and then he told me the findings of the drumhead court. The mutineers, with Le Gros for their leader, were members of a Central American revolutionary junta which had its headquarters in New York. At first, the intention had been to capture the *Andromeda* and use her as a means of transportation for arms and ammunition, and, as Goff had told us, one cargo of the munitions had already been carried and landed. But the secret of Van Dyck's buried gold--which, as it appeared, was no secret at all so far as Lequat and the bandit chief were concerned--had brought them back to the island.

"Goff says they made no bones about telling him that they were killing time in the ammunition shipment, with the cold-blooded purpose of letting us starve in the interval," Van Dyck said in conclusion. "It was not Le Gros's intention to give us any provisions at all when we were marooned, but Goff, who was shrewd enough not to make any resistance when he found it would be useless, overpersuaded him."

"How could he do that?"

"Very easily. He told Le Gros about my silly plot, and showed him how, if that plot were carried out exactly as it had been planned, the secret of the real mutiny could be kept indefinitely. He argued, quite plausibly, as you will see, that in due course of time I would be obliged to confess my plot, in which case, even if we should chance to be rescued by some passing ship, the onus would still rest upon me."

I laughed. "The old skipper is something of a plotter himself, and we all owe him a lot more than we can ever pay. What are you going to do to these pirates?"

"I gave Gustave his choice; to be landed, with his fellow bandits, at the nearest port of call where his country has a consul, or to be set ashore here on the island."

"Good Lord!" I ejaculated. "Surely it didn't take him long to decide against the excellent chance of starving to death in this horrible death trap!"

Van Dyck's smile was grim.

"No; the deciding part of it didn't take him long." He led me to the starboard bridge-end and pointed to the accommodation ladder, where the mutineers, in single file, and each man carrying his allotment of provisions in a sack, were descending to take their places in the long-boat--this under an armed guard with Haskell and Quinby in command.

"They know the tender mercies of their countrymen," Bonteck went on, "and they elected, very promptly, to take

the chance they made us take, rather than to be turned over to the authorities. The name of the island fits, after all; it is still 'Pirates' Hope,' you see. Just the same, I'll drop a word somewhere to have them picked up after they've served their time for stealing my yacht."

The anchor, broken out by the hand capstan, was apeak, and the blowers were roaring in the *Andromeda's* tall funnels when the long-boat returned, to be quickly hoisted to its chocks on the roof of the deck-house. Van Dyck had the wheel, and at his signal to the engine-room the big propellers began to thrash in the backward motion and the yacht drew away from her late anchorage. I stood by until the miniature liner was set upon her course and was leaving the island astern. Then I took the wheel forcibly out of Bonteck's hands.

"You've had it harder than any of us, and I couldn't go to sleep if my life depended upon it," I told him. "If you'll give me the course, I'll take the first trick and you can relieve me after you've had your forty winks."

He protested generously, of course, but yielded at last when he found me obstinate. After he left me, I signaled the engine-room for full speed ahead and a few minutes later turned the wheel over to one of our Portuguese loyalists whom Van Dyck had sent up to act as my steersman. Freed thus from the mechanical duty, I took time for a backward look. The white ribbon of beach, with its dot of fire surrounded by a huddle of motionless figures, had disappeared, and the island itself was becoming a mere blot dimly outlined in the pale moonlight. It was like the waving of the magic wand in an extravaganza. By a few score revolutions of the *Andromeda's* twin screws we had been whisked out of the age of romance and daring-do to be set down once more among the common-places--and conventions--of the twentieth Christian century.

XIX

THE FORWARD LIGHT

DAWN was just breaking over a sea that was like a caldron of half-cooled molten metal for its colorings when Van Dyck came to take his turn on the *Andromeda's* bridge, and he rated me soundly for not having called him earlier.

"It is one thing to be generous, and quite another to be a self-immolating ass," was one of the compliments he handed me. Then: "By a streak of luck, one of our Portuguese fishermen turns out to be a passable cook. Get below and you'll find breakfast of a sort waiting for you in the saloon. Fill up, and then go to bed and sleep until you've caught up with the procession."

Being by this time in a receptive mood on both counts, I obeyed the double injunction literally, and ten seconds after rolling, full-stomached, into the comfortable bunk in the stateroom which had been mine before the age of romance took us in hand, I was dead to the world and so continued while the clock-hands made a complete revolution, with some hour or so added thereto.

When I awoke it was pitch dark in the little stateroom cabin, and somebody was knocking at the door. It proved to be Fernando, the new cook, and he was telling me in broken English that he had my dinner on a tray, by which I was made to understand that I had slept past the regular dinner hour.

Turning out for a bath, a shave, and the first change of clothing that had been vouchsafed me in many a long day, I ate the hand-in dinner with the ravenous appetite of the half-famished, and fared forth. Stepping into the brightly lighted saloon, it was hard to realize that Pirates' Hope and all that it stood for in the lives of eighteen of us had ever existed.

If the mutineers had left any traces of their short reign in our dining saloon they had all been carefully expunged. At one of the sections of the divisible dining-table Mrs. Van Tromp, Aunt Mehitabel, Madeleine Barclay's father and Ingerson were playing bridge. Through the open door of the smoking-room opposite I could see Major Terwilliger lounging at ease in the deepest wicker chair, with a glass and a bottle and the ingredients for mixing his favorite after-dinner beverage on the card table at his elbow. At another section of the divisible dining-table the professor and his wife were at work classifying a lot of leaves and roots gathered on the island.

Down the companion stair came the tinkle-tinkle of Billy Grisdale's mandolin to tell me that the younger members of the ship's company had already slipped back into the aforesaid habit of whiling away the evenings under the after-deck awning. I smiled as I went forward to look for Van Dyck, and the smile wasn't as cynical as it might have been on the other side of the island avatar. The prompt rebound to the normal and the conventional was merely an example of human nature at its most resilient--and best.

Van Dyck was on the bridge, or, more strictly speaking, in the little chart room, pricking out the yacht's course with a pair of dividers, and one of the Provincetown loyalists was at the wheel.

"You, Dick?" Bonteck said, when I drifted in and took the stool across from him. "Had a good nap?"

"If I haven't, it wasn't your fault," I returned. "Whereabouts are we by this time?"

"Off the Venezuelan coast, and only a few hours run from La Guaira. It's the majority vote of the ship's company that we ought not to be cheated out of the best part of our winter cruise, and we'll put in at La Guaira and take a run up to Caracas while Goff is refitting the yacht and laying in stores. I hope that falls in with your notion."

I let my vote stand over until I could ask about Goff.

"Uncle Elijah isn't out of commission, then?"

"Uncle Elijah is made of better stuff than most of us younger fry. He'll be up and around in a day or so; wanted to get up to-day and take over his job, but I wouldn't let him. But how about you? Will the La Guaira stop fit in with your longings?"

"Admirably. There is a revived copper mining prospect about to be exploited near Aroa, and with your kind permission I'll quit you at La Guaira and run over to Tucacas. There's a railway from that port to Aroa, and I heard, while I was waiting for you in New Orleans, that there might be an opening for an American engineer."

"Um," he grunted, without looking up, "so you're planning to desert, are you?"

"If you call it desertion, yes. I know when I've had enough, Bonteck."

"I don't think you do," he said with a queer grimace. "But let that stand over for a minute or so. Don't you want to be brought up to date in the treasure-trove adventure? I should think you would."

"If there is anything remaining that I haven't seen and felt and tasted," I returned.

"There is," he chuckled. "As the older novelists would remark, the half has not been told. Item Number One is a small problem in arithmetic. You helped me dig up Madeleine's ransom, and you counted the pieces, didn't you?"

"I did."

"You'd be willing to go into court and swear that there were forty of the gold bars; no more and no less; wouldn't you?"

"I should."

"And we dug them all out--all there were in that particular spot, didn't we?"

"I thought we did."

"Good. So did I. Yet the fact remains that there are eighty-three gold bars safely stowed away in the yacht's forehold; forty of one kind and forty-three of another. How do you account for that?"

I laughed. "It simply means that Le Gros was more thorough than we were. He found your planting, as well as that of the *Santa Lucia's* crew."

"He did. But the double find was due to Goff's effort to gain time for us, rather than to the fat bandit's thoroughness. When we left Goff waiting for his recapture, the first thing he did was to heave the chunk of coral out of the way so that there wouldn't be any landmark. Then, when Le Gros and his men came, Goff pointed out first one place and then another, until he had them digging all over the glade. That is why they beat him so savagely; and it was after he was knocked out that they stumbled upon both hoards."

"Both in the same place?" I asked.

"Goff says they were not. He was just coming back to consciousness when they were starting to carry the stuff down to the beach. There were two heaps of it. In his battered condition Goff didn't realize the truth; he merely thought he was seeing double. Afterward, so he says, he got a crazy notion in his head that the pirates hadn't found my gold at all, and that it was up to him to find it. That was what he was trying to do when you went after him."

"I know," I said; "Are there any more knots in the tangle?"

"Just one. When I went below last night to turn in, Billy Grisdale was waiting for me with tears in his eyes; said he'd

lost all his hopes of heaven, and begged me to turn back to the island and let him have men enough to go ashore and dig some more in the gold plantation--that we were leaving Edie's dowry behind. I asked him what he meant, and he told me. He and Edie had been the first to take fire when I told the old story of the Spanish treasure ship, and they had gone about looking for landmarks and digging haphazard in one place and another."

"And, of course, they stumbled upon the chunk of coral, rolled it away, and dug under it," I filled in, recalling instantly what Billy had said to me about buried treasure and the ownership thereof on the night of Ingerson's attempted suicide.

"You've said it. Naturally, it was my planting that they uncovered--not the Spaniards', but never having so much as heard of my earlier visit to the island, there was nothing to make them suspect that it was not the *Santa Lucia* hoard that they had unearthed. Their first impulse was to run back to camp and shout the good news; but the canner second thought prevailed. They reburied the stuff in the hole they had made, marked the place as well as they could--but not with the chunk of coral they had rolled aside,--and came away and left it, meaning to part with their secret only when a rescue ship should come along."

"What did you tell Billy?"

He grinned. "I took him into the fore-hold and showed him the pile of gold bars. As you would imagine, he was paralyzed when he counted and found there were eighty-three of them. There were forty-three--I'm sure there were only forty-three," he kept saying over and over."

"Wait a minute," I interposed; "you are going too fast for me. Are you asking me to believe that it was only by chance that they rolled the piece of coral over to the exact spot where, we may suppose, it originally stood--marking the place of the *Santa Lucia* burial?"

"Chance and nothing else--excepting, perhaps, it may have rolled more easily that way than any other. It was Goff and I who moved it in the first place, you remember, when we took it to mark our gold grave."

"Now we may come back to Billy," I said. "What more did you tell him?"

"What could I tell him, save to hint that the Spaniards might have split their treasure and buried it in two places?--that, and to josh him a bit for having stopped too soon in his digging venture?"

"Then you told him that the remaining forty pieces belong to Madeleine?"

"I did; I have told them all. She found it, and it is hers. More than that, I have taken Jack Grey into my confidence in the matter of Barclay's shortage in his guardian accounts, and he will see to it that the Vancourt trust fund is made whole again."

"But, see here," I protested; "that is *your* quarter million that Billy and Edie are making off with!"

He laughed boyishly.

"I'm robbed," he declared; "Held up and cleaned out in the house of my friends. I couldn't claim the stuff if I wanted to--without giving the whole snap away. But I don't mean to claim it. It is going to be put right where it will do the most good, Dick--which it wasn't going to be, if my romantic plot had worked out as it was planned. If Madeleine had found *my* money, I should never have been able to look her straight in the eyes again--never in this world. You know I shouldn't. That was the weak detail I told you about. But what she did find is her own, her very own, you see; and mine goes to the two kiddies. Billy's father couldn't stake him, neither now nor two or three years hence, when these two babies will take things into their own hands and get married, money or no money. And with another of her girls due to marry a poor man, Mrs. Van Tromp would be in despair."

"Another of her girls--you mean Beatrice?" I asked, dry-lipped.

"Sure thing. Jerry's a pauper; or if he isn't quite that now, he will be when Major Terwilliger's last will and testament is read."

"But Conetta!" I gasped. "He is promised to her, Bonteck."

"Is he?" he said; and that is all he did say.

"Isn't he?" I demanded.

"How should I know? You'd better go and ask him or her--or both of them."

For a flitting instant I found myself desperate enough to do that very thing; but I, too, had suffered my sea change.

Curiously enough the hotheaded impulse died within me before I could rise from my seat on the three-legged stool.

"Well, why don't you?" Van Dyck inquired satirically, meaning, I supposed, why didn't I go and make a fool of myself to the two people in question. Then: "What has come over you, Richard? Have you lost all of that fiery impetuosity that used to make you the worry of your friends, and put the fear of God into your enemies?"

It wasn't worth while to answer the gibe. I had other and better things to think of just then. Mellowing things.

"I know now why you dragged me in on this winter cruise, Bonteck," I said, humbly enough. "In the goodness of your heart you thought Conetta and I might be able to bridge the three-year gap and come together again. It was a kindly thought, and I shall always remember it. It wasn't your fault that the chance came too late. Don't you want me to take your trick here and let you go down to the others? True, Ingerson was at the bridge table when I came through, but he may not stay there."

"Ingerson is out of it," he said shortly. "He leaves us at La Guaira, to take the regular steamer for Havana and home."

"Nevertheless, my offer holds good. Give me the course and I'll relieve you."

"Later on, perhaps; the night is yet young. Just now, you'll be wanting to get Conetta and Jerry together so you can fire that question of yours at them. Better toddle along and have it over with, while the thing is fresh in your mind."

I turned to go, but at the door of the chart-room I paused to give him his due.

"You are a kindly sort of villain, after all, Bonteck," I said. "But how about the little experiment in the humanities that was at the bottom of all these things that have happened to us? Did it turn out as you expected it would? Are we worse than you feared--or better than you hoped?"

"Neither, Dick," he returned quite soberly. "We are all pretty much the same, I guess; brothers and sisters under the skin; just men and women 'of like passions'. I think I've known it as well as I needed to, all along, but it suited my humor to pose as a--a----"

"As a pragmatic ass," I snorted, helping him out. "Whenever you are tempted to bray again----"

"I'll just think back a few lines and remember this little Caribbean slip-up," he laughed. "But don't let me keep you. I know you are perishing to go and stick pins into poor old Jerry and Conetta."

That final remark of his was as far as possible from the truth; so far, indeed, that, upon leaving the bridge, I descended to the main deck by way of the forward ladder for the express purpose of keeping out of the way of the group under the awning on the after-deck lounge.

Since the *Andromeda* was now quite short-handed, the forward deck was deserted by all save a single man at the bow. I crossed to the port rail and stood for a time looking out upon the starlit sea and listening to the sibilant song of the yacht's sharp cutwater as it sheared its way through the gently heaving seas.

I had not been talking merely for effect in telling Bonteck that I should leave the yacht at La Guaira. On all accounts it seemed only the just and decent thing to do. Now that I came to think of it soberly, it seemed quite possible that my presence in the yacht party might have been the provoking cause of Jerry Dupuyter's disloyalty, or apparent disloyalty, to Conetta. He knew that we had once been engaged, and while there had been no more than fellow-passenger intimacy on the cruise, we had been together more or less on the island.

Though it was removed by the better part of the length of the ship, the tinny tinkle of Billy's mandolin was still audible, and presently there were voices joining in a rollicking college song; John Grey's clear tenor, Alicia Van Tromp's rich contralto, and even the professor's bass. It seemed incredible that the reaction from our late privations could have swept us all so swiftly back to the ordinary and the commonplace; and yet the fact remained: a fact demonstrating beyond all question the irresistible impulse in the normal human being to revert quickly to the usual and the accustomed.

Perhaps it was the reflective mood to which this philosophizing vein led that made me insensible of Conetta's approach. At any rate, I had no warning; I was still supposing that she was with the others on the after-deck when I felt her touch on my arm.

"You?" I said.

"Yes, me," she admitted, with the cheerful disregard for grammar which usually marked her flippant moods. "What are you doing up here, all by yourself?"

"What should I be doing? But if you really want to know, I'm gazing out toward the country where I'm likely to spend the next few years of my life--Venezuela."

"Yes," she said quite calmly. "I've just been up on the bridge with Bonteck. He told me you were going to bury yourself again in the South American wilds." Then, with what seemed to be a tinge of mocking malice: "Is it the Castilian princess?--but no; you told me she is married, didn't you?"

"No," I returned crabbedly; "it's you, this time, Conetta. I don't want to be on the same side of the earth with you when you marry Jerry Dupuyster."

She laughed as though I had said something humorous. "Jerry!" she scoffed. "Where are your eyes, Dickie Preble? Don't you see that I haven't the littlest chance in the world in that quarter? I should think you might."

"That is all right," I retorted. "I'll have a thing or two to say to Jerry before I quit this neat little ship at La Guaira!"

"Please don't!" she pleaded.

"Don't tell Jerry where to head in, you mean?"

"No; I didn't mean that. I mean please don't slip back, like all the rest of us have. Don't you know you were awfully dear while we were on the island? There were times--times when you were so patient and good with Aunt Mehitable--when I could have hugged you."

"Humph! I wonder what Jerry would have said to that?"

"Can't we leave Jerry out of it, just for a few minutes? But you *were* good, you know, and you were really making me begin to believe that your horrible temper, the temper that once made us both pay such a frightful price, was your servant instead of your master."

"Temper?" I said, fairly aghast at this bald accusation.

"Yes, temper. Have you been like everybody else--unable to recognize your own dearest failing? Don't you know that even as a little boy they used to say of you that you'd rather fight than eat? Are all red-headed men like that?"

"Never mind the other red-headed men," I returned. "What price did my temper make us pay?--and when?"

"I wonder if you went through it all without knowing--without realizing?" she said musingly. "Do you remember one night when you were taking Aunt Mehitable and me to the theater and some lobby lounge made a remark that you didn't like?"

"Yes, I remember it. I would have killed the beast if they hadn't pulled me off him. That remark was made about you, Conetta."

"I know. But you--you scandalized poor Aunt Mehitable. She began to say, right then, that I could never hope to have a happy married life with a man who had such an ungovernable temper. Wasn't it more or less true, Dick?"

Back of the island period and its tremendous revelations I should probably have said that it wasn't true. But now I only asked for better information.

"Once upon a time your aunt made two wills; made one, and revoked it with another within a week. Was that done to find out how much I would stand for?"

"I--I'm afraid it was." She admitted it reluctantly.

"Since it is all dead and buried long ago, you might tell me a little more about it. What she said to me was that she had heard of the loss of my property, and that she thought it was only fair to tell me that, under the terms of her will, you wouldn't inherit anything but a small legacy. She added that, of course, under such conditions our marriage was out of the question; that the only thing for me to do was to set you free."

"What did you say to her?"

"I don't remember. I probably raved like a maniac."

"You did. Miss Stebbins, the secretary, was in the library alcove, and she took short-hand notes. It was terrible, Dick. You must have been quite mad to say such things as you said to Aunt Mehitable."

"I was mad. Look at it from my side for a moment, if you can. I had just heard of the smash in the Western mines, and right upon the heels of that I was calmly asked to give you up. Did she show you the short-hand notes?"

"She did, after you had vanished without saying a word to me or even writing a line to tell me what had become of you. She did it to prove what she had said many times before--that your ferocious temper would make it impossible for any peaceable person to live with you."

"And you--what did you do?"

"What could I do? I had to go on living; one has to do that in any case. And after a time----"

"After a time, Jerry stepped in. I'm not blaming anybody, Conetta, dear. If Jerry would only break away from Beatrice Van Tromp and treat you as he ought to treat the woman he is going to marry, I wouldn't say a word."

She turned away, and for the length of time that it took the *Andromeda* to sheer through three of the long Caribbean swells she was silent. Then, as if she were speaking to the wide expanse of sea and starry sky: "It would be a tragedy if Jerry should break away from Beatrice. They have been engaged for ever and ever so long."

"What!" I exclaimed. "And you've known it all the time?"

"I think you are the only one who hasn't known it."

"But you said you and Jerry----"

"No," she interrupted coolly, "I didn't say it. I merely let you go on believing what you seemed to want to believe."

"But you did say that Jerry had asked you."

"That was a long time ago; and I think he did it only because his uncle told him to."

Slowly the incredible thing battered its way into my brain. Conetta was free; free, and she hadn't been any better able to forget than I had. I slipped an arm around her.

"It's an awful gap--three years; could you--do you suppose we could bridge it--and let Aunt Mehitable make another will, if she wants to?"

Just then, Bonteck, or whoever had the wheel, must have let the *Andromeda* fall off a bit. There was a plunge, a splash, and the spray of the curling bow wave showered us both. She let me wipe her face with my handkerchief, and then put it up to be kissed.

"There has never been any gap, Dick, dear," she said softly. "I--I guess I'm just a silly little one-love fool. I've just been waiting--and waiting . . . and Aunt Mehitable . . . she's sorry, dear; she's been sorry ever since that dreadful day three years ago when she made you swear at her and call her a mercenary old harridan. . . ."

Time being the merest abstraction in such circumstances, it might have been either minutes or hours after this that the tubular chime which answered for a ship's bell on the *Andromeda* began to strike. Conetta counted, and as the last note was dying away she chanted happily:

"Eight bells; the forward light is shining bright, and all's well! Kiss me again, Dickie, dear, and we'll go and find Aunt Mehitable--if she hasn't gone to bed."